The World Is Ours

by AristoMuse

Summary

Shujin Academy is hailed all over Tokyo as one of the best schools to attend. Any who graduate from here is almost guaranteed an accepted college application. The teachers are highly acclaimed, and even an accomplished Olympic medalist as the gym teacher, heading the national winning volleyball team. Everything was great. Or so they all say.

It's April 9th, the first week of school in the new year. Kimisawa Airi was beginning to doubt this school was as dignified as they claimed, as she glanced at her bruised classmate with worry. Where did he get them? Who gave them to him? Maybe it was time for her to stop hiding and face the truth: this world was rotten and it needed to change, starting with whoever kept abusing her classmate. With the addition of a new student coming in with a criminal record, this year was bound to be one hell of a roller coaster.

First fanfic written. Started out self-indulgent. Now posting on FFNET as well due to plagiarism. Now also with original art + fanart! Has a TVTropes recc!
PLEASE READ!

8/7 EDIT: I added Ryuji x Ann as a side ship because I do genuinely enjoy how close they are, but they're not the main point of the story! It'll only be mentioned from time to time and you'll see their relationship evolve from a fiery friendship to a fiery romantic relationship.

10/6 EDIT: Thank you to LetPlayer for letting me know. Someone was plagiarizing my fic on, of course, FFNET. LOL. Literal word for word copy and paste. It’s been taken down thanks to the staff at FFNET, and I'm flattered that someone thinks this story is good enough to plagiarize, but of course, I'm also angry. **Just to make it clear, I did not post this story on any other platform other than AO3 until now. I only post on AO3 and FFNET now under AristoMuse.** You DO NOT have permission to repost this story or to plagiarize it. I didn't think I'd ever have to write this because this is such self indulgent trash, but I do now.

2/2/18 EDIT: There is now an instagram dedicated to this fic! You can find it all on airikimisawa, and the HD artworks on deviantart. Most of them are drawn by me, but I have gotten lots of fanart that I love to showcase on there!

3/23/18 EDIT: There is now a discord server for this fic!! It's at https://discord.gg/FMqFyuN PLEASE read the rules before introducing yourself!

11/21/2019 :DO NOT EMAIL, PM, OR HARASS ME FOR MY THOUGHTS ON P5R. My answer is that I don't care for it, and think the new additions could've been DLC. No, I will not be adding in Kasumi. I don't think she's important enough for me to actually spend my time and effort writing her into this fic. There. Those are my thoughts. Now you don't have to ask me.

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This is my first ever fanfic so I'm honestly really nervous about posting this. I've never gone beyond making the OC, so this is all new to me. Please keep comments/reviews on a clean note.

Things to know before reading: This will be long. Very long. Bare mention of confidant ranks, though most confidant hanging out will be a thing. This is all based on my own perceptions of the protagonist. I apologize if Airi seems rather mary sue, I'm doing my best to make sure she's as fleshed out as every other character, but it's hard since it's my first story and i constantly want to jump the gun. This is also unbeta-ed, unless myself counts. This fic is constantly being edited to be updated with new and more appropriate formatting, as well as new additional info to help flesh it out. When I started, it was more like a script than a story.

Thank you for reading and I hope you enjoy it enough to stick around for the long haul!

"..." talking
'...' thinking

*I am thou, thou art I* Persona

“This is Shibuya, I repeat, this is Shibuya..." announcements

PERSONA 5 is an official copyrighted title and product under the company ATLUS. Nothing belongs to me other than my OC, Kimisawa Airi, as well as her Persona ideas. I hold no rights over any of the official characters, core story, etc. This is written for fun and not for monetary gain.
See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

6/18: I can't take it lol I’ve improved so much that coming back to this hurts, so I'll be editing the first couple of chapters! Sorry to all who read the originals, they're quite terrible. Hopefully they make more sense now with the current chapters.

-----4/9 SATURDAY, AFTERNOON, SHUJIN ACADEMY

Shujin Academy was hailed all over Tokyo as one of the best schools to attend. Any who graduate from here was almost guaranteed an accepted college application. The teachers were highly acclaimed, and even an accomplished olympic medalist as the gym teacher, heading the national winning volleyball team. Or so they all say.

It's April 9th, the first week of school in the new year. Kimisawa Airi was beginning to doubt this school was as dignified as they claimed.

Looking at the bruises and defeated demeanor of Mishima Yuuki from her seat, her wine colored eyes narrowed with suspicion and worry. Who gave him those bruises? Why did they have practice everyday? Why did everyone on the volleyball team seem to dread practice?

All these questions swam in her mind, distracting her from the lesson. It was a good thing Kawakami-sensei didn't really seem to care, though her occasional glances implied that she knew her top student wasn't paying attention.

'I don't remember the lesson, but it's all right.' Airi grimaced, fidgeting with her mechanical pencil. 'It's only the first week. More importantly, why hasn't any teacher done anything?'

The bell rung, signalling the end of classes for the day. Most of the students as well as the teacher left the class, swarming the halls as they got ready to go home.

Deciding to confront the situation, Airi stood up from her desk, straightening out her black blazer and plaid skirt. Shouldering her bag, she walked up to her bruised classmate who didn't notice her approach, too distracted with his head bowed submissively while packing his books away.

"Mishima-kun?" She called out gently.

His head shot up, a startled expression on his face as his short blue hair ruffled from the action. The smile on her face dimmed slightly at the glint of fear in his brown eyes. 'Why is he so afraid..'?

"A-Ah yes, Kimisawa-senpai?" Mishima stammered quietly, fidgeting with his white turtleneck. "Was there something you needed..'?

She tucked a strand of rose colored hair behind her ear. "May I ask how your day was? You seemed rather depressed during the last class."
He blinked. "Um, it was all right. I was just um, thinking...of future exams..?" His voice trailed off, as if he wasn't sure himself.

Airi tilted her head slightly, her braid falling over her shoulder. "Those are pretty far off, I don't think you need to worry about them now. Is something else bothering you?" She pressed further.

His breath hitched at the question, the fear in his brown eyes that dimmed at the start of the conversation coming back in full force.

Airi's brow furrowed in worry. 'Could this be more serious than it seems?' She fretted mentally. 'He's hiding something, something big.'

Mishima snapped up from his seat, his body rigid. His hair shadowed his eyes, hiding any vulnerable emotion from her. "No, nothing's wrong!" He bit his lip. "Please excuse me, practice will start soon and I can't afford to be late again, he might..." He stopped himself. "Ah n-nevermind, see you tomorrow, Senpai!" With that, he rushed out of the room without glancing back.

She was glued to her spot, still standing where Mishima left her in the now empty classroom. '"He'? Did he mean Kamoshida-sensei? Is he...' She clenched her hands, and with a look of worry on her face, grabbed her bag and went down the same way.

The closer she got to the gym, the more Airi was starting to think her suspicions were correct. No other teacher or staff member was present near the gym, and thinking back on last year, they weren't here then either once Futo-sensei was let go and replaced by Kamoshida-sensei. They swarmed the other buildings though, practically at every corner.

She gripped her bag, and quietly made her way to the side entrance. Luckily, the door was unlocked. Already the sounds of practice could be heard, the squeaking of sneakers and volleyballs hitting the lacquered wooden floor inside. From what she knew, the volleyball team had mandatory practices every day, even during breaks.

She slowly and quietly inched the door open. The bright lights inside the gymnasium blinded her for a moment in comparison to the orange overcast from the sunset sky.

When her vision returned, she froze. Her blood ran cold.

Some members were diligently hitting volleyballs at the wall, constantly smacking as hard as they could. It would have been perfectly innocuous if not for the bags under their eyes and the bruises around their wrists and knees. Others were standing with their back against their teammates who threw volleyballs at them with all of their strength.

Airi trembled, in fear or anger, she couldn't tell. Why was this happening?

She looked around a little further and gasped, the tiny inhale drowned out by the sound of pained grunts. There was Kamoshida-sensei near the back of the courts, and in front of him was a shivering Mishima, head down in submission. She couldn't hear anything due to the distance, but her eyes couldn't deceive her. Her classmate had gotten a new bruise on his face since she last saw him a half hour ago. Kamoshida-sen-
No. Her eyes hardened. Kamoshida stood there with his hands on his hips, looking down at his student with a sneer on his face, clearly berating the downtrodden teen.

She clenched her fists, her eyes narrowed with fury. 'How dare he! I can't believe how he's gotten away with this for so long!' She dug into her bag, looking for her phone. She needed to photograph evidence to show to Principal Kobayakawa about this. There was no way she would let this go on any longer.

She groaned silently when she grasped nothing. 'I probably left it in my desk.' She thought sullenly. 'I should at least go tell the principal. He needs to know.'

With one last decisive look, she slowly closed the door and power walked across the courtyard. Passing by the occasional student who waved to her, she arrived at the intended office on the third floor. Straightening out her blazer and skirt, she took a deep breath and knocked, mentally scolding herself to calm down. "Yes, who is it?" She heard.

Sliding the door open, she walked into the office, and closed the door behind her. She walked up to the desk and bowed. "Principal Kobayakawa, I am Kimisawa Airi from class 2-D. I would like to speak to you about something."

The principal, a rather grotesquely rotund man in a mustard yellow suit that barely buttoned, looked up from his paper work and gleamed a blinding smile. "Ah!" He exclaimed, "If it isn't one of the top students in the school! I saw your end of the year report earlier, and I must say, you definitely have what it takes to get into the best Universities!" He laughed jovially, his bald head shining from the window behind his chair.

Airi straightened from her bow and blinked. "Ah um. Yes thank you, Principal," She stammered. It was rather embarrassing to be praised like that.

He shuffled his papers. "Now what is it that you want to speak to me about? Is it about a future letter of recommendation?" Kobayakawa grinned. "I can certainly arrange for one next year, as long as your grades continue to be so wonderful!"

Airi shuffled her feet. "No sir, though I thank you for thinking so." She answered. "It's about Kamoshida-sensei."

His smile dimmed slightly at the mention of the gym teacher. "Oh? Did you want his autograph?" He joked. "I'm sorry but you'll have to gather the courage to ask him yourself for one!"

"No, sir." She said firmly. She had to say it. She couldn't let him get away with this. "This may sound ridiculous, but... I think Kamoshida-sensei is abusing the volleyball team."

His smile disappeared in an instant. "Now why would you say that? Those are rather serious accusations there, Kimisawa-san." He frowned. "Kamoshida-sensei is an esteemed teacher, the best in this academy! I'm sure whatever you may think of him, it is unfounded." He brusquely waved her away. "I don't want to hear any more of this. Now please, school has ended for the day and I'm sure you have better things to do than to bother me with your nonsense!"

Airi stood there in shock. How could her principal say such things? She bit her lip and hurriedly walked out of the room, heading down the hall.

'He didn't even listen to me!' She sulked. 'If he just heard me out...!' Biting her lip, she clenched her eyes. The bruises on Mishima stood out in her mind, and a sharp tinge of guilt hit her. She couldn't even do something as little as this...
Arriving at her class, she walked in and grabbed her phone. Passing by all the other students, she started walking out of the building, face wiped of all emotion. She can't let anyone else know that there was a problem.

Walking a block away and into the empty vending machine alcove, she leaned on a wall and sighed in frustration. What could she do? She didn't want to see anyone hurt. 'I'm so sorry, Mishima-kun...' She thought sullenly, 'He's enduring all of this. The entire team is. Don't their parents notice?'

She still.

'Or they do notice...and aren't doing anything...' She covered her mouth in horror. Was that really it...? They couldn't bring themselves to care for their kids, even when they were coming home with bruises and split lips every day?

The hand that wasn't covering her mouth gripped her phone tightly. 'I have to do something...I need to protect them.' Airi thought resolutely. 'No one else is doing anything...They don't deserve this. No one does!'

A loud beep sounded out.

Startled at the noise, Airi looked down at her phone where the sound emanated from. On the screen was a bright red logo of an eyeball. She raised a brow, giving it a weird look.

Kind of creepy.

She hesitantly tapped it, and a search box appeared. "Please enter a name, a location, and a keyword." The app stated in a feminine tone.

She tilted her head in confusion. 'What is all this? Where did it come from?' She wondered. 'I know I never downloaded an app like this.' She tapped on the map function a couple of times, curious to what it would do. It had a map, so was it some sort of GPS?

Her thumb hit the school's location, and it updated with a ping. "There is a hit."

He grinned, inhuman teeth glinting in the harsh lamp's glow. "So she has taken the first step." He glanced toward the living doll he was currently impersonating in the sub-dimension he created, and then to the two he had separated from one, their yellow eyes staring away obediently.

He had pondered to himself whether or not to interrupt, but found himself much too curious about this specimen to interfere. How will things change, now that she begins to question? If she would even survive to meet the tricksters. The results would be very interesting, whether or not she succeeds in this trial.

"Let the games begin."
2/3/18 update with Airi's official art done by me! Redone 8/31/18. Redone AGAIN 12/22/19
Something pulsed.

Everything turned purple and...distorted?

Airi looked around, scrunching up her brow in distress as her surroundings warped. Her breath hitched. There was a weird nauseous feeling, and a split second where her feet wasn't touching anything. When she felt the ground appear underneath her feet, she stumbled, hitting the ground with her hands and knees.

'What just happened?!' She screamed in her mind. Looking around for clues as to what she had just went through, she noticed something else.

She gasped. "Huh?!

The surroundings completely changed. What was once an orange sunset sky was now a reddish purple hue that clouded the heavens. Everything was dark except for the building in front of her that glowed ominously. What was once Shujin Academy had turned into a large and looming stone castle, the stained windows glowing red like freshly spilled blood.

She turned her head from side to side. What was going on?!

She looked down at her phone. On the marker stated, "Kamoshida's Palace."

She furrowed her brow and looked up, seeing the telltale signs. There were banners with Kamoshida's face on it everywhere around this castle; on the walls, on flag poles, even statues of him on the high balconies. The only thing that stayed the same was the sign out front spelling out "Shujin Academy."

This was the same place? Slowly putting one foot in front of the other, Airi walked in, cautious of her surroundings. Everywhere she looked, there were statues and signs dedicated to Kamoshida. What was this place exactly? Was this real? Did she hit her head...?

She slowed to a stop in the foyer, the red carpet plush underneath her oxfords. The marble floors were polished to a point that she could see her own reflection mirrored back. To her sides were double doors, leading to who knows where. There was no one around and not a sound was heard. The entire keep seemed empty of all life. The most noticeable thing in the room was the giant portrait of Kamoshida, fully dressed in armor in front of the grand staircase.

Airi shuddered. 'I can't unsee that.'

With a nervous gulp, she headed toward the only open door to the right. 'Wherever I am, hopefully I can find someone who can help.'

As she descended further into the deeper levels of the castle, her nerves began to fray more and
more as she encountered not a single soul. Opening another door, her ears picked up a sound that wasn't her own echoing footsteps. 'Is that rushing water?'

Turning a corner, she was confronted with cells upon cells, a rapid river running right in the middle of the corridor.

She paled. Actual dungeons?!

Hesitantly, she continued down into the cells, looking inside each one to see if there were any people. There were none. She hit the end of the corridor and sighed. So much for that.

"Huh? H-hey! You there!"

Airi looked around, eyes darting from empty corridor to empty corridor. "Who said that?" She asked warily. Where was that voice coming from?

"Down here!"

She looked down and saw...a cat? inside the last cell. Eyebrows raised in bewilderment, she crouched down to speak to the cat thing.

It had a large round head and a smaller body, small cat ears twitching at her voice. Its large blue eyes looked up at her with an expression of surprise, the upper half of its face concealed with what seemed to be a black bandana and under its chin a yellow handkerchief. A black jumpsuit covered its body aside from its hands and feet, which were cat paws. It stood up on its hind legs with no problem, implying that it was a bipedal creature.

Airi whispered. "Hello? My name is Airi, can you help me?" There was no one else around. If it could understand her, maybe it could help...

The cat thing—what was it?—looked up at her with a mischievous smile on its face and exclaimed, "Oh beautiful lady! It is an honor to meet you! My name is Morgana!" It puffed up its chest with its paws on its hips.

She smiled. Whatever it was, it was still super cute. "Hello Morgana, it's a pleasure to meet you, although I'd rather it was somewhere more pleasant." She paused. "Um, I'm sorry if I offend, but what are you?"

It huffed. "I'm human!..." It slumped. "I think."

Airi blinked. A human? "I'm sorry but to me, you look more like a cat."

"Don't call me that!" Morgana exclaimed indignantly, glaring up at her with its big blue eyes. "I'm not a cat! I'm a human!"

Airi raised her hands placatingly. "OK, I'm sorry for upsetting you." She soothed.

It deflated. "Ah, my apologies...I'm taking my frustrations out on you since I'm stuck in this cell." It perked up. "Oh! Do you think you can get me out of here, Lady Airi?"

She looked around to see if anything could break the lock. It was rusty enough that it could be broken, but it would've been easier if she could pick it. The one time she didn't have a lock pick on her...

Her eyes glimpsed at a small rock nearby and she reached to grab it. Throwing it a little in her
hand, it seemed sturdy enough. 'Hopefully this works,' she thought as she raised her arm. With a deep breath, she struck down.

With a clank, the lock broke off and noisily fell to the stone floor. Standing up, she opened the door with a loud creak, and the feline waddled out.

"Ahh! At last, freedom!" It exclaimed in joy.

Airi smiled at the glee in its eyes. At least she could help one person today...

"Hey! Who's down there making that ruckus?!"

She stiffened, fear filling her limbs like a shock. Someone else was here?!

Turning around, her eyes widened as three suits of armor rushed up to them, spears in hand. 'Are they hostile?!' She thought apprehensively. What was going to happen to them? Those spears were awfully sharp...

Morgana turned around at the noise. Narrowing its eyes, It took a step forward, brandishing a scimitar from who knows where. "Hey! You're not going to capture her or me!"

The guards ran in front of them, blocking their only way out. "Tch! A prisoner escaped." One guard said, its voice distorted with two different decibels.

"And an intruder?!" Another exclaimed. They raised their spears at the two.

She trembled, taking a step back. 'We're going to die! All she could hear was the blood pounding in her ears. Was this really how she was going to go...? After everything she went through?

Morgana shouted valiantly, crouching in front of its savior. "You'll have to get through me first!" It rushed to attack and took one of them down with a swing of its blade, before another guard swatted it away with its spear.

"Ack!" It yelped as it smacked against the cold stone wall, before falling into a slumped position on the ground. It winced, gritting its fangs in pain.

Airi turned to look at it, gripping her hands in front of her, knuckles white with the pressure. "Morgana!" She yelled. "Are you OK?!"

Morgana slowly sat up, flinching as its tail was crushed from the impact. "I'm OK! But...I won't be able to fend them off. I'm too weak from being captured earlier." Its ears fell. "Lady Airi...you're going to have to fight!"

She hugged herself, anxiety and fear creeping up her spine. "B-but how? I don't have any weapons or fighting ability..." She stammered, her eyes wet with unshed tears. She was such a coward. Another person was protecting her again, and she just stood here like some useless doll...

"You probably have a Persona!" Morgana gritted. "You're in a Palace, after all. You have to summon it and fight!"

She furrowed her brow. "A Persona..? I don't know what that is!" She argued, her breath shaky now with her heart pounding so quickly.

It coughed. "You have to!"

One of the guards then grabbed Morgana by its neck and slammed it against the wall, holding it up
with its grip. Raising its other hand, it aimed its spear at the feline. "Enough with your chit chatting!" The guard yelled. "Kamoshida-sama wants any and all intruders dead, including you!"

Morgana struggled against its grip. "You can try all you want!" It wheezed, paws scratching at the gauntlet. "I'll never...bow down...to the likes of him...!"

The other guard raised its spear at her, prepared to strike her down.

Standing there motionlessly, a tear slowly fell down her cheek as she watched with wide eyes. Why was she so useless?! She breathed shakily, feeling frustration and self hate well up inside her. All she wanted was to help, to protect the people who couldn't protect themselves. She just wanted to live up to her legacy...Why couldn't she do one thing right?!

Something within her pulsed.

Her eyes widened, mouth opened in a silent scream. She gripped her head, nails digging into her scalp. What was this...?! Within a second, her head began hurting. She gritted her teeth as the pain increased with each pulse.

‘You were so entrenched in your own adversity that you were blind to others’ suffering...’

This voice...who was it? Airi wondered, even as her mind felt like it was being torn in half. She flailed her head from side to side, trying to ease the splitting pressure but to no avail. She choked on her saliva as the pain now overrode the rest of her body. She couldn't feel anything except the excruciating pain of her soul tearing in half.

‘You love so strongly...even those you barely know...your kindness knows no bounds, if only so they don't end up like her...’

She hunched into herself, nails starting to claw her skin off her scalp with the force she was gripping her head, staining the tips in red. 'Make it stop!' Airi screamed.

‘You stand here now, useless and forgotten...What is it that you desire most? To be seen and heard, or to fade back into nothing? You have the choice to grasp it, but you don't!’

Tears streamed down her face, from the pain or the truth in those words, she couldn't tell. It was true. It was all true. She did nothing then, and she didn't do anything now. Even when someone who defended her was now in danger of dying. Nothing mattered anymore...Nothing except for the need to prove to herself that she can do this.

Just take a step forward...prove it to Morgana who depended on her. Prove it to the soldiers who were going to kill them. Prove it to herself that she could stand up and fight. Prove it to her...

‘Will you accept the contract? Doom your soul to uncertainty in the face of reaching for what you desire most?’

"YES!"
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Revised and edited as of 6/18/17

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Airi screamed, her head snapping up into the air.

The guards turned at her outburst, even Morgana who was still held up against the stone wall.

Blinking, she couldn't hear anything but the rushing of water from the river. Her brain registered that the pain had stopped a moment later, and something cold and bright was on her face. Slowly reaching up, her calloused fingertips felt metal instead of skin. What...

She gripped at whatever it was, and flinched as her skin underneath moved with it, as if it was apart of her. Beginning to hyperventilate, she gripped the sides weakly, the sharp edges cutting into her fingers. It hurt, oh it hurt so much, but the itch..! With a screech, she pulled.

The mask tore off in a gush of blood, and a blaze of power surrounded her, hiding her from the rest of the world. White flames encased her body, changing her, making her stronger.

For the first time since the incident, she felt free, as if she finally realized what she was holding back. She took a deep breath, as if the air was from a crisp mountain range and not a moldy dungeon. Was this her real self..?

As she focused on the change inside of her, she didn't notice the change on the outside, nor the being that slowly gained corporeality behind her.

Swathed in white and purple silks was a woman, her skin so light that it seemed to glow. Her long silver white hair brushed against it, flowing down past her ankles. A golden diadem was sat on top of the silver locks, holding back most of it to show off her cold expression. She held up a long staff with a glowing orb and golden crests, but her black and silver arms were chained down with golden fabric. Her high collared silver and purple gown conformed to her torso, squeezing her waist, before flowing down in a sea of amaranthine. Silver butterflies decorated her dress, as if flocking to the light. Her metal crinoline held up the heavy dress, showing a clear view of her long black legs that ended in a point.

Gazing down, she tried to lift her staff in the air and a chant sounded out from her. With a scream, the guards were destroyed by beams of light, penetrating through their armor and into their cores.

Morgana had hit the ground for the second time today, and looked up in awe. "A new Persona..!"

"I AM THOU, THOU ART I." She spoke airily though her mouth did not move. Her expression never changed. "THOU WHO DESIRE BEYOND HER STATION, WHO ART WILLING TO FORSAKE ALL SHE BELIEVES TO PROTECT WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT TO THINE OWN SELF."

"I AM JEANNE, COMTESSE OF RADIANCE, ONE WHO SHINES HER OWN JUSTICE."
NONE SHALL DARKEN MY PATH."

As she faded from reality, Airi exhaled. So that was a Persona...She clenched her hands at the new power within her, feeling her nails bite through her gloves. Wait, gloves? Confused at the new sensation, she looked down at herself and gasped in shock.

Her clothes changed from her Shujin uniform into a sleeveless deep purple and silver embroidered vest coat that hugged her figure, the coattails falling to her calves. Long dark purple gloves sheathed her arms up to her shoulders, covering a silver high collared blouse. Shifting her legs, she felt the skin tight leather pants move with her, black knee high boots encompassing her feet instead of her usual oxfords. A large diamond pendant hung from her neck, nested in her cleavage, with a gold belt hanging on her hips. The last new addition was the silver embroidered scarf she had loosely wrapped around her neck, the short ends fluttering like dainty wings.

She scrunched up her face in confusion, and felt it again. The mask was back. It wasn't itchy like before, when something inside *screamed* at her to tear it off. Now it felt like it really was a part of her.

Taking a few steps to the river, she looked down at her reflection. The mask was of opera-esque design, the silver sterling lacing around her eyes as well as her right cheek. Holding up a hand to brush her hair out of the mask's way, she blinked as she noticed her usual braided tail was held up in a bun.

"What is going on..." She wondered quietly.

"You awakened your Persona!" Morgana proclaimed, waddling up to her. Its eyes shined with amazement as it looked up at her.

"You keep saying Persona, but..." She hesitated. "I've never heard of it as a term for power before. Only with people and...masks..." Her eyes widened with realization. Was this what the term actually meant? Personas were a literal thing, and not just a part of a person's mental need to hide themselves?

"It's your inner self rebelling against the injustices done to you!" Morgana explained eagerly, its chest puffing up at its knowledge. "You rip off the mask that you wear in your heart to become your true self that breaks free and fights."

Airi's eyes widened in surprise. "My true self...? The me who wants to protect..." she muttered, looking down pensively. She did it then. She finally took that first step.

In a burst of white, her ostentatious clothes disappeared and in its place was her school uniform. "Whoa!" She uttered in surprise. "My new clothes disappeared! Is that supposed to happen...?" She looked down at her body, lifting her hands as she tried to see how it did that.

Morgana hummed. "You're probably still adjusting to your new powers, so it's a little unstable."

She nodded her head in understanding. "Oh, OK. That makes sense."

Morgana shook its head. "But never mind all that! We have to move, there may be more guards coming."

"I can take them!" Airi said confidently. "With this new power, my Persona, I can protect both of us!" She pumped her fist, a smirk on her face.

"Be that as it may," Morgana frowned reluctantly. "You're still new at this, we shouldn't provoke
any more guards!"

It ran down the corridor and stopped near the stairs, the same one she took earlier. Turning around, it gestured at her. "C'mon, this way, Lady Airi! I'll show you a way out!" Morgana grinned.

Airi followed it, and both of them ended up going through the large foyer and down another corridor. They dodged into a room on the left and came to a stop.

Morgana then jumped onto the bookcase where there was a barred access way and ripped the grate off. "Here!" It gestured. "You can leave the Palace through this and return to the real world!"

She held her hands out in a stop motion. "Wait. Before that, can you explain to me where exactly are we? What kind of world is this?" She pleaded. "This isn't a dream, right..?"

"This is a Palace, a place where one's distorted desires have taken shape," Morgana explained quickly. "A Palace is how a distorted person sees a location. To you, this is your school, but to the ruler, this is his castle."

Airi crossed her arms. "So this is all cognitive?" She wondered out loud. "This is how Kamoshida sees the school through his eyes?"

Morgana smiled. "Yes! You get it!" It said happily. "I knew you were intelligent, Lady Airi!"

A thought dawned on her. "Is Kamoshida here as well?" Airi questioned fervently. "Or another version of him? And does it affect him in the real world?"

"Yes, there is a Shadow version of him somewhere." It stated grimly, glancing at the door. "If you steal his Treasure, then you irrevocably change him and cleanse his desires. He turns into a new person and would confess his crimes."

Airi took a step back at its statement. "Wait, really? He’ll confess his crimes?" She asked faintly. Could she help the students this way? The principal wouldn't listen to her, and Kawakami-sensei wouldn't be able to help...

Morgana nodded, before shaking its head. "Anyway, you should get going before more guards come!"

"But wait," She interjected hurriedly, brows furrowing in worry. "What about you?"

Morgana grinned and gave her a thumbs up with its paw. "Don't worry about me!" It exclaimed. "And since you've come here once, you can probably do it again!"

"Who's there?!" Shouted someone from beyond the door.

Straightening its shoulders, Morgana walked to the door. "I'll provide a distraction while you escape, Lady Airi!" It stated determinedly, its back facing toward her.

Airi bit her lip, but acquiesced to its decision. "OK, be careful Morgana! I'll come back for you!"

Morgana flashed her a smile before running out the door. "Hey, numbskulls!" It taunted, running through another door. Metal clanked as soldiers ran after it.

Airi jumped up the bookcase, and started crawling through the vent. Behind her, she could hear Morgana yowl. A guard most likely caught up to it and was dragging it back to the dungeon. She closed her eyes in guilt. 'I'm sorry..!'
It took a couple moments, but when light shined through the tunnel, she picked up the pace and finally reached outside.

"You have returned to the real world." Her phone stated.

Airi blinked. What? She looked around. She was back in normal Aoyama-Itchome. There were even students walking toward the train station, chatting to each other, not knowing their fellow student just traveled through dimensions.

'I was just crawling through...' She furrowed her brow. Looking down at her phone, that red eye from before had turned into an app, now nestled between her music and her schedule. She shook her head slowly. 'That was real...That was really real!' She thought to herself hysterically. How could a person just travel into someone's mind like that? What was Morgana? Did Personas exist in everyone..?

All these questions swam in her mind, and she sighed tiredly. Putting her phone away, Airi headed toward the station and boarded a train to Shibuya. Gripping a safety rail, she looked out the window, the blackness of the tunnel speeding past in a blur.

There was no way she could do anything now, not with how exhausted she felt. Seemed like tearing one's soul in half to reveal its true self took a lot out of a person.

"This is Shibuya. I repeat, this is Shibuya. The time is now 5:48PM, the next stop is..."

Leaving the train through the crowd of people, she headed toward her transfer, intent on going home. Swiping her wallet at the turnstile, she left the Ginza line and headed toward the train when someone bumped into her. "Ow!" She squeaked in pain.

"Sorry!"

That voice sounded familiar.

Airi turned around to look at the person who pushed her.

"Oh!" He uttered in surprise. "H-hey Senpai, sorry about that!"

It was Sakamoto Ryuji.

"Oh, Sakamoto-kun. It's alright." Airi smiled gently.

She had always had a soft spot for him ever since middle school, especially after what happened last year. It must have been hard for him to break his leg right before the track tournament, then the disbandment of the track team itself, replaced by the volleyball team. Kamoshida just couldn't help himself, she pursed her lips.

While a nice young man in general, Ryuji was much too brash and loud for Airi to have ever talked to him for longer than a couple moments, with the exception of that school project they did together with another classmate.

"I thought I told you before, you don't have to call me senpai. We're the same age." She scolded.

Ryuji rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. "Ah, you goin' home now?"
She nodded. "Yes, it's been...a long day." She grimaced. That was the understatement of the century.

Ryuji nodded in agreement. "Yeah I get ya. Thank god it's the weekend!" He groaned, stretching his arms up in the air. He slumped, exhaling a big sigh. "School is such a pain. Especially since I have to see Kamoshida's big ugly face."

Airi giggled, amused at his ire towards the gym teacher. "I can sympathize. Kamoshida is pretty egotistical, huh?" She joked.

He looked up at her in surprise. "Uh, yeah...sorry." He blinked. "You're the first person I know who's agreed with me..." He trailed off.

Her face softened, understanding why. Kamoshida was such a respected figure in the school that no one said a bad thing about him. To the staff and other students, he was the ideal and most desirable teacher. No one ever went against him, even now.

Except for Ryuji. Couple that with terrible grades and a somewhat rough demeanor, and it had him labeled as the school delinquent and outcast.

"I know, and I'm sorry it has taken so long for me to see." Airi answered, ducking her head in apology. "I should've asked sooner, especially after your leg..."

Ryuji furrowed his brows and looked away. "...Don't worry 'bout it." He grinned weakly. "It's all healed up now. Besides, lots of people can't see past his stupid act." He glanced at the time on a nearby pillar. "Shit, I gotta go! I'll see ya on Monday!" He waved as he ran past to his train.

Airi sighed. 'Still so overwhelming.' She thought, then smiled fondly.

It was a good look on him.

How I envision Jeanne as (updated 2/21/18)
Airi’s thief outfit (updated 2/6/18)
Following the P5 trend, Jeanne was a real thief and adventuress in 18th century France. She was a comtesse whose claims to nobility were dubious at best, growing up very poor. As a child, she had to beg for food and steal in her village to feed her and her two siblings. Her father claimed to be descended from the royal line, but the current royalty at the time didn't acknowledge it and had them stay as peasants. Angry that her distant relatives on the throne refused to help her family out of poverty, Jeanne concocted a plan where she stole a diamond necklace that she commissioned under the name of Queen Marie Antoinette. Jeanne had her husband sell off the diamonds, but they were soon caught. The King and Queen of France granted them a trial since Jeanne claimed she was of royal blood. Even though they were the criminals, the public found them not guilty, in fact, they saw the Queen as the guilty party. They sentenced Jeanne to prison for life but she escaped to London disguised as a boy. This incident became one of the catalysts of the French Revolution.
Jeanne was someone who craved the light; the light of jewels, of embroidered fabrics, of an extravagant lifestyle. Therefore, her design is inspired by gold and diamonds. Gold is used as a royal color throughout the world, as well as purple. Silver is seen as very sophisticated, so a lot of her outfit is silver. She has a crinoline since they were used very popularly in good ole France. Her legs end as points instead of feet to add in the inhuman quality of Personas. She has diamonds embedded on her legs, her corset, and her diadem. Her entire face is a mask, but is shown as bare to trick people into thinking it's her real face. Her hands are permanently attached to her staff to show her resistance in giving up the light.
Arriving at Yongenjaya, Airi got off the train and walked out of the station, swiping her wallet at the turnstile. She walked down the familiar streets, turning the corner into the alleyways. Back here were small bars and shops, along with a supermarket and a closed down movie theater. This area of Yongenjaya never saw as many people as it deserved, but it was how the locals liked it. It was quiet compared to the bustling streets outside, making it a perfect place for a lot of elderly people.

She rubbed an eye, getting rid of the crust. There was no way she could finish her homework with how tired she was. Time for some coffee.

Turning into the alley in front of the second hand shop, she headed into Cafe Leblanc. Opening the french door, she closed her eyes, inhaled, and slowly exhaled. The smell of coffee and exquisite curry could always calmed her down, leaving her with a smile on her face. The decor of the cafe was rustic but warm, giving off a feeling of home. It looked straight out of the 80s, but she liked it. The booths were worn but clean, and the multicolored glass chandeliers hung closer to the tables. The bar stretched from the entrance all the way to the back of the store near the restroom, along with stairs going up to what she assumed was the storage attic.

Opening her eyes, Airi walked up to the bar where Sakura Sojiro, owner and barista of Cafe Leblanc, was slowly wiping the counter. He was an older gentleman with a receding hairline in his slicked back black hair, a pair of round glasses in front of his tired eyes. His beard was trimmed neatly and he always wore a pink button up under his striped apron, a constant aroma of tobacco wafting around him along with the ever present scent of beans.

This was her home away from home, a place where she could relax and re-energize after a tiring day, just like today.

Sojiro lazily looked up at her. "Oh, hey Airi. Just got out of school, huh?"

Sitting down on one of the bar stools, she smiled tiredly. "Yeah, it's been a long day." She placed her bag down on the tiled floor next to her.

"Hmph. Not easy being class representative and working, it seems." He muttered, putting a cup away. "What would you like?"

She hummed, glancing at the shelves upon shelves of coffee beans behind him. She had been here often enough that she had tried almost every kind he had to offer, but decided to go simple today. "One cup of Colombian, please." She clapped her hands in front of her in anticipation. "And a plate of katsu Curry!"

"Comin' right up." Sojiro said, moving around to prepare the ordered items.
While he got the food ready in the small kitchen corner, there were thumping sounds heard from above. She looked up curiously at the wooden ceiling, but put it out of her mind once her food arrived in front of her.

Taking one last bite of her curry, Airi washed it down with her coffee. She sighed contentedly. It was nice to be able to splurge on a good plate of curry and coffee once in a while. "Gochisousama deshita." She clapped her hands. "It was delicious as always."

Sojiro grunted in answer, not looking up from his newspaper.

She tilted her head, observing his tense posture. He seemed off today, as if something was bothering him. She didn't know him well, but she couldn't help but ask. "Is something wrong?" Airi inquired softly.

He sighed heavily, his weathered face lined with deep creases from age and stress. "No, nothing's wrong per say. Just got someone new."

"Oh?" She voiced, curiosity winning over her. "Who is it?"

"It doesn't concern you." He answered gruffly, raising his newspaper above his eyes to block her from his view.

She exhaled. She couldn't help him if he didn't want it. Reaching down for her bag, she pulled out the appropriate amount of money to pay for the meal and left it on the counter. Getting up, she waved to Sojiro. "I'll be off now! Have a good night!"

"Night." He muttered, still not looking at her. "Stay safe."

Leaving the cafe, the cool breeze of a spring evening chilled her. The school uniform blazer was not good for such cold temperatures. Rubbing her arms, she quickly walked a couple blocks down to a small house, sequestered away from the shops. Taking her keys out of her bag, she inserted and twisted it into the lock, opening the front door.

Her house was nothing special, a bit big for one person. The walls were bare. Dark wooden floors lead from the cement entryway into the building, branching out into the different rooms. To her right was a tatami room, a kotatsu and a small wooden cabinet occupying the space. To her left was the staircase leading to the second floor where she spent most of her time.

The living room was modestly furnished, with two light beige chaises, a dark wooden coffee table, and a TV mounted on the wall. She had saved up so much just to buy it, and couldn't really afford cable to go along with it. At the very least, it came with the news channels and a select few other channels, making it a still worthy buy. Across from it was the first floor bathroom, with only a sink and a toilet inside.

The dining room was to her left behind the staircase, consisting of a dark wooden table with eight complimenting chairs surrounding it, a simple chandelier brightly lighting the room. Behind it was the kitchen, a partition separating the two. With its dark wooden cabinets and white limestone surfaces, she could still remember her mother cooking her favorite omurice at the stove...

Walking up the steps, Airi left her bag in front of the study and moved toward the bathroom to wash up. The second floor consisted of two rooms and a full bathroom. Only one was a bedroom, and the other used as a study. The furnishings were simple but tasteful, giving a lived in and warm
vibe to the house. A lot of it was new, bought with her own finances, but some from her childhood still existed inside the house, giving her a sense of nostalgia.

After a relaxing bath to soothe her aching muscles, she grabbed her bag and brought it into the study. Flicking the light switch, she went and sat down in front of the desk. The room consisted of several bookcases, filled with now useless encyclopedias, as well as a dark wooden desk that housed her laptop. That piece of technology had cost her so many hours of work to pay for. She still had a couple months left before she completely paid it off from Yodobashi.

The one thing she avoided in this room were all the photo albums, memories of better days hidden within.

After about two hours, Airi closed the last book and sighed in relief. "I'm done!" She groaned, stretching her arms.

She put her books back in her bag before leaving the study and entering her bedroom. She had work tomorrow, after all.

The room had all the necessary amenities; a large but low framed bed with a purple comforter, two dark wood armoires, and a dark wood vanity where all her accessories and makeup laid. The only thing out of place was a beautiful cello leaning against its stand, the cool rosewood still gleaming softly under a layer of dust.

Ignoring it with a sharp tug of guilt, she flung herself on top of her bed with an exhale. It's been a little over a year, but she still couldn't believe she had this house again...

'Let go! Leave us alone!'

'Give me all your money, bitch!'

'Hey! That's my wife and daughter! I'll call the police!'

'Kaa-chan! Tou-chan!'

Airi clenched her eyes as the memories assaulted her once again, the gunshots still ringing in her ears. A tear slipped down her cheek, wetting the fabric of her pillow. Though this house was hers again, it felt all too empty without them.

The loneliness crept up, and she took a deep breath, trying to calm down. 'He's already behind bars, Airi. Let it go.' She rationalized. There was no point in agonizing over this again...

She could never regret her years in the orphanages, making sure the younger kids were healthy and happy. She met her best friend there, after all...Even if she regretted her parents' deaths at the hands of that man.

She sniffed, wiping her tears with the back of her hand."I have my home again." Airi whispered. "I just need to create my future, the way they wanted it for me..."

Eyelids growing heavy, she slowly descended into slumber, letting the quiet sounds of the neighborhood lull her to sleep.
"To reiterate," The principal began, "Just so we're clear, you will immediately be expelled if you cause any problems. Honestly, I hesitated on accepting someone like you, but there were some circumstances on our side..." He paused. "You might have done a variety of things hiding in your hometown, but you WILL behave yourself here. If you are thrown out from our school, there will be no place for you to go." He warned the student. "Keep that in mind."

He gestured to his left, where a woman wearing a yellow striped shirt and jean skirt stood. "This is the teacher in charge of your class."

She stepped forward, an exasperated expression on her face. "I'm Kawakami Sadayo. Here's your student ID." She stated, placing the card on the table. "Be sure to read the school rules. Any violations will send you straight to the guidance office. And, if by chance you cause any problems, I won't be able to protect you at all." She paused, tucking a strand of short wavy brown hair behind an ear. "That is your promise, yes, Principal Kobayakawa?" She eyed her boss skeptically.

Kobayakawa nodded in agreement. "He is responsible for all his actions."

She sighed, clearly irritated. "But really though, why me...? There should've been better candidates." She complained sullenly.

"It was a sudden transfer," He answered flusteredly. "And your class was the only one that had an opening."

At this point, Sojiro interrupted. "If you're done explaining things, mind if we get going?" He asked tiredly. "I have a store to get back to."

The principal nodded. "Sakura-san, please keep a close eye on him. Don't let him cause any trouble outside..." He warned.

Sojiro rubbed his neck. "Well, I'll be sure to have a serious talk about the situation he's in."

Kawakami sighed and looked at her new student, a hint of fear and wariness in her dark brown eyes. "Come to the faculty office when you arrive at school tomorrow. I'll show you to your classroom."

The student who was the topic of the conversation nodded silently and took his new ID card. Examining it in his hand, it read, "Shujin Academy 2nd year, Kurusu Akira." Next to it was a portrait of himself, a blank expression on his face. 'This is my new school...' He thought emotionlessly.

Sojiro turned and walked out, his charge silently following him out.

Two people stood across from another in the walkway in the school courtyard. The woman clearly looked done with her life, while the man seemed befuddled.

"What a troublesome situation." Kamoshida remarked, crossing his arms. He was a tall man in his
20s, a mop of curly hair sitting atop of his rectangular face. Dressed in a white shirt and red pants, he was always ready for the gym.

Kawakami sighed heavily, putting a hand on one hip. "I can't believe they pushed someone with a record on me." She whined. "A male teacher would be better suited for this..."

"Why in the world was someone like that admitted here?" He rested his hands on his hips.

"Who knows?" She retorted. "It was the principal's decision. I was told that it's for the school's reputation..." She trailed off.

"Hmph." He crossed his arms. "I would've thought that my volleyball team has contributed more than enough to cover that."

Kawakami nodded tiredly in agreement. "That's certainly true."

"Be careful, OK?" Kamoshida urged, doing some stretches with his arms. "Then again, if anything were to happen, I'd kick out a student like that right away."

She ran a hand through her hair. "I keep wishing that he'd just end up not coming to school. Still, that isn't something I should be saying as a teacher..." She trailed off, pursing her lips in exasperation. It wasn't that she didn't want to teach him, but...he has a criminal record. How could she not be scared?

"Well," Kamoshida began, interrupting her thoughts. "I should be returning to practice."

"Oh right." Kawakami blinked. "The tournament's coming up, isn't it?"

"Hehe." He forcefully grinned, pumping his fist. "Having such high expectations placed on you by others is quite a problem in itself. We'll have to work hard to make up for the track team too." He ended smugly.

"Yes...that's true." She replied distractedly.

Kamoshida headed down the courtyard towards the gym, leaving Kawakami where she was standing.

She sighed heavily once again. "Why'd it have to be MY class..."

Chapter End Notes

-Katsu is breaded meat (usually pork ie. Tonkatsu) and often paired with rice and/or curry.

-Some Japanese curry has coffee and sugar in it, giving it a more unique blend of flavor. I've never tried having it with a cup of coffee though, and the thought kind of makes me queasy lol

-A kotatsu is a low coffee table with a blanket underneath it. A heater is placed underneath, making it a perfect place to nap or whatever during winter.

-Yodobashi is a famous electronics store in Tokyo, arguably most famous electronics store in all of Japan.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Revised and edited as of 6/19/17

See the end of the chapter for more notes

----4/11, MONDAY, EARLY MORNING, YONGENJAYA BACKSTREETS

Making sure the door was properly locked, Airi turned around and started walking down the road to the station. Being so early in the morning, many of the shops had yet to open aside from the supermarket. Looking up at the dark skies, the clouds a muddy gray, she hurried up a bit. The news had said it would rain today. Thankfully, she brought an umbrella in her bag.

Looking down at the time on her phone, she pursed her lips and began power-walking. It was getting a bit late, and no doubt the train was going to get crowded.

Once reaching the gates, she swiped her wallet on top of the ticket scanner before walking down the stairs toward the platform for her train. Already, she could hear the telltale rumbling that indicated one was about to pull up. Hitting the platform, she walked up to the indicated boarding markers. When the train pulled up and opened its doors, she walked in amidst the sea of people getting out, grabbing a seat.

As the doors started to close, a young man hurriedly ran in, just making it through the gap. He slumped at his spot and sighed in relief.

Airi tilted her head at the scene. 'He's wearing a Shujin uniform,' She observed. 'I've never seen him around though. I could have sworn I was the only Shujin student from Yongenjaya...' Deciding that it wasn't her business, she pulled a book out of her bag to read. The train ride was going to take a while, after all...

After reading a couple of chapters, the announcement finally spoke out the desired destination. "This is Shibuya Station. I repeat, this is Shibuya Station. Transfers are available for..." It continued to list several connecting lines while the train pulled to a stop.

Airi put her book away and got up to the doors. Walking out as soon as they slid open, she leisurely strolled toward the Ginza Line.

He got off the train and looked around. 'The next train to take is the Ginza Line...' He repeated to himself. A little unsure of where to go, he started walking off the platform and up the escalator. Once he was at the Underground Walkway however, he was a little overwhelmed with all the bright colors and multitude of signs.

An older man bumped into him from behind. "Hey, don't just stand there and block the way!" He said angrily, before power walking away to his destination.
He hurriedly moved to the side, flusteredly ruffling his black hair. Leaning against the wall, he crossed both his arms and legs. 'People are so unfriendly here..." He somberly thought, frowning a little.

Adjusting his blocky glasses, he swerved his head left and right, trying to find an indicator of where to go. A familiar pattern caught his eye. A girl wearing what seemed to be the Shujin Academy uniform was walking towards the stairs leading out of the station.

'Yes! If I follow her, she can lead me to school.' He thought determinedly. Uncrossing his legs, he hurriedly followed after her up the stairs. Not really paying attention to anything else, he tracked the girl to another station platform, one that read 'Ginza Line'.

He exhaled, glad that his idea worked, and waited for the approaching train. As soon as the doors opened, he walked in to take a spot. It was packed with more students from Shujin, as well as businessmen and women on their way to work.

'Why is it so crowded...' He sulked to himself, hugging his bag close to him to avoid taking up more space. There was barely any room to move what with how packed the train car was. Thankfully the school was only a few stops away. He wouldn't be able to take this for much longer.

"This is Aoyama-Itchome, I repeat, this is Aoyama-Itchome, the time is now 7:24AM. The next stop is..."

He perked up. He can finally get out of here! He along with many other students pushed out of the train. He sighed in relief from getting out of such a tight space. It took some time, but he finally made it.

Walking toward the exit, he overheard two other Shujin students talking in an alcove near the staircase. "There was another one of those strange accidents..." One girl said. "This time, it happened on a subway. If it weren't a Sunday, I might have been on it." She griped.

"That's really scary..." Her friend answered her. "How much longer do you think this sort of thing will happen?"

'Accidents, huh...' He pondered. Putting it out of his mind, he walked up the stairs, passed the gates, and out of the station. He stopped just outside, closing his eyes, and taking a deep breath of fresh air.

Drip.

Water hit his nose. He flinched, opening his eyes to look at the gloomy sky. It was beginning to rain. He grimaced and rushed to the nearest awning, a shop named "Jeunesse et Beaute", to wait it out. He idly looked down at his phone, unsure of what to do.

His phone rang out. That strange creepy app was back again. He sighed. How many times did he have to delete it for it to go away? 'I might have to reboot my phone...'

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw another pair of shoes walking up next to him to also take shelter from the rain. He turned his head to see who it was, and his breath hitched.

It was the girl he followed. He hadn't gotten a good look at her earlier, what with how determined he was to get to the right train, but now with her so close, he studied her person. His hands started to feel a little clammy.
She sighed. Of course it rained once she took a few steps out of the station.

'At least I didn't have to deal with a wet train ride.' She thought, a little thankful about that. It was gross to be packed in like sardines on a wet train, the heat blasting the humidity to ridiculous heights.

She walked over to an awning of the store "Jeunesse et Beaute" for a dry place to dig for her umbrella. Another person was already taking shelter, a boy in the Shujin Academy uniform. While she sighed in relief from being out of the rain, out of the corner of her eye, she noticed him looking at her.

She turned to meet his gaze.

He was rather tall with a slim build, fluffy black hair almost hindering his dark gray eyes that were accentuated with the most beautiful lashes she had ever seen on a male. She almost felt jealous, though the large glasses he wore hid them from the world. He continued to stare at her with his mouth slightly open.

Airi gave him a smile. "What a terrible day to start the week, huh?" She joked. It was a little weird how he kept staring at her...

He blinked, closing his mouth. "Uh, yeah...I didn't bring an umbrella..." He replied, looking away from her.

'His voice is really smooth.' She reflected, smiling at him sympathetically. "I'd offer to share, but unfortunately my umbrella can barely fit me as it is." She apologized sheepishly, idly caressing her braid that was pulled to the left.

He stiffened at her statement, a slight flush appearing in his cheeks. "It's alright." He replied quietly, giving her a shy smile.

She wondered why he was blushing, but then it hit her.

In Japan, only couples shared umbrellas.

Now it was her turn to blush at her faux pas. She looked down at her oxfords, her cheeks heating up.

They both stood there awkwardly, not knowing what to say to each other. Splattering footsteps interrupted their awkward moment, and they both looked up when another person joined them under the awning.

The girl, and it was clearly a girl with how short her skirt was, pulled down her white hoodie, freeing her bundles of blonde hair. She looked toward the sky, seeming to wonder when the rain will lighten up.

Airi blinked. It was Takamaki Ann.

Half Japanese and half Finnish, the blonde haired girl was regarded with both envy and suspicion as the only foreigner in the school. She was a gorgeous yet rather closed off individual, most likely due to people judging her as aforementioned. Airi never had a problem with her at middle school, except maybe her grades. She was quick witted, but school didn't seem to hold the amateur model's attention. It was honestly a shock when she heard that both Ann and Ryuji made it into Shujin.
"Takamaki-chan, good morning." Airi spoke, a friendly smile on her face.

Ann turned in surprise, seeming to forget there were other people within the vicinity next to her. "Oh! Senpai! Good morning." Ann answered, giving her a small smile.

The black haired boy looked on, observing the two beautiful girls next to him.

A car honk interrupted any sort of conversation they could have had, and all three looked out at the road. A white car had pulled up in front of them, the window pulling down revealing Kamoshida. He looked out the car window toward Ann, a smile on his rectangular face. "Good morning! You want me to give you a ride to school?" He asked jovially. "You're gonna be late."

Ann smiled a little. "Um, sure. Thank you." She answered quietly, walking towards the car.

He looked over to the other two still standing. "How about you two?" He offered, still smiling. "Kimisawa?"

Both Airi and the black haired boy waved their hands with a polite smile on their faces, rejecting the offer.

Once Ann got in the car, she pulled her seat belt on. As the window rolled up though, her expression turned into one of trepidation and slight fear before disappearing under the tinted glass, and the car drove away.

A silence took over, and Airi decided it had been a long enough delay and pulled out her umbrella. Opening it up, she turned to the other student and offered him a small smile. "See you at school." She said, bowing slightly, before walking towards Shujin.

The boy was now alone, staring after the girl. What to do now, he wondered, with the rain still pouring.

"Dammit! Screw that pervy teacher."

Turning his gaze away from the small back of the retreating girl, he saw a blond boy with his hands on his knees, panting.

His bleached hair was styled into a short mullet, face pulled into a sneer. He wore what should be the Shujin academy uniform, but had a yellow graphic t-shirt instead of the usual white turtleneck. His pants were rolled up to show off his ankles, and wore converse sneakers at his feet. His suspenders were left to hang around his legs as he straightened up with a sigh.

"Pervy teacher...?" He wondered out loud, staring curiously.

The blond boy turned and looked over at him with a sneer on his face.

Chapter End Notes

-In Tokyo, the metro system has a bunch of different lines all owned by different companies but they all fall under the Tokyo government. To transfer, you have to get out of the line and swipe in at a different one. (While in NYC where I live, you can transfer as many times as you want as long as you're at the right stations.)
-If you have a PASMO card (which is their metrocard), you can hover it above the
scanner on the turnstile without taking it out of your wallet. This system is highly used
in East Asia, I've seen it in Hong Kong and Korea. (WISH AMERICA WOULD GET
ON THAT TOO)
It was only fourth period, but Kawakami-sensei seemed to get moodier and moodier. Airi wondered what could be troubling her like this. Hopefully it wasn't anything serious.

She leaned her head against her palm, idly looking at the board, inspecting for anything she missed. She was sat at the second row closest to the window, and one desk before the back of the room. It wasn't an ideal seat, but it honestly didn't matter in the long run. The teachers spoke more than they wrote on the board anyway.

The bell rang then, signaling break had begun. "Alright class, it's lunch time. I'll be off in the staff room." Kawakami stated languidly, her face pulled into a worried frown. She promptly left the class without a look back.

Airi sat up and started organizing her notes. Since the desk next to her wasn't occupied, she used it as another surface for her books when eating lunch. Most of her classmates left for the cafeteria, with only a few lingering in the room to chat.

She pulled out her meal, a simple spicy chicken mayo onigiri and a green tea bottle, and started munching away while scrolling through her phone.

"Hmm..." She muttered. The only thing on the news were reports of the accidents. All of them had the perpetrators suddenly having a mental breakdown while at work, harming dozens of passengers.

Airi frowned. Mental breakdowns...why did that strike her so oddly?

Her eyes widen.

The Palace! She covered her mouth in horror. 'I forgot about Morgana!' She thought guiltily. Biting her lip, she promised to go to the Palace today after school to help it out.

"I heard there's a new student transferring," She overheard a classmate saying to their friend. "And they have a criminal record!"

"Oh my god, why would the principal allow a criminal in the school?!" The classmate's friend yelped. "What if he pulls a weapon on us? Or, or...kills someone!" They paled.

Airi furrowed her brows. A new student? And one with a criminal record? 'No one told me anything about this.' She thought pensively. 'But...Takase was a juvenile and he was still a great older brother...'

Back at the orphanage that she moved to, most of the staff were too busy to really care for the
children, so it fell to the eldest kids to take care of the younger ones. She tried her best to help out, especially when the older kids would go out to forage. She was in charge of making lock picks and distributing food to the kids, making sure everyone was fed and clothed properly. It was what she would want her to do. She wasn't the only one though.

With short spiky brown hair and a loud personality, Takase was the older brother who brought back toys and knick knacks for the others from his little joints out in the city. There wasn't a single person who hated him because he was the one who would comfort them in the middle of the night, patting their backs as they cried from their nightmares. He was the real kind one.

A year later however, he was taken out of the orphanage by his relatives. Airi heard one of the caretakers whisper about how "that unruly one was already causing trouble for his new family." They were clearly referring to him. 'But he's not a bad person.' She thought back then, ten years old. 'He's just trying his best...

To then attend this school and hear from Kawakami-sensei what had happened to him...it hurt. It hurt to know she was left behind again.

Returning to the present, she blinked and shook her head. She shouldn't remind herself too often of that. The new transfer student was probably misunderstood as well. She'd reserve her judgement.

She cleaned up her mess and decided to go to the restroom. Quickly relieving herself, she washed her hands and left.

Walking back to the classroom, passing by other students, she saw Kawakami-sensei was talking with someone. She couldn't get a good look at them, but shrugged. Did it really matter? Deciding it wasn't her business, she kept her head down until she got back to her class.

As class president, it was her duty to get the board ready for the next teacher, as well as help out with any of her classmates' concerns regarding schoolwork and the like. Walking up to the front of the board, she erased the previous lecture.

The bell rang, signalling that the lunch period was over, and she clapped her hands free of chalk. Taking a seat at her desk, she took back her books from the other table and opened her notes.

Kawakami-sensei walked in. Airi furrowed her brows at her expression. 'She seems even more done.'

Just after finishing that thought, another person followed the teacher in.

It was the boy from this morning.

Airi blinked in surprise. He was the transfer student? 'No wonder I didn't recognize him earlier. He's new.' A thought struck her then. 'Wait, if he's the transfer, then he's the one with the criminal record?' Looking him over, she really couldn't see him as someone who would commit a crime. She would just have to get to know him first.

Kawakami clapped her hands, gaining the attention of the class. Immediately, the classroom broke out into loud whispers, recognizing the new student for who he was.

"Being super late on his first day? He really is insane..."

"He looks normal though..."

"But he might slug us if we look him in the eye..."
Clearing her throat, the teacher persuaded the class to focus. "Settle down." She scolded, shifting a bit. "...Well, I'd like to introduce a transfer student: Kurusu Akira. Today, we..." Kawakami glanced away. "Had him attend from the afternoon on since he wasn't feeling well." She turned to the new student. "All right, please say something to the class."

He nodded and turned back to look at his new fellow classmates. Bowing, he looked ahead with a steady gaze. "My name is Kurusu Akira. Nice to meet all of you." An appropriate and average introduction.

"He seems quiet...but I bet when he loses it..."

"I mean, he was arrested for assault, right...?"

Kawakami fidgeted apprehensively. "Uhh...So..." Her eyes darted around at the awkward tension in the room. "Your seat will be...hmm." Looking around the room, her eyes landed on the empty desk, right next to Airi. "There." She pointed. "The open seat. Sorry, but can the people nearby please share your textbooks with him for today?" The teacher asked awkwardly.

"This sucks..." Someone from behind Airi's seat muttered irritatedly.

"Also," Kawakami interjected, looking at Akira. "While I am your homeroom teacher, I'll be far too busy to take care of any concerns. If you have questions, you can direct them to the class president."

Akira nodded again in understanding, but tilted his head at the mention of the latter.

Kawakami then directed her gaze at Airi. "Kimisawa-chan, please stand up."

Airi perked up, and did as she was told. She clasped her hands in front of her politely, looking toward the new student.

"This is the class president of 2-D, Kimisawa Airi. Please come to her if you're unsure of anything." Kawakami introduced, her lips twitching into a frown. A glimpse of worry flashed in her eyes at the thought of them sitting so close together.

Airi bowed. "I'm Kimisawa Airi, pleased to meet you, Kurusu-san. I hope you have a good time here at our school." She said with a pleasant smile.

Akira blinked in surprise. It was the girl from earlier, under the awning. He realized he was staring and quickly bowed, then maneuvered toward his new desk. Walking down the aisle, he noticed that the other girl from the awning was in his class too.

She looked at him with an accusing look. "Lies." Ann whispered.

He looked at her questioningly, but she avoided his gaze and stared out the window. Settling in his seat, he unpacked his bag before putting it down, and got a notebook ready.

"Did you catch that?" A brown haired girl sitting further away whispered. "Do those two know each other? Does that mean he hit on her before transferring here?"

"That means she's cheating on him with Kamoshida-sensei." Her friend gossiped. "Then again, this is Takamaki-san we're talking about..."

"For real." The brunette snipped. "That side of the room is totally awful."
Airi grimaced. It seems the gossip never ended for them. 'Poor Takamaki-chan.' She thought, glancing at the model sympathetically. She could try to address this to the class, but Ann might not appreciate even more attention. It would count as favoritism as well, and might backfire horribly.

"Oh right!" Kawakami clapped her hands. "The volleyball rally is in two days. Everyone's just changed classes so make sure you use that time to get to know each other." She subtly rolled her eyes. "Well then, let's get class started."

At that, Airi took out the textbook for the next class and offered it to Akira with a smile.

He blinked, slowly reaching out to accept it. Their fingers brushed ever so slightly, bringing a small blush to both their cheeks. Airi gave him another quick smile before averting her attention to the front of the classroom, where the teacher began writing the new material on the board.

The girl who was whispering earlier began turned to her desk mate. "Kimisawa-senpai is too kind."

Her desk mate nodded in agreement. "Un. She even smiled at him! He might target her first..."

"Who's on duty today?" Kawakami asked the class, turning back with a piece of chalk in hand.

Mishima grimaced and stood up. It was him. "Everyone...please rise..." He said dejectedly.

School finally ended.

Airi sighed, organizing her notes. She was so tired of listening to Chouno-sensei drone on and on about how the rain messed with her hair.

A shadow loomed over her, and she looked up. It was Akira. He was holding out the textbook that she had lent to him earlier.

She took it back and shot him a smile, thanking him. "So, how was your first day, Kurusu-san?"

Akira shifted his glasses with one hand, the other in his pocket. "It was fine. Thank you for lending me your textbook. You're..." He quietly started then paused. "You're the first person to be kind to me in a long while." He gave her a small smile. "So...thanks."

Her eyes widened slightly. The first person to be kind to him? Studying his eyes, she could see a glimmer of pain swimming in his gray irises. It looked old. It made him look wearier than he was supposed to be at this age. She frowned. 'He must have gone through something horrible...'

"I'm glad that I could help." She replied after a moment. Standing up from her seat, she grabbed her bag, flashing him another smile. "So!" She chirped. "Any questions so far? Do you think you'll be all right adjusting?"

He tapped a finger on his chin, shouldering his bag as they started walking out of the class together. "I think so. Aside from all the rumors about me, I should be fine..." He grimaced, looking away.

Airi furrowed her brows in worry, sympathizing with his situation. "I'm sorry you have to go through that. There's some rumors going around, but they don't know you yet. The school is just scared."
They both stopped in the hallway right after exiting the classroom. He looked down and met her eyes, keeping her glued to her spot. "And you?" He tentatively whispered.

"Huh?" She voiced, confused, tilting her head to one side. "What do you mean?"

He glanced away for a moment, before refocusing his gaze on her. "What do you think of me?" Akira questioned apprehensively.

Airi looked down, gripping the handle of her bag with both hands. His stare was rather intense, and heavy as well. "I think...you did something that you thought was right, and was punished for it." She answered quietly. "At least...I hope that's the case."

His eyes widened at her bold statement, and he gazed down at her in astonishment. No one else had stood up for him. Not his friends, not his family. Yet this girl who barely knew him, treated him like...a normal person.

Lips twitching, Akira let out a small laugh, the sound slightly bittersweet. "An accurate guess." He regarded her coolly. "Thank you again, Kimisawa-senpai. I'll be going now." He waved goodbye at her, and turned to walk away.

She sweatdropped. "You don't have to call me Senpai..."

Taking a few steps, he flinched, gripping his head that had suddenly started hurting. The corridor seemed to waver in front of his eyes, turning into a stone hall with red carpeting, before changing back to normal.

Noticing that he stopped, Airi walked up to him. "Is something wrong, Kurusu-san?" She asked concernedly.

He loosened his grip on his head, straightening his back. "Is this...a castle?" He muttered to himself, shaking his head. He didn’t notice Airi standing right next to him, who heard what he said and looked at him inquisitively.

"Kurusu-kun!"

They both turned toward the voice. Kawakami walked up to the both of them, crossing her arms with a frown. "Are you sure you’re okay?" She inquired. "Also...it seems like people are already talking about you, but I wasn’t the one who told them.” She tousled her messy brown hair aggravatedly.

Akira looked down resignedly, but nodded to acknowledge the teacher’s statement.

“I can’t even catch a break, why do I have to deal with this?” She scowled, before looking up at the black haired student. "You should head straight home without stopping by anywhere. Sakura-san sounded pretty angry." She stated.

She looked down for a moment, before snapping her head up, a thought hitting her just then. "Oh," She continued. “About Sakamoto-kun, don’t get involved-"

The boy in question walked up, cutting her off. "Speak of the devil." She muttered, crossing her arms. "What do you want?" She snapped tiredly. "I heard the police caught you cutting classes today."

“Ugh...it was nothin’.” Ryuji grunted, gazing at her with a challenging stare.
Kawakami sighed exasperatedly. “And you haven’t even dyed your hair back to black either…”

“Sorry.” He replied curtly, before turning to Akira. Leaning close, he whispered. “I’ll be waitin’ on the rooftop.” Leaning back, he gave Airi a quick smile and walked away.

The homeroom teacher observed this with a tired frown on her face. “See? That’s why I don’t want you getting involved. Understood?” She said, before also walking away.

Closing his eyes, Akira let out a heavy sigh.

Airi gazed timidly up at him from the corner of her eyes. It seemed there will be no end to the prejudice against him. Ryuji wasn’t a bad person either, but her teacher still treated them like this. She gently placed a hand on his arm, trying to comfort him.

He opened his eyes and tried to smile at her, half succeeding, soundlessly thanking her for the support. They turned around, about to leave but stopped once they saw two staff members walk up the stairs.

Kamoshida and Principal Kobayakawa stepped off the stairwell, chatting all the while. They hadn't noticed the two students standing behind them.

“Why did you allow a student like him to transfer here? He’s already started associating with Sakamoto.” Kamoshida complained. “A student with a criminal record, and a culprit of an assault case.” He sighed. “At this rate, it’d be pointless how much I contribute to the school.” Kamoshida placed his hands on his hips.

Kobayakawa held his hands up placatingly. “Now don’t be like that…” He consoled. “This school counts on you, Kamoshida-kun. You are our star.” He smiled, pride shining on his pudgy face. He shook his head. “Still, a steady build-up is necessary behind such brilliance as well.”

Kamoshida sighed, closing his eyes in displeasure. “Your troubles never seem to end, do they, Principal Kobayakawa?” He forcefully grinned. “All right, I understand. I’ll continue to do my best to answer your expectations of me.”

They both turned and walked toward the faculty offices.

Airi frowned, watching the two staff members. ‘No wonder all the students were already talking about Kurusu-san if the teachers just walked around talking about it so loudly…’ She thought angrily.

“I guess I’ll head to the roof to see what Sakamoto-san wants.” Akira began, watching the two staff leave with a blank expression. It wasn't as if he could stop them. “...How do I get there?”

She pointed at the stairs next to them. “Just go up these stairs and you’ll see the door. Be careful though, no one’s supposed to be allowed.” She winked, a playful smile on her face. “I won’t ask why Sakamoto-kun wanted you, but please stay out of trouble, both of you.” Airi said, smile softening. “I’ll see you tomorrow. Good day, Kurusu-san.” With that, she headed down the corridor.

Akira watched her leave, a slight smile on his face, before walking up the stairs to the roof.

As Airi headed toward her locker, she saw Mishima standing around morosely, his back hunched
‘Shit!’ She scolded herself. ‘I forgot to ask Mishima-kun about Kamoshida.’ With a frown, she walked up behind him and tapped his shoulder. “Mishima-kun?” She softly called out.

Mishima jumped, turning quickly to look at her, fear prominent in his eyes. “O-Oh, Senpai.” He exhaled. The relief emanating from him was palpable.

Her eyes however, were focused on his right elbow where a new bruise was turning purple. Airi stared icily at it, now knowing Kamoshida had place it on him. “Are you alright, Mishima-kun?” She quietly asked, concern shining through her eyes. “Do you need to go to the nurse? I’m sure she’ll still be there right now.” Hopefully he’d accept, and the nurse will question his injuries.

His eyes darted around and he shook his head. With stiff shoulders, he bypassed her and quickly walked away, avoiding her attempts to call him back.

Airi gazed sadly after his retreat. ‘I’m so sorry, Mishima-kun…’ She clenched her hands around the straps of her bag. She had to do something. At this rate, he would...

With a sharp exhale, she walked out of the building and to the empty vending machine alcove from a few days ago. Pulling her phone out, she quickly looked around, making sure no one would see her next trick. Her thumb tapped on the app, activating the power.

As the air distorted around her, Airi disappeared from reality, leaving no trace of her presence.

Chapter End Notes

-spicy chicken mayo onigiri is freaking delicious. Literally a rice ball with a piece of grilled/fried chicken and spicy mayo inside, a piece of seaweed wrapping it.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for the kudos!! Special thanks to carminagadelica, Honorjoy, and CyberneticReaper for the encouraging comments!! All the love!

So there's some stuff that the game never mentions, such as P5-kun's hometown and such, so I'll be making some guesses based on actual Japanese geography and whatnot to fill in the blanks. Hope that's all right!

Revised and edited as of 6/20/17

Walking up the stairs, he opened the door to the roof, ignoring the “DO NOT ENTER” sign. First day of school and he was already breaking rules.

Ryuji was already there waiting for him, sitting on a discarded folding chair. He looked up at the sound of the door opening, and regarded him with a heavy stare. “...There you are.” He stated the obvious. “Sorry for callin’ you up like this, especially since you were chattin’ with Senpai.” He apologized. “I bet Kawakami already told you stuff like “don’t get involved with him,” huh?” Ryuji snorted.

“She said you were trouble.” Akira replied quietly. He knew though, that the person in front of him was a good guy. His actions back in that castle proved it when Ryuji distracted the ruler away from him, taking a couple hits to the abdomen. Did that really happen to them...?

“Heh,” Ryuji snickered. “We’re pretty much in the same boat.” He crossed a leg over another. “I heard you got a criminal record. Everyone’s talkin’ about it.” He paused. “No wonder you were so gutsy.”

Akira rolled his eyes, exasperated at the constant mentions about his offense, and went to lean on one of the desks. He was so sick and tired of people automatically labeling him negatively once they heard he had a record. He clenched a hand inside a pocket. He knew he didn't do anything wrong. Even if...even if everyone told him he was.

A silence came over both of them, each wanting to ask the same question, but not wanting to acknowledge it.

Ryuji sat forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “…What was all that that happened? You know, how we almost got killed in a castle...” He quietly asked. “It wasn’t a dream...right? You remember it too, right?” He asked, almost desperately.

He nodded, a grim expression on his face. “Yeah, it happened.” He had no idea how, but they met some weird version of that ugly gym teacher who proceeded to kick the shit out of them. He felt so much pain from that voice that called out to him, that once he took off his mask, it was like he was breathing for the first time in his life. ‘Arsene...right?’
He felt an answering pulse in his chest, and he gasped silently. So it was real. It wasn't some horrific nightmare.

The blond looked away, gazing at the skyline. “Well, just cause we both remember doesn’t mean much though...” He quietly stated. Sitting back, he crossed his arms and legs, looking over at him with a troubled expression. “I mean, even if it was a dream, you still saved me from Kamoshida...” Ryuji grinned. “So yeah...thanks, Akira.”

Akira’s lips quirked. “You’re welcome.”

The punk replaced his smile with an angry frown. “But man, that Kamoshida we saw there...” He fidgeted. “You prolly don’t know about it, but there are some rumors about him.”

“Kamoshida...” Akira muttered, furrowing his brow. So that’s his name.

“Yeah.” Ryuji nodded. “That ripped mophead.” He sneered. “That asshole who was all full of himself at the castle. No one says anything to him ‘cause he’s some medalist who took the volleyball team to Nationals.” He ranted frustratedly. “The way Kamoshida was king of that castle felt crazy real ‘cause of that...”

They both leaned back, exhaling heavy sighs.

“...I wonder if we can go back to that castle again.” Ryuji thought out loud, scrunching up his face. With a loud grunt, he shot up from his seat. “Ugh, forget it. Must’ve been all a dream! It has to be!” He rubbed his head hysterically.

Akira looked on silently, unsure of what to say at the moment. Honestly, he didn’t know what to believe either. That response from within him confirmed that it happened, but could they go back? What was that place really? What was going on? ‘It felt so real, but...’

Ryuji turned to look at him apologetically. “Sorry to drag you out here like this. That’s all I had to say.” He paused. “You know, we might be pretty similar. I feel like we’re gonna get along just fine as “troublemakers.”” He grinned. “I’m Sakamoto Ryuji. I’ll come talk if I see you around. Don’t ignore me, all right?”

Akira nodded, smiling slightly. "Kurusu Akira. It's nice to officially meet you." Ryuji beamed. “Seeya!” With that, he walked off, leaving the roof.

The transfer student sighed. What a long day. ‘It'll be even longer when I get back to the cafe.’ He thought sullenly, knowing Sakura-san was going to give him an earful.

He began his walk toward the station. Hopefully he took the right trains, since last time it was Kimisawa-senpai unknowingly showing him the way.

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With one last scream, the shadow dissipated into thin air. Airi relaxed the grip she had on her weapon, panting from the exertion.

‘It’s a bit weird, I’ve never held a scythe before.’ She pondered, examining the weapon closely.
It was finely detailed, with elegant vine-like detailing swirling up the silver staff, and a purple clothed grip. The blade itself was a gleaming silver, with a razor fine edge on both ends. A sharp tip erupted at the top where the blade and staff met, allowing her to stab forward if need be. All in all, it was a graceful weapon to be used in battle.

‘I’ll have to practice, but it feels really natural so far.’ She complimented herself. It felt good to be able to fight. For the first time in her life, she was standing up on her own two feet, fighting for herself.

Looking around, she noticed she ended up passed the kitchens. Examining the empty room, she wondered where Morgana was. ‘I hope it’s OK…’ She thought worriedly. The only thing she could hear was the crackling of fire from the oven pit.

Airi bit her lip. The castle was huge, and she was all alone. Was it a good idea to keep going? ‘I am pretty tired...maybe I should go back.’ She bleakly thought to herself.

Allowing the weapon to disappear, she walked toward the way she came from. There weren’t any new guards, so she safely made it all the way out.

“You have returned to the real world from Kamoshida's Palace. Thank you for your hard work.” Her phone stated.

Her brows furrowed. Thank you for your hard work? Maybe this app was as insidious as it looked.

She bit her lip. Was it a good idea to keep using it when she didn't even know why she had it? Who downloaded this into her phone? She would check, but she had never had much experience with technology, so she can't trace it...

Sighing, she pocketed her phone and headed home.

She laid down on her bed, bringing the covers up to her chin. ‘I’m so exhausted…’ She thought tiredly, her eyes boring into her ceiling. ‘Summoning my Persona and infiltrating a castle really takes the energy out of me...’

As she slipped into slumber, one last thought floated through her mind.

‘I should get some coffee tomorrow in the morning..’

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-BEEP BEEP BEEP-

Her eyes snapped open. Airi lazily sat up in bed and turned to shut her alarm off. She yawned, stretching her arms up in the air. She hooded her bloodshot eyes, bags prominent under her wine colored irises. Even after sleeping a full nine hours, she still felt exhausted.

‘Definitely need that coffee.’ She thought grimly.

Slowly getting out of bed, wincing from the way her body screamed at her in pain, she made her
way to the bathroom to get ready for the day. After an extremely hot shower to loosen her aching muscles, she changed into her school uniform, grabbed her bag, and left the house.

Lethargically, she walked down the backstreets of Yongenjaya. It was a gloomy and rainy day today, and it only made her feel more tired. Gripping her umbrella tightly, Airi finally made it to Cafe Leblanc. Checking the time on her phone, she still had a good half hour before she fell behind schedule.

The bell on the door rang as she walked in, signalling a new customer, and after closing her umbrella, she collapsed onto the nearest bar stool, leaning on the counter.

Sojiro, who was stirring a pot of curry in the kitchen, looked up and raised an eyebrow. It was rare to see Airi so exhausted. “What can I get ya?” He inquired.

Airi held up one finger. “Your strongest brew, please.” She requested, voice muffled from resting her head on her arms. “And a sandwich.”

“So sure thing.” He replied, getting what she requested.

The clinking of the coffee jars and pots lulled her into a state of calm relaxation. ‘I could fall asleep right now...’

The wood creaked underneath feet as someone came down the stairs from the attic, breaking her zen, and she looked up in curiosity. Sojiro was the cafe’s only inhabitant, she recalled.

Her eyes locked with gray ones, concealed behind a giant pair of glasses.

Airi blinked. It was Akira.

Akira, who stared back at her with a surprised expression on his face. He wasn’t expecting to see her here.

Airi gave him a tired smile. “Good morning, Kurusu-san.” She greeted warmly.

He walked up to the bar stool next to her’s, taking a seat. “Good morning, Kimisawa-senpai.” He replied with a small smile.

“You two know each other?” Sojiro asked brusquely, raising his eyebrows as he placed both her order as well as a plate of curry down in front of the two students.

“Yes, we’re in the same class.” Airi replied, picking up her sandwich. “You know, you don’t have to call me Senpai, we’re the same age.” She said, looking at the ebony haired boy next to her.

He shrugged in response, picking up his spoon. “Itadakimasu.” They both said quietly, and started eating.

After finishing her sandwich, she grasped the handle of her cup. Swirling the coffee, Airi took a long swig. The heat hit her first, followed by a rich bitter taste that coated her throat as she swallowed. Downing her drink, she placed the cup down on its saucer before dabbing her mouth with a napkin. Already she could feel the effects of the caffeine, which means she’ll have enough energy to get through the day. “The coffee was a godsend. Thank you, Sojiro-san.” She complimented.

“You’re welcome.” Sojiro answered with a slightly fond smile, before taking the dirty dishes to wash.
Airi let out a sigh of content before turning to Akira. “So, you live here then?” She chirped.

He nodded. “Sakura-san is my new guardian until I’m off probation.” He replied calmly. "I'll be living here for the next year."

The older man grunted in agreement, washing the dishes.

She giggled at their somewhat rough interaction. “I’m glad that out of all the potential candidates, you got Sojiro-san.” She said, fondness bleeding into her voice. “Hey may seem rough, but he’s a genuinely good man.”

They both could see Sojiro hunch his back from the statement, as if not wanting to accept the compliment.

Akira observed his guardian with a thoughtful look. He didn’t treat him badly, he supposed. He turned back to the class president. “So you live in Yongenjaya, Senpai?” He politely inquired.

Airi nodded. “Yes, for the past year now, and in my childhood.” Her smile dimmed, eyes darkened as she was lost in her memories.

Akira observed her curiously. What was she remembering? His thought was interrupted when he heard his companion get up, and he blinked questioningly.

Shouldering her bag, Airi offered him a smile. “We should get going or we’ll be late.” She stated.

He nodded in agreement, getting up. They both walked out of the cafe and opened their umbrellas. It was really terrible weather, he admitted. A lot of the older generation in Yongenjaya that usually walked around at this hour were nowhere to be seen.

The two students strolled peacefully down to the station, not feeling the need to speak. The rain filled the silence, after all. They swiped their wallets at the scanner, and headed down toward the train platform.

While riding the train, they both chatted quietly to each other about nothing in particular. “No way!” Airi laughed, covering her mouth with one hand. “You’re really from Mishima? We have a classmate named Mishima.”

Akira nodded with a smile. “Yeah, I met him yesterday when he bumped into me.” He frowned. “I don’t think he’s OK...He was covered in bruises and bandages.”

Airi nodded sadly in agreement. “Yeah.” She whispered. “I noticed too. I-I tried to ask him yesterday, and before then as well, but he kept avoiding me.” She looked down dejectedly. "I want to help him, but..."

He looked at her, frowning softly. He didn’t like seeing her so down, especially since she’s treated him so well. He placed his hand on her shoulder. “We’ll look into it together.” He reassured.

Airi looked up at him, surprised at his offer. She then smiled sadly at him. “Thank you, but you’ve just transferred. I don’t think I should be bothering you with this...”

Akira shook his head. “No, I’m already involved. You remember Sakamoto-san asking to meet with me yesterday?”

Airi nodded at his question.
“We had met Kamoshida earlier yesterday because we were...” He glanced away. He couldn't mention they were in some weird castle. "Delayed in getting to school. He threatened me with expulsion if I got in his way.”

Her eyes widened. “Already?” She whispered.

He looked at her questioningly.

She pursed her lips. “I was looking into the volleyball team and their various injuries because of Mishima-kun.” She said reluctantly. “They’re required to have practice every day, which is insane if you ask me. I got suspicious, so I sneaked into the gym after school to observe.” Looking away, she continued quietly. “He’s been physically abusing the team, driving them like slaves. The entire school is enamored with him though, and even the principal didn’t believe me when I told him.” She sighed heavily. "No one would say anything..."

Silence took over, both of them trying to figure out what the best course of action was.

“This is Shibuya. I repeat, this is Shibuya. The time is now 7:15AM...”

The train doors slid open, and they both got off the train, heading toward their transfer. They chatted amicably the whole way to school, unaware of the other Shujin students traveling along with them, their eyes glued to the two with avid attention.

“Hey, isn’t that the transfer with the criminal record?” One girl whispered to her friend.

“Yeah that’s him...don’t talk to him or he might kill you.” She whispered back fearfully.

“Who’s the chick with him?”

“That’s the class president of 2-D, Kimisawa. I hear she’s super nice.”

“Tch, trying to leech off success, I see. Didn’t I hear that he and Sakamoto already started hanging out?”

“Hey, don’t say that about her! She’s my class president. She’s probably taking pity on him, fat load of good that’ll do though...”

Chapter End Notes

Mishima, Japan is a small city in the Shizuoka prefecture, located about 2-3 hours south from Tokyo. It's near the eastern coast (which means beach winkwink). It's basically a pit stop between Kyoto and Tokyo. With a population of about 109k people, everyone kind of knows everyone.
The teacher in front of the classroom sneered, age lines wrinkling at the action. He was a tall, older man with graying hair and a pair of square glasses in front of his stern eyes. His suspenders highlighted his stocky build as he adjusted his belt. “I’m the social studies teacher, Ushimaru. I’ll be teaching you the rules of society this year.” He stated. “Hmph...you all look like you’ve been spoiled growing up.”

Airi grimaced at how he was addressing the class. It wasn't proper for teachers to be insulting their students, but it was his first class with them. Perhaps it'll be fine later on.

Most of the students weren’t paying attention though, either distracted by the rain outside, or passing notes to each other discreetly. Akira was one of the former, lost in thought, leaning his head on his palm, watching the droplets slide down the glass.

“Before we learn society’s rules,” Ushimaru-sensei continued. “Maybe I should start with the rules of being a decent human being.” He frowned. Looking around the room and the faces of the students, his eyes stopped on one person. “Hey, new kid.” He called out.

Akira snapped out of his daydream, turning to pay attention. Clearly he was calling him.

“The greek philosopher Plato divided the human soul into three parts. A soul is composed of appetite, spirit, and what else?” Ushimaru-sensei asked, crossing his arms expectantly.

Akira furrowed his brows slightly at the off-topic question. “Logic.” He answered with certainty. It was a good thing he was reading that tidbit off a website.

The teacher’s eyebrow raised. “Correct.” Ushimaru replied. “So you knew that, huh?” He remarked before returning his attention to the entire class. “Plato’s teacher, Socrates, said that evil is born from ignorance. People who’ve been babied, taught that evil is due to individuality, can only become society’s scum.”

The class erupted into furious whispers.

“Wow, he got it right...is he really a delinquent?”

“He seems like a punk, but maybe he’s actually serious about studying?”

Airi beamed with pride, turning to Akira to give him a thumbs up.

Akira smiled back, rubbing his neck bashfully, before they turned their attention to the teacher who continued his lecture. “Bizarre incidents have been occurring frequently. Those are but the action
of scum. We don’t need crude people like that in this school. Understand?” He stated grimly, before starting the lesson.

The classroom was already empty by the time they packed their bags, and both Akira and Airi started walking out of the class, chatting about the material they learned. Just passing through the door, they saw Takamaki Ann in front of them, checking her phone.

Airi was about to say hi to her old middle school classmate when she saw a certain teacher walk up the stairs and stop in front of the amateur model.

Kamoshida called out a greeting with a grin on his face, not knowing he had an audience. “Hey there, Takamaki! You looking for a ride home?” He offered. “Things have been pretty dangerous lately with all those accidents.”

Ann turned to look at him, giving him a polite smile. “Sorry, I have a photoshoot today. It’s for the summer issue, so I can’t afford to miss it…”

A frown now replacing his smile, he sighed. “Hey, now...being a model’s fine and dandy, but don’t work your pretty little self to the bone.” He lectured, placing his hands on his hips. “You mentioned you weren’t feeling well, right? Something about appendicitis?”

Ann nodded, confirming what he said. “Yes. I keep planning to go to the hospital, but I’ve been too busy...sorry to worry you.” She voiced meekly, eyes downcast.

He shifted in place. “You must feel lonely too. I feel bad for keeping your best friend at practice so often. That’s why I asked you out in the first place,” He paused, a thought hitting him. “Oh, and...be careful around that transfer student. He’s got a criminal record after all, if something were to happen to you…” He warned. “Watch out for your class president too. She's forced to deal with him, after all.”

“...Right. Thank you.” Ann replied, keeping her head down to avoid looking him in the eye. “Please excuse me.” She said quietly, before walking away.

Kamoshida stared at her retreating backside, drinking in the curvaceous girl with desire in his eyes, before his face twisted into an ugly sneer. “Tch.” He angrily muttered, before walking off too.

Airi watched what happened, worry painting her face. She bit her lip. Sexual harassment as well? To a minor at that. The list of crimes just kept getting longer. Why didn't she look into this sooner?

Akira nudged her, trying to get her attention. She snapped out of it, and gave him a reassuring smile. The two then started walking out of the building.

Just passing the gate, they were stopped by Ryuji. “Yo.” The punk greeted Akira, giving Airi a nod in her direction.

She smiled back, waving a hand in greeting.

Akira raised an eyebrow. “What’s up?”

Ryuji looked at the class president with hesitation, before walking up to Akira. “I wanna talk about that castle from yesterday.” He whispered, covering his mouth. “I tried tellin’ myself that it was just a dream...but I couldn’t do it.” He leaned back. “I can’t act like nothing happened. It’s all
connected to that bastard Kamoshida, after all.” He said, crossing his arms, a frown marring his lips.

Airi looked on at their conversation, curious to what they were discussing.

Akira shoved his hands into his pockets, a thoughtful frown on his face. "Right..."

“I wanna find out what’s up with that place, no matter what.” Ryuji stated in a normal volume, his eyes silently pleading with him. “And, y’know, you’re the only person I can rely on for this stuff. So, you in?”

He looked down pensively, thinking of his options. He did want to know what was up with the Palace, and his Persona. He pursed his lips. ‘And that jail room in my dreams.’

Looking up at the punk, he nodded in agreement. “Sure, I’m in. What next?”

Ryuji pumped his fist in excitement. “Yes! I knew I could talk some sense into you.” He grinned. “I think we should just try retracing our steps from yesterday. In the meantime, you’re walkin’ to the station, right? We’ll go together.” He offered. “Lemme know if you see any other weird buildings on the way.”

Akira observed the punk, adjusting his glasses. ‘I should probably just go along with this. Maybe they could go back to that place...’

Airi, a little frustrated at being ignored for so long, interrupted. “Um, what are you two talking about?” She asked, crossing her arms.

Ryuji looked at her in surprise, as if he forgot she was there the entire time. “Senpai!” He yelped. “Uh nothin’, nothin’. Just uh...guy stuff. Yeah.” He said sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck nervously.

She raised an eyebrow. Did he think she was going to believe that? “Guy stuff, huh?” She repeated. “What’s this about Kamoshida and thinking it was a dream?” Airi inquired. ‘Did they also appear at Kamoshida’s Palace..?’

Ryuji broke out in a cold sweat. “Uhhh...” He stammered. “We uh, saw him yesterday at this weird place! So...We wanted to see if he was gonna be there again!” He finished, fidgeting in place and his eyes looking everywhere but her.

Airi lifted her eyebrows. “Well, if that’s true, you won’t mind me tagging along, will you? I also need dirt on Kamoshida to officially report him.” She stated calmly, testing her old middle school classmate.

His nerves getting the best of him, Ryuji’s teeth chattered. “Uh, it’s in a really dangerous place! A girl like you shouldn’t be going anywhere near it!” He yelled, desperately trying to get her to drop it.

Airi deadpanned. She opened her mouth to retort when a hand fell on her shoulder, interrupting her. She looked up at Akira, who shook his head. She pouted but conceded. “Fine. I’ll just leave now then since I’m in the way. See you tomorrow, Kurusu-san. Sakamoto-kun.” She said curtly, before turning on her heel and walking away.

Ryuji and Akira stared after her retreating back, the former slumping down and letting out a big sigh. “Jeez, I thought she was never gonna leave.” He groaned, rolling his shoulders as if he just went through a huge ordeal.
Akira sweatdropped, and began walking toward the station, Ryuji following after him. “How do you know Kimisawa-senpai?” he inquired after walking for a couple of minutes, curious at their relationship. For all their interactions these past two days, he barely knew anything about his class president. All he could really tell was that she was kind to everyone.

Ryuji hummed. “I knew her since middle school. We used to be in the same class. I didn’t really talk to her too much...” He replied, trying to recall. “Even back then, she was class president. She’s really responsible, y’know? Always tryin’ to take care of people.”

Ryuji smiled faintly. “I remember this one time,” He began with a grin. “A kid in our class got a pair of scissors super glued to his hand and started freakin’ out. I thought it was hilarious, like who does that?” He snickered. “But she walked right up to him and calmed him down, and escorted him to the nurse’s office. Senpai is just...super nice like that.”

They both stopped in front of the train station. Akira looked on thoughtfully, the new information swimming in his mind. It certainly cemented the first impression he had of her as a kind and beautiful individual. ‘A rarity in this world.’ he thought bitterly.

Ryuji spoke up. “Alright, if a huge castle like that really exists, I’m sure we’ll find it in no time.” He paused. “...When’d they build something like that, though?” The delinquent looked around, trying to figure out where to go. “We walked that way from here, right?” He pointed at an alley.

Akira shrugged halfheartedly. “Maybe.”

His face fell. “When you put it that way, I’m not so sure anymore...” Ryuji pursed his lips. Straightening up, he squared his shoulders. “All right, this way. Lemme know if you see something.” He said, heading down the alley way.

Akira turned to follow him, disappearing behind the corner.

Airi looked out from behind a nearby building, narrowing her eyes at the two, overhearing their entire conversation.

“What are you two hiding?” She whispered to herself. Were they trying to get into the Palace? Her mouth tightened and she moved to follow them, making sure they wouldn't see her.

‘I’m glad that Sakamoto-kun views me in such a positive light though.’ She thought fondly as she dodged behind another corner, observing their journey.

That story was pretty old, after all.

“Huh?” Ryuji uttered with bewilderment. They were in front of the school gates, the occasional student walking out. “We’re at school...There wasn’t anything out of place on the way, right? I didn’t see no castle either...” Ruffling his hair, he turned to face Akira. “We must’ve made a wrong turn somewhere. Let’s try again.”

Akira looked at his companion with an expression of exasperation. “Again..?” He asked, rubbing the back of his neck. This was already the third time they had turned around and it was starting to get late.
“Don’t worry.” Ryuji reassured. “I won’t mess up this time. Let’s go.”

With that, he turned around to try a different route, the bespectacled boy trailing after him silently.

Airi watched on as the two walked away, unimpressed. They had been circling back and forth from the station to the school over and over for the last hour.

Straightening up from her crouch, she leaned against the wall. ‘Are they looking for the Palace? I can’t even tell anymore.’ She thought tiredly. She would just have to wait here for them. If they really were trying to access the Palace, sooner or later, they’ll end up back here. Again.

‘I just have to be patient and wait for them to catch up. Don’t they have the app..?’

“For real...?” Ryuji groaned. They were back at the school again. He leaned against the gate. “Is it smaller than we think it is? What do you think?” He asked, looking over at his companion.

Akira put his hands in his pockets, trying to remember what had happened exactly. ‘I was holding my phone when we arrived...’ He thought pensively before looking at Ryuji, “Check on your phone.”

He sighed. “I already did that. I didn’t see anything like that around here...” His voice trailed off. "Phone, huh..." An idea hit him then. “Hey, that reminds me-didn’t you have a navigation app thingy on, back then?” He straightened up from the wall.

Akira blinked. “Navigation app...?” He murmured, adjusting his glasses.

Ryuji kicked his shoe against the pavement. “I dunno if it was or not, but I heard stuff that sounded like one comin’ from your phone.” He stated, furrowing his eyebrows. “Y’know, didn’t it say stuff like “returned to the real world” or something like that? Lemme see your phone for a bit.” He demanded, making grabby gestures with his hands.

He hesitated, but slowly took out his phone.

Ryuji snapped it up and started searching, while Akira looked at him with an unimpressed face, hand still outstretched.

“What’s this eyeball lookin’ thing?” Ryuji asked curiously, pointing at a certain app.

“Not sure.” Akira shrugged. “I can’t delete it, it just keeps coming back...”

He looked up at him with disbelief. “Wait, what?” Looking back down at the phone, he frowned. “What a weird app...Oh wait! This is it!” Ryuji exclaimed, turning the phone over to show to his companion. “This IS a navigation app! There’s even your search history! Oh man, I’m such a genius!” He praised himself, a smirk on his face.

Akira squinted his eyes at the screen, suspicious of what was dwelling in his phone. He didn’t remember typing anything. The app showed the map of their location (he didn’t turn on location tracker though.) as well as the search bar. To the side was his search history and preferences.

“Let’s try it out.” Ryuji suggested excitedly. 'I'm so sick of walkin' back and forth to the school.” His companion looked at him skeptically. “I dunno about this.” He said flatly. Were they going to tamper with something that couldn't be deleted?
“I’ll do it.” The punk offered, already tinkering with the app.

“Kamoshida...Shujin Academy...Pervert...Castle...” The automated voice listed. “Beginning navigation.”

“There we go!” Ryuji pumped excitedly. “Then, we just go in a certain direction, and-”

Everything pulsed.
The air around them turned purple and wavered. 

Startled, Akira looked up. What was going on? Had this happened the first time around..?

Ryuji saw him move in the corner of his vision and looked up from the phone, not noticing anything else. “Hey, what’re you-huh?” He stopped, as reality around them warped. “What the hell?!” He yelped, looking back down at the phone.

The red eye on the screen wavered, sending out pulses of energy. The scenery changed from Shujin Academy to a castle that loomed over them menacingly. The usual cement building was now a stone built castle, looking as if it belonged in old European movies. The sky changed from orange to a purple-ish red, the clouds glowing ominously. A drawbridge was in front of them, inviting them in as kind as a Venus flytrap.

They stared at the building, completely mystified before Ryuji whooped. “Look! It’s the castle from yesterday!”

He ran a couple feet forward, the darkly clad boy following right behind him. He came to a stop right outside the front door, observing his surroundings. “We made it back...That means what happened yesterday was for real too...” He said, turning to look at his friend, before taking a step back in shock. “Yergh! Those clothes..!”

Akira looked at him questioningly, then directed his gaze down on himself. Letting out a sound of surprise, he brought his right hand, clothed in a red glove, out of his pocket and examined his outfit. His clothes changed again, and he didn’t even notice.

Like the last time they were here, he was clad in a black trench coat that split into three tails, red gloves, and a turtleneck with line details. Enshrouding his legs were a pair of black cargo pants that tucked into his pointed boots.

“That happened last time too, huh?!” Ryuji asked, freaked out. “What’s with that outfit?!”

Akira shook his head. “I don’t know.” He replied hesitantly, putting his hand back in his pocket. “You jelly?” He nudged jokingly.

He sputtered in indignation. “I-I aint jealous!” Ryuji yelled. “What’s goin’ on here?! This makes no fuckin’ sense at all...”

“Hey!”

Caught off guard, the two males turned to look at who had called out at them.

A small bipedal feline with a yellow scarf on came out from behind the corner, waving at them. It waddled up to the duo, looking at them with an unimpressed expression. “Stop making a
commotion.” It scolded sternly.

Ryuji took a step back. “A-ah...You?!” He sputtered.

The feline shook its head in exasperation. “The shadows started acting up, so I came here wondering what it could be. To think you guys would come back to the entrance when you barely managed to escape.” It tutted in its boyish voice, scouting the perimeter with its large blue eyes.

“What is this place? Is this the school?” Ryuji questioned, scrunching up his face in confusion.

The cat, Morgana, nodded. “That’s right.” He confirmed.

“But it’s a castle!” He shouted, stomping one foot in front of him.

“This castle IS the school.” It lectured. “But only to the castle’s ruler.”

“The castle’s ruler...?” Ryuji repeated hesitantly.

“I think you called him Kamoshida?” The cat asked, not waiting for an answer. “It’s how his distorted heart views the school.”

Akira leaned on one foot, trying to make sense of the situation with all the information their new companion gave them. Honestly, he had forgotten all about the feline in the midst of their escape. They had busted it out of a cell and it showed them the way out, so they were at least thankful for that.

“Kamoshida...distorted?” Ryuji muttered. He rubbed his head, not comprehending the situation. “Explain it in a way that makes sense!”

Morgana sighed irritatedly. “I shouldn’t have expected a moron to get it...” It said, aiming an unimpressed look toward the punk.

“What’d you say?!” Ryuji shouted angrily, sneering down at the cat burglar.

“AAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!”

Their heads shot up, turning their gaze to the direction of the sound. Akira bent his knees, prepared for any approaching enemies. He didn't have much experience in fighting, but with Arsene at his side, he could at least stand a chance.

“W-what was that?” Ryuji questioned softly, his eyes wide from the pain heard from that outburst.

Morgana looked at them grimly. “It must be the slaves captured here.”

“For real?!” He yelped. “Oh shit...it’s for real!” He muttered to himself, taking a shaky breath. “We saw other guys captive here yesterday...I’m pretty sure they’re from our school.”

Akira looked on grimly. The news wasn’t surprising, but not welcomed. That Mishima guy from his class was probably one of them.

“Most likely on Kamoshida’s orders.” The feline stated firmly. “It’s nothing out of the ordinary; it’s like that every day here.” It turned to look at Akira. “What’s more, you two escaped yesterday. He must have lost his temper quite a bit.” It remarked grimly.

“That son of a bitch..!” Ryuji growled, his hands balling into fists. He looked downward away from the other two, his face twisted in anguish.
“Ryuji..?” Morgana questioned quietly.

Tightening his fists, the punk exploded. “This is bullshit!” Ryuji snarled. He sprinted toward the front door and slammed his shoulder into it, trying to break in. “You hear me, Kamoshida?!” He yelled out.

Morgana looked at the punk sadly. “Doing that isn’t going to open it, y’know...Still, it seems you have your reasons.”

Ryuji turned to look at the cat. “Hey, Monamona!” He said loudly.

The feline bristled, glaring at him. “It’s Morgana!” It corrected angrily.

“Do you know where those voices are comin’ from?” He questioned impatiently.

Morgana looked at him apprehensively. “You want me to take you to them?” It looked over to Akira who nodded. Kamoshida will pay for what he’s doing. “Well...I guess I could guide you there. But only if he comes with us.” It gestured to the darkly clad male.

“Let’s go.” Akira commanded.

Morgana jumped up excitedly. “It’s settled then!”

“For real?!” Ryuji grinned at the fellow teenager. “...Thanks, man.”

Morgana focused on the two of them, and gave them a smirk. “All right, let’s do this. Follow me!”

The three ran off, infiltrating the castle.

A figure walked up to where the three were just standing, placing a hand on one hip, and the other holding a scythe.

“Airi.” She said smugly, her scarf fluttering a bit.

She quickly followed after them, making sure they didn’t see or hear her. ‘I’m glad Morgana is alright. I’ll have to apologize to it later for not coming back sooner.’ She thought to herself, crawling through the vent.

Hiding behind chairs, corners, and walls, she silently tailed them. She wouldn’t have lost them anyway, all she had to do was following the trail of dissipating Shadows that Morgana and Akira killed.

‘Ryuji doesn’t have a Persona?’ She questioned, still observing them from a distance. It was strange that he was here if he couldn’t fight back. Could the app be messing with them? Following them further, they ended up in the dungeons where the slaves were kept.

Airi grimaced. She hated this place so much. ‘I bet a shadow version of Mishima-kun is here as well...’

She watched as the trio made their way to the Safe Room to hide from the oncoming guards. Bypassing the door, they continued on...straight to where she was.

‘Shit.’ She cursed, dodging back a hallway. When a Shadow came close, she ambushed and killed it. Walking back to the Safe Room, she heard the door open and their foot steps getting farther, and she quickened her pace.
They finally reached the training hall, she mused sadly. Ryuji’s going to be heartbroken. He had endured just like them, but he got out of it at the price of being ostracized at school.

Observing from behind a corner, she watched as Akira shot a imitation gun, knocking a Shadow onto the ground.

She hummed in amazement. ‘I should get a gun...’

Airi frowned morosely as Ryuji tried to free the slaves, but Morgana scolded him and told him that nothing here is real, and they’re all apart of Kamoshida’s cognition. Akira listened with a grim face, not saying anything. They couldn’t do anything anyway. There was no point in freeing the sports slaves, but she could see Ryuji was having a tough time admitting it himself.

Deciding that they were fine, Airi turned back and made her way to the foyer to wait for them. ‘I want to see the look on their faces when they realize another thief is here.’ She thought impishly, wearing a mischievous smile.

Finding a good hiding spot on the second floor on top of a bookcase, she sat and waited to make her entrance.

Instead of soft footsteps however, she heard the familiar but unwelcome sound of armor clanking. Looking down, Airi sees some shadow soldiers marching in the foyer, in the direction of the dungeon. Furrowing her brows in worry, she slowly got up.

‘Did they get caught?’ She wondered, gnawing on her bottom lip.
“The watch post near the training hall has ceased reporting! Chances of intruder activity is extremely high! All personnel, increase security measures!”

Akira silently groaned. So much for sneaking out.

He readied his dagger next to Morgana, who also readied its scimitar as they waited for opposition. Ryuji cursed, completely weaponless at this point. “Dammit!”

They snuck their way back to the entrance way, only fighting one Shadow in the process. Opening up the door, they ran up the winding staircase. “The exit’s this way! Let’s hurry!” Morgana urged, quickening their pace.

As they ran out into the foyer, they were suddenly stopped by the appearance of Kamoshida and a contingent of soldiers.

Kamoshida, clad in a giant gold crown, a white fur trimmed red cape decorated with hearts, and a neon green speedo, frowned at them. “You knaves again?” He sneered, his voice featuring the dual tone that was becoming familiar in this world. “To think you’d make the same mistake again. You’re hopeless!”


Kamoshida smirked evilly. “It seems it’s true when they say “barking dogs seldom bite.” How far the star runner of the track team has fallen.”

He glared. “The hell are you gettin’ at?!?”

The evil king started chuckling. “I speak of the “Track Traitor” who acted in violence, ending his teammates’ dreams.” He purred. “Oh, I can only imagine the pain of the others who were dragged under with your...selfish act.”

Flinching, Ryuji took a step back. “Tch...!” He grunted, frustrated that his guilt ridden memories were being brought up. Of course this piece of shit would mention that.

Akira glared at the Palace ruler. “Violence?” He asked his companion. It must’ve been due to the unfair treatment. Ryuji was a brash guy, he’d seen it plenty of times today, but he’d never pull a fist on someone unless they deserved it.

Kamoshida tsk'ed. “What a surprise. So you’re accompanying him without knowing anything at all?” He questioned smugly. “He betrayed his teammates and crushed their hopes, yet he still carries on as carefree as ever.”

“That’s not true!” Ryuji argued, anger lighting his eyes.
“You’ve come a long way with this fool and are now going to end up dead...How unlucky of you.” Kamoshida said mockingly before gesturing to the soldiers behind him. “Go. Kill them all. Don’t sully my castle with garbage.”

The shadows stepped forward in their suits of metal, before transforming into their real forms as Demon Horses, their hooves clacking on the marble floor. They slowly circled them in.

Ryuji narrowed his eyes in frustration, taking a step back. “Goddammit.” He spat, clenching his fists. He had nothing to fight with. Like always, he had to rely on others to help him. If only he had a Persona too.

Morgana and Akira moved to shield him. “Ryuji, move!” The feline commanded, readying its weapon.

Akira dove straight in, slicing his opponent before back flipping out of an incoming attack. He stumbled back though, when he saw his attack had done little to no damage on the enemy. Another shadow sneaked up behind him and knocked him down with its horns.

He gritted his teeth, struggling to get up. Move, dammit! He yelled at his body.

“Agh!” Morgana yelped, landing in front of him in a painful heap. Kamoshida then stomped on its back, holding it in place. “Rgh...you piece of-”

Leaning on his elbows, Akira tried to get up when a soldier came up and stepped on his back, holding him down. “Ugh!” He grunted out, his face now pressed against the lush carpeting. What could he do?!

Ryuji sat where he stood, hopeless, his companions being beaten so easily in front of him. He stared in defeat. Even with two Persona users, they couldn't beat him...

“I bet you simply came here on a whim and ended up like this, am I right?” Kamoshida sneered at the ex-track member.

“No...” Ryuji whispered, not having the strength to deny harder.

He shook his head in amusement. “What a worthless piece of trash, getting emotional so quickly.” Kamoshida smirked. “How dare you raise your hand at me. Though it was only temporary, have you forgotten my kindness in supervising the track team?”

With a twisted expression on his face, Ryuji beat the floor with his fist, the carpet absorbing the blow without a sound. “Wasn’t no practice- it was physical abuse!” He gritted his teeth. "You just didn’t like our team!”

Kamoshida sneered. “It was only an eyesore! The only one who needs to achieve results is me!” He declared, holding a fist up. “That coach who got fired was hopeless too. Had he not opposed me with a sound argument, I would’ve settled it with only breaking his star’s leg.” He gloated, smirking down at the punk who looked at him in shock.

Up above on one of the chandeliers, Airi looked on in disgust. ‘I can’t believe that’s what Kamoshida is wearing in his heart. Ugh...’ She cringed. Hearing him talk about what he did to the track team made her grimace, fueling her determination to help her friends.

She looked sadly down at Ryuji, who was standing there, stunned in silence. ‘So that’s what
happened...’ She thought morosely. She had wondered what had exactly gone down with the track team, but had been too distracted by her own problems. Now that she knew what had happened though, maybe she could do something about it...

Snapping out of her thoughts, she stood up from her crouched position. Furrowing her brows, she readied her scythe to intervene.

Kamoshida laughed. “Do you need me to deal with your other leg too? The school will call it self-defense anyway!”

Ryuji clenched his eyes. “Dammit...Am I going to lose again?” He whispered to himself. ‘Not only can I not run anymore...the track team is gone too ‘cause of this asshole!’ He berated himself angrily. ‘He broke my leg just so he could get the position! He..!’

Morgana looked at the punk sadly. “So that’s why...” It murmured.

Shifting his foot on the feline’s back, Kamoshida gestured to a soldier. “Once I’ve dealt with these two, you’re next.” He stated, looking directly at Ryuji. His expression twisted, madness seeping into his eyes as he laughed in triumph.

“Ryuji!” Morgana struggled underneath the foot.

“Stand up for yourself!” Akira yelled, still pinned underneath a suit of armor. The ex-runner was their only hope. "You're just gonna let him get away with this?!"

“...You’re right.” Ryuji whispered, getting up from his position on the floor. “Everything that was important to me was taken by him...I’ll never get ‘em back..!”

Ignoring the delinquent’s words, Kamoshida straightened. “Stay there and watch.” He smirked. “Look on as these hopeless scum die for nothing because they sided with trash like you.”

Standing up, Ryuji matched his steely gaze with acid yellow ones. “No...That’s what you are.” He declared. “All you think about is using people...You’re the real scumbag, Kamoshida!” Shakily, he took a couple of steps forward.

Unsettled, the ruler yelled out, “What are you doing? Silence him!”

Stopping, Ryuji pointed his finger at the distorted king, glaring hatefully at the reason why his dreams were stolen from him. ‘Stop lookin’ down on me with that stupid smile on your face!’

‘You made me wait quite a while.’

Eyes widening, Ryuji gripped his scalp as immense pain tore at him. Shaking from side to side, he trembled, trying to contain the pressure in his head. Something was pulsing, the beats coming faster. He couldn't tell if it was inside or outside of his body.

‘You seek power, correct? Then let us form a pact.’

He choked, saliva spitting from his mouth. Now on all fours, he violently convulsed on the carpet. Even though his eyes were wide open, he couldn’t see, couldn’t hear, couldn’t feel anything except for the soul wrenching pain.

‘Since your name has been disgraced already, why not hoist the flag and wreak havoc?’
He gritted his teeth, his blunt nails digging into his scalp.

‘The “other you” who exists within desires it thus…’

Trembling now, he panted. What was breathing, what was thinking, what was being.

‘I AM THOU...THOU ART I…’

Ryuji screamed, feeling like his head was being split open.

‘There is no turning back...The skull of rebellion is your flag henceforth!’

With one final screech, he stilled. Silence reigned as everyone stared at him with bated breath.

Snapping his head up, a metal mask in the shape of a skull, appeared in a flash of blue fire, covering the whole upper half of his face. Gripping the sides as he shakily stood up, he pulled with all his might.

“ARRGHRRRR!” He screamed, the mask coming off in a burst of blood.

Airi was worried. She didn’t know whether or not Ryuji was going to discover his Persona, especially in this hopeless situation, but, with great reluctance, she decided to wait it out even though Morgana and Akira were being threatened at sword point. It was difficult to stand back and watch, but she knew first hand that a person needed to confront themselves to take off that mask.

Seeing Ryuji begin to convulse on the ground though, she perked up. ‘Yes! It’s happening!’ Bending her knees, she was ready at any moment to jump down and intervene.

She was excited. With four Persona users, they could easily storm the castle. Then they could take his Heart.

In a blazing stream of blue fire, Ryuji’s power erupted, blowing away the guards and Kamoshida.

Seeing as they were now unpinned, Morgana and Akira quickly got up, readying their weapons while looking on at the power in awe.

The initial burst died down, revealing Ryuji who was now covered head to toe in a new outfit, complimenting the skull on his face. His black leather jacket fit snug around his torso, the metal spines on his back giving him extra protection from sneak attacks. Black belts crisscrossed over his black pants, elbow and knee pads at his joints. His steel toed boots stomped onto the carpet, the force leaving a lasting print. Clenching his yellow gloved hands, he grinned viciously.

A being floated behind him, using an old ship with a war head face painted on as a skateboard. With two swords crossed on its chest, a golden canon grafted on its right hand, and an eyepatch, the pirate cackled, its teeth making a clacking sound. Its blue admiral coat hugged its skeletal frame, enhancing its ribs and hip bones. Its black and red cape billowed behind it, the flames fanning the damaged fabric. Adjusting its admiral hat, Captain Kidd aimed the cannon toward the enemies.

Lifting his head, Ryuji gave an animalistic grin, eyes red from his awakened power.
Kamoshida shielded his face from the fierce winds. “Ugh, this one as well?!”

The newly awakened Persona user looked down at his hands, admiring his new abilities. “Right on...wassup, Persona.” He grinned gleefully. “Now that I’ve got this power...it’s time for some payback.” Cracking his knuckles, he stared down at Kamoshida. “Yo, I’m ready…”

“BRING IT!” All three Persona users got into position, ready to fight again. The guards stepped forward, transforming into Demon Horses and one Bereth, a suit of armor sitting atop of a horse.

Ryuji called out, “Captain Kidd!!” His Persona appearing behind him in a sea of blue flame. “Let’s light em up!” He said, calling down a lightning strike at his opponent.

Akira went and took out one of the minions with a stroke of his blade.

Morgana followed up with a strike, dealing more damage to the Berith. They quickly took down the enemies, leaving the foyer empty aside from them and the Palace ruler.

Holding himself up on his knees, Ryuji panted. “How ‘bout that?!” He yelled, snarling at Kamoshida.

Morgana gazed at him in awe. “Woah...so Ryuji had potential too..” It murmured.

Slashing his hand out, the pirate gestured at the corrupted gym teacher. “Even if you apologize now...I ain’t forgiving you!”

Kamoshida looked at him in amusement as he took a few steps forward, his heart decorated cape fluttering. “I told you, this is my castle. It seems you still don’t understand…” Snapping his fingers, more soldiers appeared, and a lieutenant at that.

Just then, a woman calmly walked up to Kamoshida, turning to look at the enemies.

“Wha-” Ryuji sputtered. “Takamaki?!”
Chapter 11

Indeed, it was Takamaki Ann. However, she was dressed in a purple leopard print bikini, wearing cat ears on the top of her head.

Morgana sighed dreamily. “Oh...what a meow-velous and beautiful girl..!” It purred, infatuated with the newest person in the room.

The woman in question wrapped her arms around Kamoshida’s, cuddling him.

Shocked, Ryuji could barely comprehend what was happening in front of his eyes. “What’s goin’ on...?!”

Akira watched the scene with a confused frown. Though he had little interaction with the model, Takamaki did not seem like she was one to do something so sickeningly submissive. “Something seems off.” He declared.

Ryuji turned his head toward him. “Yeah, now that you mention it...But why is she even here?!” He shouted incredulously.

Kamoshida then caressed the Not-Ann’s jaw lustfully.

He flinched. “Hey! Let go of her, you perv!” He shouted.

Turning his head to look at him, the evil lord smirked. “How many times must I tell you until you understand? This is MY castle- a place where I can do whatever I want. Everyone wishes to be loved by me.” He gloated. He turned to face the three thieves directly, letting go of the girl’s face. “That is, everyone besides slow-witted thieves like you.”


Morgana rolled its eyes exasperatedly. “Calm down, Ryuji! It seems that girl isn’t the real one. She's the same as those slaves- a being from Kamoshida’s cognition of her!”

Kamoshida smirked. “Are you jealous?” He asked smugly. “Well I’m not surprised. Women aren’t drawn to problematic punks like you. Not Takamaki, not Kimisawa, none of them.”

Akira furrowed his brows, frowning when Airi’s name was mentioned. He didn’t like that this disgusting pig thought of his class president like that.

“No,” Kamoshida started. “Clean them up this instant!” He declared, walking away with Not-Ann attached to his side.

The guards that had been standing idle since summoned started approaching them, swords raised.

Morgana took a step back. “We’re outnumbered!” It shouted, trembling in exhaustion.

“Dammit, what do we do...?!” Ryuji angrily panted, gripping his bat tighter.

Akira gritted his teeth. At this rate, it seemed there was only one way out. Taking a deep breath, he readjusted his dagger. If he was going to die here, he wasn’t going down without a fight!

“It seems this is where I make my entrance.” A voice called out.

Everyone stopped and looked around, not knowing where that voice came from.
A figure suddenly fell from above, landing in front of the thieves in a stretched out position, before straightening up, their back facing them. The woman-and it was clearly a woman with those curves, turned her head to the left, looking at the three behind her.

‘Those eyes look familiar...’ Akira thought, watching avidly.

With a wink and a quirk of the lips, she turned to face the front, giving the enemies a serene smile.

“Another intruder!” A guard shouted. “Kill them all! For Kamoshida-sama!” They shouted in unison. They convulsed, turning into Demon Horses.

She smirked. With a wave of her hand, caressing her mask, a regal figure bathed in light appeared behind her. Its excess fabric billowed behind it, imitating wings, covering the exhausted group from the Shadows' eyes.

“No way! Another Persona user!?” Ryuji shouted in shock.

With a twist of her heels, the newcomer spun in place and snapped her fingers, unleashing an all out attack. The shadows screamed in agony as white light pierced their bodies, dissipating into nothing. Seeing that the threat was gone, she relaxed her stance.

The elegant lady then turned to look at her new companions with a warm smile. “Sorry I took so long.” She apologized softly. “Let’s hurry and leave.”

Taken aback after that display, Ryuji sputtered. “Wait, who the hell are you?!”

Morgana ran up to the elegantly dressed lady, eyes shining with infatuation. “My lady! You came back for me!” It purred excitedly.

Akira tilted his head. “You know her?” He asked, questions running through his mind.

The woman in question shook her head. “C’mon, before more guards come!” And with that, she ran off, heading toward the escape route.

The skull adorned punk furiously rubbed his head. “Man...!”

The three Persona users then followed after the newcomer.

Once outside, they all came to a stop, safe for the time being. Ryuji had his hands on his knees, panting. Morgana kneeled on the ground, tired, thankful to be out of the castle for the first time in a while. Akira breathed in deeply, and with his hands resting on his hips, turned to look at the woman who saved them. He didn’t get a good look earlier, but she was dressed rather richly.

She had on a long sleeveless purple and silver embroidered vest coat, a silver embroidered blouse underneath, and long deep plum silk gloves reaching up to her shoulders. Her rose colored hair was twisted into an elegant and complicated braided bun, her mask a lacy silver that gleamed in the torchlight. With black leather pants, a silver embroidered scarf, and a large diamond pendant resting on her bosom, she made an impressive vision.

“Anyways,” Ryuji panted out. “I don’t remember changin’ into this!” He gestured at his outfit.

Akira looked him over and smirked. “It looks good on you.”

He looked away, slightly embarrassed at being complimented. “Well, it ain’t as bad as your’s!”
The ebony haired male gave him an unimpressed look, offended.

Remembering they had an extra member, the pirate turned toward the mysterious woman. “And just who exactly are you?!” He interrogated, pointing a finger at the lady.

Said female raised her eyebrows. “You don’t recognize me?” She asked.

Furrowing his eyebrows, Ryuji let out a “huh?!” and turned to look at Akira, silently asking him if he knew who it was.

He shook his head. He had never seen her before, but there was something about her that was familiar.

The woman sighed, exasperated at her companions’ inattentiveness. “Watch.” She commanded

The two males stared at her questioningly.

Slowly reaching up, the woman cupped the right side of her mask and pushed it upward, exposing the left side of her face. Her wine colored eyes stared at them expectantly, waiting for them to get it.

Ryuji squinted his eyes. “Um...you DO look familiar.”

Akira blinked, examining her face closer. ‘She does seem familiar,’ He thought to himself. ‘Where have I seen eyes like those before?’

A memory flashed in his mind. A beautiful girl turned to look at him in the rain, and gave him a smile. The same girl who silently offered her textbook to him. The same girl who he talked to for hours this morning on the train ride to school. The same girl who Ryuji tried to ditch earlier.

His breath hitched. “Senpai..?” He asked softly, surprise written all over his expression.
Airi gave him a warm smile, happy that he finally got it. “Yep! Took you long enough, Kurusu-san.” She said teasingly, sliding her mask back down in its rightful place.

“HUH?!” Ryuji exclaimed. He walked closer, looking at her up and down, trying to correlate the person in front of him with his usually uniform clad acquaintance. “Airi-senpai? Is that really you?” He questioned hesitantly.

She nodded happily, holding a finger in front of her lips in a secretive manner, winking at him.

Ryuji blushed at the motion, awkwardly rubbing the back of his head.

Morgana ran up to her and jumped, trusting her to catch it. "Lady Airi, you kept your promise!" The feline then nuzzled its face into her neck.

She reciprocated happily, rubbing her cheek on top of its head. "Of course, Morgana!"

Looking at the two snuggling in front of him, Akira frowned slightly. What was going on anymore. His class president and neighbor was also a Persona user? And she knew the feline?

“Did you find them?!”

The four persona users snapped to attention, looking in the direction the voice was coming from.

“No. Search that way!”

The sound of the soldiers faded away, searching elsewhere from their current location. “Soo...” Ryuji began, rubbing the back of his head. “What just happened..?”

Morgana jumped back down onto the ground and crossed its arms. “I told you before. When a Persona-user opposes a palace’s ruler and becomes a threat to them, this happens.” It lectured.” It’s to prevent you from being affected by distortions.”

Holding up his hands to touch his new mask, Ryuji brushed his fingertips against the cool metal. “Is this...a skull?”

“Your appearance reflects your inner self. It’s the rebel that slumbers within...Not that you’ll get it.” Morgana ribbed, a smirk on its face.

The pirate let out a big sigh, slumping his shoulders. “Nope..” He said, closing his eyes.

It jumped up, a serious expression on its face. “Then stop asking questions and accept what you see for what it is.”

Ryuji huffed. “Easy for you to say.” He retorted, then jumped as a thought hit him. “Wait, we’re in deep shit!!” He yelled out.
“Be quiet!” Airi shushed him, holding up a finger in front of her lips.

“We might’ve gotten away here, but we’re still screwed with Kamoshida at the real school...” Ryuji panicked, scrunching up his face at the thought of punishment.

“That’s quite sharp of you!...For being an idiot.” Morgana commended mockingly. “Relax. The Kamoshida in reality can’t possibly know what happens here. A shadow is the true self that’s repressed—a side of one’s personality they don’t want to see.”

“So...we’re OK?” Ryuji asked slowly.

Morgana rolled its eyes. “Did the real Kamoshida remember about the execution?”

The pirate blinked and shook his head no, realization slowly dawning on him.

“There you have it.” The cat said smugly.

Slowly, a grin spread across Ryuji’s face. “Alright, now that we know that, all we gotta do is-”

“Wait.” Morgana interrupted the punk. “I guided you as promised. It’s your turn to cooperate with me.”

Airi looked at it, confused. Cooperate? “Morgana?” She softly said. The two boys next to her looked at the feline with questioning looks, not expecting anything else.

“That’s why I was being super nice about teaching you idiots everything.” It said, looking irritated, then quickly turning to Airi. “Not you though, Lady Airi! I’m glad to help you!” It interjected, smiling at her dreamily.

Sweatdropping, she smiled back.

Ryuji scratched his head. “Uh, cooperate?”

Morgana looked out to the courtyard with a serious expression. “Don’t you remember? I originally came here for an investigation.” It stated. “I told you before, Lady Airi. I’m human! I need to erase the distortion from my body and regain my real form!” It exclaimed. “That’s why we must delve into Mementos and-”

“Whoa, hold up. What’re you goin’ on and on about?” Ryuji interrupted, scratching his head. “We never said anything about helpin’ you out.” He looked over at Akira, who nodded in agreement.

The feline looked at them, shocked. “Huh? Don’t tell me...Are you not going to repay the hospitality I showed you?” It turned to focus its eyes on Akira. “Especially you! You’re going to up and leave, even though you’re already part of my master plan?!”

Shoving his hands in his pockets, Akira looked at the feline questioningly. “I never promised. What plan are you talking about?” He asked.

Narrowing its eyes, Morgana exploded. “Is it because I’m not human..? Because I’m like a cat..? Is that why you’re making a fool of me?!” It then shifted its gaze at the only female, silently pleading.

Airi crouched down, gently placing a hand on its giant head. “Of course I’ll help you, Morgana.” She consoled. “You helped me out too.” She said, giving it an affectionate smile.

It gave her a hopeful look, before turning to the two males with a frown, challenging them to say
something.
Ryuji rubbed his face tiredly. “We’re busy!” He complained, then walked up in front of Morgana and crouched, patting its head patronizingly. “Thanks for everything, cat. You’ve got guts, bein’ a cat and all!” He grinned. “See you around!” With that, he got up and started jogging out.

Hesitantly looking at the cat, Akira followed after him, leaving Morgana standing there with its mouth hanging open in shock.

“Hey! What the hell?! Ugh, seriously!” It shouted indignantly. “Why’re you wrapping this up like everything’s all hunky-dory?!” It narrowed its eyes in anger. Pursing its lips, the feline made to follow them. “Oh hell no! Get back here! GRAHHH!” It roared after them, leaving Airi the last person standing in the courtyard.

Holding a hand to her temple, she shook her head and sighed. ‘Boys.’ She thought exasperatedly, calmly walking after them.

“\textit{You have returned to the real world. Welcome back.}” The phone stated as they appeared within the alley that faced the school.
Ryuji panted, straightening his back. “...Thank god. We’re back.” He sighed in relief.

Akira, who was breathing deeply with his hands resting on his hips, nodded in agreement. They breathed silently, the sounds of students leaving school filling in the background.

The punk looked up at his fellow Persona user. “I dragged you around a lot, huh?...Sorry, man.” He apologized quietly, a somber look in his eyes. Groaning, he stretched his arms into the air. “Ugh, I’m dead tired. How are you holdin’ up?”

Akira shrugged. “I’m exhausted.” He replied quietly, remembering that he got his ass handed to him at the Palace. Good thing Kimisawa-senpai intervened, he thought absentmindedly, before stiffening.

Kimisawa-senpai! He hurriedly turned his head side to side, looking for the compassionate class president. ‘She didn’t follow after us.’ He thought, stricken with panic.

Ryuji, not noticing his companion panicking, nodded. “Me too...Man, I’m gonna sleep like a rock when I get home.” He groaned, then grinned, looking up at the bespectacled boy. “But damn, if what we saw was for real, this is gonna get good! I totally remember the faces of the guys Kamoshida was treatin’ like slaves. Once we make ‘em fess up to any physical abuse, Kamoshida will be done.” He declared triumphantly.

His expression turned into one of confusion when he saw Akira looking around frantically. “Wassup?”

He focused at his companion, eyes wide. “We left Kimisawa-senpai back at the Palace.” He stated bleakly.

Ryuji blanched. “Shit!” He yelped.
The two delinquents squirmed in place, unsure of what to do next.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

It's a bit longer today, hope you'll enjoy it! Super thanks to HonorJoy, Ghosty_ghost, LazuriteLuxCaelum, and Ananas for the wonderful comments! Special thanks to Letplayer for the critique!

I'll be posting another chapter today as well so it'll flow the story faster!

Revised and edited as of 6/20/17

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“It warms my heart that you’re both so worried for my well being.” A voice called out.

They turned to look at who it was. Walking out of the shadows was Airi, smiling at them. Akira breathed out in relief, glad that his classmate made it out safely.

Groaning out in relief, Ryuji slumped. “You scared us, yo.”

“Sorry.” She apologized sheepishly. “But you do remember it wasn’t my first time there, right? I already have a Persona.”

The two averted their eyes, not wanting to admit they actually had forgotten.

Airi looked on at the two of them, amused at their avoidance. “Anyway, you said you remembered their faces, Sakamoto-kun?” She inquired after a moment.

Said punk nodded with a frown. “Yep. They were all members of the volleyball team. One of them’s in my class.” He replied grimly. “And it’s Ryuji, Senpai.” He added as an afterthought.

She rolled her eyes. “And it’s Airi to you. You don't have to call me Senpai. We've known each other for four years.” She retorted, before turning to Akira. “You too, Kurusu-san. Please just call me Airi.” She added, looking at him hopefully.

Akira gave a small smile back, adjusting his glasses with one hand. “Then it’s Akira, Airi-chan.” He conceded. “I’ll help as well.”

She blushed a bit at the more familiar suffix.

Ryuji pumped his fist. “Yeah! Now that’s what I’m talkin’ bout!”

A thought hit her, and Airi looked up at the transfer student with a worried frown. “Akira-san, if you wanted the rumors about you to dissipate, I don’t think this will help...” On one hand, having an extra person help their investigation would help move it along faster, but on the other hand, this will undoubtedly blow up in the end. If they were caught, there was no doubt he would be sent away...

Ryuji turned to his fellow delinquent and nodded, agreeing with the class president. “Yeah, everyone already knows about you. They’ve got you pegged as a criminal...” He crossed his arms...
Akira smirked slightly, a mischievous glint in his eyes. “Don’t worry about me.” He stated confidently, reassuring her. It was kind of fun to skirt around authority, especially one where they were clearly abusing their power. “How did that happen though? Kawakami-sensei and Principal Kobayakawa assured me that it was going to kept from the other students.” He asked, shoving his hands in his pockets, frowning slightly.

“Kamoshida opened his damn mouth, that’s how!” Ryuji scowled, crossing his arms angrily. Akira raised a brow. “Seriously? A teacher did that?”

Airi nodded, frowning at the mention of the gym teacher. “No one else but a teacher could have known, and we already know he doesn’t like you.”

Balling his fists, Ryuji turned and kicked the brick wall behind him. “It doesn’t matter if it’s a student or a club; that asshole just wrecks things he doesn’t agree with.” He growled. “Just like he did with me…! No one’ll take anything I say seriously.”

Airi looked at the punk sympathetically. She straightened her shoulders, a look of determination replacing her previous expression. “Still, we need to talk with the volleyball team, maybe get them to confess. After seeing Kamoshida’s heart, there’s no way we can just ignore this.”

Akira looked at her pensively for a moment, then nodded. “Of course.” Guess he’ll have to talk to the other students at some point...

Ryuji whooped and pumped his fist in excitement. “I’m countin’ on you guys! Don’t worry; I’m hyped about this too!” A loud growl suddenly erupted, emanating from his stomach and he slumped. “Oh right I forgot, I haven’t eaten anything since lunch...” He muttered. “It’d be weird to split off now, so why don’t we all grab a bite somewhere?”

The Yongenjaya residents looked at each other, silently questioning their counterpart, before nodding in acquiescence.

“All right! Follow me!” He declared excitedly, grabbing his bag. “I mean, I gotta hear all about your past, dude!”

Rolling his eyes in exasperation, Akira moved to follow him, Airi falling into step next to him as they walked to the station.

“WHAT?!” Ryuji sputtered, rice splattering out of his mouth. All three Shujin students were sat at the counter of a gyudon restaurant on Central Street. It wasn't too crowded considering the late afternoon hour, but it was enough that they were huddled together in the corner. The one employee rushed to and from the back, doling out the meals to the patrons. Other than a few quick glances from other customers, they were mostly ignored.

Akira nodded while taking another bite of his beef bowl, confirming what he just said was all true. “The hell, man! How much shittier can that asshole get?!” Ryuji yelled, scrunching up his face in disgust.
Sitting to the left of the bespectacled teenager, Airi held a hand up, covering her mouth in horror. "I’m so sorry, Akira-san..." She said quietly, her heart breaking from hearing his story. She dolefully pushed her empty bowl away. ‘He really did try to do the right thing. By saving that woman, the would-be rapist sued him for injuring him.’ What a terrible world they lived in, where doing what was considered the right thing can be punished under the law.

She frowned bitterly. It honestly wasn't that surprising these days...

Akira waved his chopsticks dismissively. “Calm down, Sakamoto-san. It’s all in the past...”

The punk tch'ed. “It’s Ryuji. And for real? If it was me, I wouldn’t calm down until I punched that dick in the face.” He declared, angry on his friend’s behalf.

He continued to stuff his face with his beef bowl. “So...you left your hometown, and...you’re livin’ here now, huh?” Ryuji asked rhetorically, voice slightly muffled by all the food he was chewing. Swallowing, he paused. “We might be more alike than I originally thought.”

Akira raised a brow. “You may be right.” He replied, slightly quirking his lips. They both weren't well liked, either in school or in public in general.

Ryuji looked at him in surprise. “You’re the first guy who made me think that.” He grinned before his face fell, a frown marring his lips. “I guess it’s how we’re treated like a pain in the ass by the people around us, like we don’t belong. I did something stupid at school before, too.” He finished dejectedly, continuing digging into his meal.

“Hey,” Airi interjected softly. Both boys turned to look at her questioningly. “Not anymore, OK? I fully support you two.” She stated firmly, smiling assuredly at them. "I heard earlier in the Palace what had happened. Ryuji-kun..." She looked down at her lap. "I'm really sorry I never asked how you broke your leg..."

Ryuji waved her away. "Don't worry about it, it's all healed up now!" He grinned weakly. “But you know...” He looked away nostalgically, pursing his lips. “I always thought you were too good for me, y’know? Like, you were super kind, and smart, and pretty. Everyone liked you in middle school, and they like you here at Shujin!” He explained, smile slightly bitter.

Airi's eyes widened at his explanation.

“You worked harder than anyone else. Why should a "troublemaker" like me come up to steal your time?” He shrugged his shoulders as if it wasn’t a big deal.

The self deprecating look in his eyes gave him away though. How long did he think like this? Him not being worth her time? She pursed her lips. “As someone who I care greatly about, you can come to me anytime. I’m not worth more than anyone else, including you.” Airi stated sharply, before softening her frown. “We’re friends, right?” She asked, a smile slowly curling her lips.

Ryuji stared at her, before giving her a bright grin. “Right! Friends.” He answered, slightly tearing up. Wiping his eyes with a sleeve, he turned to Akira. “You both live in...Yongen, right?”

He nodded.

“It’s rush hour on the subways right now. I suggest you kill some time before headin’ home.” Ryuji shrugged. He looked down at the table, noticing his neighbor’s bowl. “What the hell, man. You barely touched your food.” he scolded, grabbing more ginger from the nearby container and placing it in his companion’s bowl.
Akira gave him an odd look. “What are you doing?”

He nudged him, giving him a grin. “Just lemme do it. I gotta thank you for helpin’ me.” He answered, grabbing more ginger. “Anyways, I got your back like you got mine from tomorrow on.” He promised, giving him a smirk.

Airi looked at the beef bowl in front of Akira with a revolted face. ‘That’s a lot of ginger...’ She sweatdropped.

“As long as we do something about Kamoshida, I’m sure we’ll both feel better at school.” Ryuji declared. “Oh yeah! Tell me your number and chat ID. You too, Airi!”

The three Persona users pulled out their respective phones, exchanging contact information with each other.

Putting his phone away, Ryuji muttered darkly. “Just you wait, Kamoshida…”

“We should start tomorrow then. The sooner the better.” Akira proposed, checking his schedule on his mobile.

Airi nodded in agreement. “Right. First, we should find and question the people who were kept as slaves.”

“The volleyball rally’s tomorrow, huh? Shit’s recommended by Kamoshida. Makes me wanna gag.” Ryuji complained, wrinkling his nose. “But thanks to that, we got no classes in the afternoon, and we can walk around unnoticed.” He finished, a serious expression on his face.

The other two nodded in understanding.

A grin overtaking his face, Ruji grabbed the tongs and piled on more ginger on Akira’s beef bowl. “C’mon, you gotta eat more. There’s tons of ginger here.”

Sweat dropping, he slowly pushed the other boy’s arm away from his bowl, which was now completely covered in ginger.

Airi stretched and got up from her bar stool, grabbing her bag. “You two enjoy yourselves, now.” She patted her black thigh highs. “Unfortunately, I have work to get to, so I have to cut this short.” She said apologetically. “I’ll see you tomorrow!”

Akira blinked. She had a job? “Where do you work?”

“I work at the flower shop down in the Underground Mall here.” She smiled. “You should come visit if you need any flowers! I work there four days a week.”

Ryuji’s eyes widened. “Whoa, you work that much? Talk about spending money.” He sighed jealously.

Airi giggled. “No, silly, it’s so I can afford groceries. Food isn’t cheap, you know.” She jokingly lectured. “How else would I eat?”

He furrowed his brows. “Don’t your parents buy the groceries?”

At that, she averted her eyes, smile dimming slightly. “No. Just me.” She answered softly. Giving them a halfhearted wave, Airi turned and left the restaurant.

Akira stared after her retreating back, wondering what had triggered the change in her mood, before
reluctantly digging into his -now mostly ginger- beef bowl.

Chapter End Notes

-Gyudon translates to "Beef Bowl" and it's a popular fast food in Japan.
Chapter 14

Two girls sat next to each other in the vending machine alcove that was out in the school courtyard, idly talking about their day. “How are you doing, Shiho? You look really tired.” Ann asked, worry shining in her eyes.

Shiho sighed shakily, one hand idly scratching at her black knee guard. “…I haven’t been sleeping very well.” She admitted reluctantly, her black hair that was pulled into a ponytail brushing her shoulder. “Every time I close my eyes, I keep thinking about too many things.” Her dark brown eyes stared blankly at the ground. “Nationals are coming up soon, so I keep thinking…” She paused, closing her eyes. “Should someone like me really be on the starting lineup..?”

Ann stared at her friend with a look of sadness. “Shiho…” Forcing a grin on, she pumped her arm. “Don’t worry. Just be confident in yourself!” She reassured. “Your skills have been recognized. It’s all because you work harder than anyone else!”

Shiho slowly turned to look at her best friend, face still blank. “Yeah...Volleyball’s all I have, after all…” She answered bleakly, dark eyes looking away.

Coughing awkwardly, the model switched the subject. “More importantly, was that injury OK? It looked really swollen.” Her eyes slid down to the bruise on the volleyball player's elbow, just barely in view underneath her sleeve. She hadn't seen that yesterday, which meant it was new...

She shook her head. “No, it’s nothing. It’s normal...Especially since a meet is coming up...”

Ann looked pensively at her, not knowing how to respond. Why was it normal for them to have so many bruises? Back in middle school, Shiho had attended the volleyball meets then too, and never got this many injuries. A bruised wrist here and a scraped knee there was all she ever got. Since the end of last year when she had joined their high school's team, her injuries had more than tripled in less than a year...

Just then, a blue haired student came up to them, eyes downtrodden. “Sorry to interrupt, Suzui.” Mishima apologized quietly. “Um...Kamoshida-sensei told me to get you.”

"Huh?” Shiho gasped, her head shooting up with wide eyes. “ What does he want..?” She asked, fear slowly creeping into her dark irises.

He looked away. “He didn’t say…” He answered meekly, rubbing a bruised arm.

She looked down, gripping the end of her plaid skirt in trepidation. “Ann, I…”
Ann grimaced. “It’ll be fine! I bet it’s a meeting about the starting lineup or something.” She assured, trying to cheer her friend up. She knew she was lying, but what could she do? As long as she held Kamoshida's attention, Shiho wouldn't be hurt. Even if it sickened her to her core to let that man even come near her.

Shiho looked up at the half foreigner, debating with herself, before smiling. “..Yeah.” She answered softly, before getting up. “Well...I better go...” She stated bleakly, following Mishima to the sports office.

“Good luck!” Ann called out after her, pumping a fist. Once the two volleyball team members left her sight, her smile dropped. “Hang in there, Shiho..!” She muttered fiercely, running a hand through a ponytail in agitation.

----4/12, TUESDAY, EVENING, YONGENJAYA BACKSTREETS, CAFE LEBLANC.

Arriving back at the cafe early in the evening, Akira walked in to see Sojiro sitting on one of the bar stools, reading a newspaper.

The cafe owner looked up once he heard the bell on the door ring. “...You’re home.” Sojiro stated after a moment. “I take it you actually went to school today since Airi personally escorted you?” He asked sarcastically, raising an eyebrow at the youth.

Akira frowned slightly, resigned to the fact that his guardian would be so skeptical of him. “Of course.” He answered quietly.

The older man hmphed. “I guess you learned your lesson from yesterday. Eh, as long as you aren’t getting into any trouble, it’s fine by me.” He stated apathetically, before narrowing his eyes at the student. “I don’t know what you’ve been up to, but trust me, you’ll be gone if you start causing problems.” Sojiro warned. “In case you forget, your life is not a free one right now.”

Akira nodded with a blank expression. ‘Just be patient.’ He told himself. It was something he had repeated in his mind for months since the court decision.

His phone rang, the noise penetrating the quiet calm of the cafe.

Taking it out of his pocket, he wondered who it was. On the screen, it read, “Sakamoto Ryuji,” and it was a group text message. It read, R: Hey! I decided to message you guys.

R: Can you see this?

Akira mentally rolled his eyes. Of course he could see it. He dexterously typed in “Yep” and sent it. He got a reply within a few seconds.

R: I’m counting on you tomorrow, OK?

Ak: Got it.

R: You’re a bro, man...

R: Airi, you gonna be at the rally? Wanna meet up with us?

Ai: -typing-

Ai: Yes and yes. I'll walk with Akira-kun.

R: Gotcha. Seeya guys tomorrow!
R: Let’s save those guys who’ve been getting abused. All three of us.

He blinked. Akira- kun? Slightly blushing at the more affectionate term, he typed in a confirmation before putting his phone back in his pocket.

“Sheesh, are you even listening to me?” Sojiro grumbled, unimpressed at seeing his ward fiddle with his mobile. “Just stay away from bad influences, OK?”

Akira nodded. ‘Too late.’ He thought, bemused, before walking toward the stairs.

Setting his newspaper down, Sojiro got up and called out. “Hey, I’m gonna head home for the night.”

Akira nodded.

“I’ll lock the store up. Don’t go wandering out.”

Nodding again, the transfer student ventured up the stairs and put his bag down on the table. Hearing his guardian leave via the bell ringing, he let out a sigh and collapsed on the couch, closing his eyes in exhaustion. What a long and exhausting day.

Opening his eyes, he examined his room. There were still cobwebs hanging on the ceiling in front of him, trailing down and encompassing the jam packed bookcase, an old dusty blue fan sitting haphazardly at the top just threatening to fall off. To his left was a stacked work desk covered with a transparent white sheet, the tools buried under more books.

‘I should clear that soon so I can use it for work…” He thought absentmindedly. It was a stark difference to his room back in Mishima.

On his right was an empty table, and next to that was his “closet”, which consisted of a large cardboard box sent from home. It was shifted into another rack, one which held bags of coffee beans he didn’t dare to touch. His bed, the only good thing about this room, was pushed to a corner right against the windows, a beige comforter carelessly pushed to one side of the mattress.

Reluctantly getting up, he took his school books out of his bag and began his homework.

The room still wasn’t clean enough to go without shoes, making it really awkward when he finally got up to change and get into bed. Laying down on the box spring, his phone rang. Quietly grumbling, he checked to see who messaged him. It was Ryuji again.

R: That thingy on your phone was some red eyeball icon, right?
Ak: Right..?
R: We ended up at that weird place when we used this nav app, right?
R: I found it on my phone too…
R: I don’t even remember installing it!
Ak: That’s creepy. You probably can’t delete it either.
R: For real. What is this thing..?
R: Think it’s being downloaded on its own somehow?
Ai: When you’re a Persona user, your powers automatically change your phone, making it
into a doorway to the Metaverse.
Ai: Or that's how I think it is.
Ai: Sorry for the late reply btw, just got off work.
Ak: So late? It's almost 11PM.
R: Whoa, really? So you have it too, Airi?
Ai: Yep. It's kind of creepy.
R: It's dangerous to use something without knowing what it is...
R: But with it, we can go to that weird place, right?
Ak: Seems like it.
Ai: We'll have to use it cautiously. There might be more to it than just as a portal.
R: I'm counting on you two, alright? Akira, don't go ditching school on me!
Ai: Of course! Let's do our best and help the students!
Ai: I gtg, It's the last train and it's packed.
Ak: Right. Get home safely.

Flopping his arm down on the bed after holding it up for several minutes, he placed the phone on the window ledge. Putting one arm underneath his head, Akira looked through the window at the night sky, the quiet neighborhood sounds slowly lulling him to sleep.

Pulling his comforter to cover him, his last thoughts were of his new friends. ‘I wonder which house is Airi-chan’s…’ before his eyes slid shut.

Drip. Drip.

His eyes shot open and looked around.

He was back in the cell.

He sat up, holding a hand to his head, getting on his feet. The chains dragged behind him as he walked to the bars, clutching them as he stared out. The two young parole officers wearing identical outfits, Justine and Caroline, stood at attention next to his door. Their yellow eye looked straight ahead, their silver hair hidden by law enforcement caps.

“Welcome to my Velvet Room.” The beak nosed man greeted with a large grin, his bloodshot pupils the size of pinpricks.

“To reiterate, I am Igor.”
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Revised and edited as of 6/20/17

See the end of the chapter for more notes

----4/13, WEDNESDAY, EARLY MORNING, YONGENJAYA BACKSTREETS.

Like the day prior, both Airi and Akira met up at Cafe Leblanc to travel to school together. Chatting amicably on the train, they agreed to do this every school day to keep each other company on the long journey. Leaving the train station at Aoyama-Itchome, the two walked toward school, surrounded by other journeying students.

“How annoying- we’ve barely started high school, and already they’re making us play at a volleyball rally?” A first year student complained. “And why are they pitching us against the teacher team? Kamoshida’s gonna crush us.”

“We get to see his technique live and in person, though. We should totally get spiked on!” His friend exclaimed excitedly.

“Yeah, OK. You’re gonna get your face smashed in.” The first year replied irritably. “Just look at how banged up the volleyball team is. What the hell goes on in practices?”

Walking behind them were Akira and Airi, who frowned at each other. People knew that the volleyball team was in bad shape and no one was doing anything.

They walked silently the rest of the way.

“OK, listen up, everyone.” Kawakami-sensei announced. It was during what would have been considered first period. Standing in front of the class was the homeroom teacher, wearing a bored expression. “As you all know, the volleyball rally is today. Head to the gymnasium once you’ve changed. Got it?” With that, she left the room.

The room broke out in excited murmurs.

“I can’t wait to see Kamoshida-sensei! Sometimes, I still can’t believe we got an Olympic medalist as our gym teacher!” A female student gushed.

“I know right! I’m so jealous of Takamaki-san. It’s clear that she hogs him.” Another quipped.

The students congregated and left, heading to the locker rooms to change. The Yongenjaya residents waited for the class to empty before getting up, shouldering their bags, and heading
toward the gym.

“How should we do this?” Airi whispered with a vague smile.

“We’ll have to wait until after some of the matches.” Akira replied with an even expression.

To anyone else looking, they would have appeared as normal students that weren’t trying to sniff out the biggest scandal of the school.

The bespectacled student separated from the class president and entered the boy’s locker room. He changed into the mandatory gym uniform for Shujin, a bright red track suit with white trim and arrow marks on the side. Leaving the jacket unzipped, showing the white t-shirt underneath, he left and headed into the gymnasium.

It was packed with students clamoring to see the medalist in action. Trying to squeeze past a couple of girls, Akira spotted Ryuji, his sleeves rolled up to his shoulders, sitting on the side near the stage. No one else sat around him, staying as far as they could from the delinquent.

Akira made his way over, giving him a nod in greeting.

“Yo.” Ryuji greeted. “Where’s Airi?”

He sat down next to his friend. “Still in the locker room, I think.” Akira replied, looking at the court with disinterest. He only ever played football.

The two then watched boredly as Kamoshida and the staff beat every team of students that went up against them.

Yawning, Ryuji stretched his arms up. “Pretty boring, right?” He grinned.

Akira smirked in amusement. It was pretty dull to keep watching the gym teacher annihilate his students, the other teachers not really participating.

“Sorry I took so long!”

Airi jogged over and stopped, slightly out of breath. Her regular low ponytail was put up into a braided bun, similar to the one she had as a thief. Her red shorts showed off her pale skin, enhancing her long slim legs. She left her jacket unzipped with a white shirt on display, hugging her shapely curves.

Evening her breath, she sat down next to the boys. “I was held up in the locker room because I was talking to one of the girls on the volleyball team.” She whispered with an apologetic smile, hugging her knees.

Akira stared.

Why would he do anything else at this moment, he wondered distractedly, as his eyes drank in the sight in front of him. He knew that his class president was a beauty, but seeing her now out of her regular uniform and in more conforming clothes really cemented the fact in his mind.

“Did you get anything out of her?” Ryuji questioned, not noticing his companion’s silence.

Airi shook her head sadly. “No, she barely said anything.” She replied, softly frowning. “But I know abuse when I see it…”

A whistle blew, signalling that someone had scored. Looking around the gym, Airi saw Ann sitting
by herself, not really paying attention to the game.

Ryuji, following where her eyes were looking, snorted. “Still sticks out...She hasn’t changed a bit.”

An idea hit her. “I’m going to go over to Takamaki-chan. She’s friends with the girl I cornered. Hopefully she knows something.” Airi informed the two, before straightening up and walking over to Ann.

Akira continued to stare after her, mouth slightly open, his eyes glued to her backside. Damn. He watched the class president sit next to the model, giving her a greeting. The two chatted for a bit but they were too far away for him to hear what they were saying.

The crowd gasped, and Airi turned to see what had happened. One of the students participating in the game was on the floor, the volleyball rolling away from his face. She covered her mouth in horror.

it was Mishima.

Kamoshida stood there for a moment, staring down at the blue haired student with a frown, before crossing the court. “Hey! Are you all right?” He called out, kneeling next to the boy, pulling him up into a sitting position. He looked out towards the students. “Someone! Take him to the nurse’s office!”

Another student came up and dragged Mishima’s unconscious body away, out of the building. The students whispered to each other, uncertain of what to do.

“All right, let’s keep playing!” Kamoshida grinned, continuing the game.

Airi watched as her teammate was taken out of the building, a stab of guilt in her gut. Again, he was hurt right in front of her and she couldn't do anything. How many injuries did this make..?

Glaring at the gym teacher who brushed it off without a care in the world, she turned back to Ann with a guilty expression. “Sorry Takamaki-chan, but...I have to go make sure Mishima-kun is OK.” She apologized, getting up from her seat.

The model gave the class president a reassuring smile. “Don’t worry about me. I understand!”

Airi shot her a grateful smile, before running out of the building.

Akira watched as she sprinted out of the building after Mishima. He frowned slightly. A student got seriously injured and the teacher responsible for it just brushed it off. ‘Isn’t there anyone else in the room other than us who thought that was messed up?’ He wondered darkly. What kind of place was Tokyo if people didn't care..?

“Hey.” Ryuji nudged him. “Let’s go.” He gestured to the doors.

He nodded and stood up, the two delinquents leaving the gym and headed to the vending machine alcove. Most of the students were still at the rally, leaving the courtyard mostly empty with only a few stragglers here and there.

Arriving at the corner, Ryuji turned to look at his friend. ‘That asshole’s actin’ like a king over
here too...” He frowned. “Get to know each other better, my ass. It’s just a one-man show to stroke his ego.” He ranted angrily. ”And how he acted like he was worried over Mishima? What an abusive douche bag!”

Akira nodded in agreement, a grim look on his face. “It was messed up.” He replied, putting his hands in his pockets. The man seemed to think it wasn’t a big deal that he smashed the ball right into the student’s face, and none of the students other than Airi had went to help.

Ryuji sighed, slumping from his outburst. “…Anyway, now’s our chance to go look for the guys we saw were slaves yesterday. Let’s look for the faces we saw at the castle.” Curling his fists, the ex-runner looked at his friend with a determined face. “I’ll be sure to find to spill about Kamoshida’s physical abuse. Just you wait, asshole…” He muttered to himself.

“Where are you searching?” Akira asked, leaning against a vending machine.

He scratched his head thoughtfully. “Hmm...The first one that popped out in my mind was a guy from Class D, so let’s start from there.” He suggested. “That’s your class. Hopefully, you can get him to talk without any issues. People have been avoidin’ me lately, so…” He paused. “Oh wait, you’re in the same boat, huh…”

Adjusting his glasses, he nodded. “I’m probably not the best person to, yeah. The entire class except for Airi-chan avoids me.” He stated, pursing his lips. “We should probably ask her to go in with us...She’d be able to get it out of them.” He suggested, knowing that their chances of success were low.

“Sure, OK. She’s at the nurse’s office, yeah?” Ryuji questioned, the two of them heading off.

Chapter End Notes

football in this case is soccer for us Americans.
Airi sat stiffly next to the still figure on the bed, worried out of her mind.

Mishima was still knocked out cold. His nose had bled earlier due to the force of the volleyball hitting his face, though thankfully it had just stopped. The nurse had examined him as soon as he was brought in, and she declared that he would be fine in a few hours before leaving. The student who carried him here had also left, his job done.

She reached out and softly clasped a limp hand, mentally praying that he would wake up soon. She couldn't do anything, or rather... didn't do anything. How many injuries did this make now? She didn't even know how long this has been going on...

The office door slid open, interrupting her thoughts. She looked up and blinked in surprise when she saw it was her two fellow Persona users. She tried to give them a smile as a greeting, but ended up grimacing.

They walked up to the bed, giving Mishima pitying looks. “How is he?” Ryuji asked quietly.

Airi shook her head. “The nurse said he’ll be fine in a couple of hours, but I’m worried...” She replied, biting her lip. “Mishima-kun has been part of the volleyball team since last year. He might not last much longer like this...” She gazed down sadly, taking her hand back and placing them on her lap.

Clenching his fists, he gritted his teeth. “Fucking Kamoshida.” He spat before turning on his heel, heading to the door.

She blinked. "Where are you going...?"

“I’m gonna go find those guys. I’ll text you when I got one.” He stated, before sliding the door open and walking out, sealing the room behind him.

The two classmates were now alone, barring Mishima who was still unconscious.

The bespectacled student turned back to his class president. “Are you OK?” Akira asked quietly.

Biting her lip, Airi shrugged halfheartedly. “I don’t know. I wish I could do more for him...” She trailed off. "I feel so guilty..."

Dragging another stool up, Akira sat down next to her, offering his company. “Do you know him well?” He inquired curiously. He didn't know why, but he was just so curious to learn more about his class president. Even something as simple as this.

“Not exactly...” She replied uncertainly. “This might sound kind of patronizing, but he's pretty innocent for a teenager, and undeserving of this." She explained sheepishly. Mishima reminded her of the orphanage kids. "Seeing him injured is like seeing someone kick a puppy for fun.” Her face
scrunched up in disgust at the thought.

Akira chuckled at the explanation, amusement dancing across his features. That was kind of funny.

They sat in silence for a brief moment, the only sound heard was their breathing as well as Mishima's blocked nasal passages.

Slowly lifting his hand, he placed his on top of her's.

Blinking in surprise, she looked up at him quizzically.

“I’m sure he’ll be fine.” Akira reassured, giving her a soft smile.

She stared at him for a moment, before relaxing. Giving him a watery smile, she uttered a soft “thank you” before averting her gaze, lost in her thoughts.

They sat together in silence, him never removing his hand from hers.

“Ngh…”

Snapping their heads up, two pairs of eyes focused on the bedridden patient, who was starting to twitch. With a groan, dark brown eyes slid open, gradually regaining clarity. Mishima Yuuki regained consciousness.

Airi breathed out a sigh of relief. “I’m so glad you’re alright, Mishima-kun.”

The volleyball player slowly turned his head to look at her. “Kimisawa-senpai…” He breathed out, taking a long blink.

She smiled and nodded, eyes moist with relief. Thank goodness. "How are you feeling? Does anything hurt? I can get you some ice..."

Shakily pushing his arms, Mishima sat up on the bed. “What happened?…” He asked, holding a hand to his head, wincing as it throbbed painfully under his palm.

“You were knocked out by Kamoshida.” Akira answered, retrieving his hand and standing up. He put his hands in his pockets, observing his classmate for any more signs of injury.

Mishima jumped. “Kurusu! You’re here too...?!” He shouted, looking at him with wide eyes before groaning, holding his head in pain.

Airi grabbed the painkillers and the cup of water from the side table, offering them to the bedridden teen. “Here, this will help.” She offered gently.

He took the items gingerly, before washing down the pills. He exhaled, placing the empty cup back onto the side table.

She glanced at Akira, silently questioning if she should continue. He nodded. Turning back to their bedridden classmate, Airi softly called for his attention. “Mishima-kun, please be honest with me.” She requested firmly. He looked up at her questioningly. “Is Kamoshida abusing you and the volleyball team?”

Dark brown eyes widened at the question, and he waved his hands frantically in objection. “No! No. N-Nothing’s wrong. I got hurt because I wasn’t paying attention, and...” Mishima stammered, then stopped. He clenched his eyes, gritting his teeth. "He isn't..."
Airi grasped his hand with her own, brow furrowed with anger on his behalf. “Please, Mishima-kun.” She pleaded. “We can help.”

Gripping the bed sheets with the other hand, he bit his lip, and jerkily nodded. “OK.” He whispered.

Letting out a sigh in relief, she gave him a grateful smile. “Thank you. I'm sorry if we're making you uncomfortable...Does anyone else outside of the volleyball team know about this?”

He nodded. “All the parents and faculty know.” He answered curtly, his eyes staring ahead blankly.

Her eyes widened. “All of them..?” She asked shakily.

He nodded again. “Mine does. They don’t care.” He added quietly. "The teachers don't know.”

Airi let out a trembling sigh, unsettled by what he confessed. So it was true. The parents all knew. Why haven't they done anything? Did they not care at all..?

A hand landed on her shoulder. She looked up at Akira, who’s hardened gaze bore into their bedridden classmate. “Is there anything you could tell us that could definitely incriminate him?”

Mishima slumped, a scowl marring his lips. “What would it matter? Everyone sees us with these injuries and brushes it off. They don’t care. He can’t get caught.” He answered defeatedly. "We'll be stuck like this until we graduate..."

Just then, a phone rang out, the shrill noise penetrating the tense atmosphere in the room. Taking it out of his pocket, Akira answered. “Yeah?” He said into it. “Yo. I found the guy, he's in your classroom. Hurry up here!” Ryuji replied. “Got it.” He answered, before ending the call. He moved to leave the room, Airi getting up to go with him.

“Wait!” Mishima called out. The two Persona users turned to look at him. “Please...don't tell anyone that I told you all of this.” He pleaded, his shoulders trembling in fear.

Airi softened her eyes and gave him a warm smile. “Don’t worry,” She reassured him. “He’ll pay for this.”

Akira nodded in agreement.

The two then left, sliding the door behind them. Dark brown eyes stared after them, a small glimmer of hope flashing before disappearing behind the smog of despair. "How can you be so sure..?” He asked the empty room.

The school outcast and the class president quickly made their way back to their classroom, crossing through the courtyard and up a flight of stairs. Ryuji was leaning against the wall next to the entrance, tapping his feet impatiently. Straightening up, he pointed into the room at a heavily bandaged up student. “Him. He was the first one we saw.” He stated quietly.

The three entered the room and made a beeline to the specified person.

Hearing footsteps coming up to him, the volleyball team member turned around to see who it was.
He jumped in shock. “Ack! A-Are you skipping out on the volleyball rally? I guess I expected it from you, Transfer, Sakamoto.” He remarked rudely, looking at the two outcasts.

Said transfer looked back with slightly narrowed eyes, annoyed at the minor slur. Guess this was the treatment he could expect while he was here.

The injured student then turned to Airi and looked at her in shock. “You too, Senpai?”

She directed a polite smile at him. “Please don’t tell on us, Tsukishima-kun.”

The volleyball player looked back at them, suspicious clouding his eyes. “What do you guys want..?” He asked slowly, inching backwards.

Taking a step forward, Akira’s eyes focused on his bandaged head. “How did you get injured?”

Tsukishima scrunched up his face. “It’s from practice! What does that have to do with anything?” He asked defensively, eyes starting to dart around nervously.

“Kamoshida did that to you, right?” Ryuji interjected, also taking a step forward. “Look, we ain’t gonna tell anyone you squealed.” He reassured. “Just tell us about how Kamoshida’s abusin’ you.”

He took another step back, away from the intimidating delinquents. “I-I don’t know what you’re talking about!” He exclaimed shakily, a bead of sweat rolling down his face and hitting his bandages.

Airi stepped forward, clasping her hands in front of her. “Please, Tsukishima-kun. We need you to testify.” She pleaded softly. “We know.”

“You...you know? You have proof?” Tsukishima squawked, face slacken at the information. He shook his head furiously, glaring at them. “This is ridiculous. Please, leave me alone. You’re really bothering me!” The volleyball member snapped, clearly done with the interrogation. He turned away, letting them see his back.

Rubbing his head in frustration, Ryuji turned to his friends. “All right, let’s just go.”

The three walked out into the hallway and slid the door closed. “Crap.” Ryuji cursed. “If we keep goin’ at this pace, the ball game’s gonna end.”

Adjusting his glasses, Akira shifted in place. “Let’s split up.” He offered. “It’ll be faster.”

The punk grinned. “Right. I’ll check the Practice Building for people before clubs start. You handle the Classroom Building.”

“I’ll check the courtyard as well as the girl’s bathrooms and locker room.” Airi added with a determined look.

The three nodded to each other and split up.

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Heading toward the courtyard, Airi walked down the flight of stairs to the first floor. Turning the corner, she quickly took a step back, seeing Ann with the girl she questioned earlier, Suzui Shiho, standing near some lockers.

It wasn't an unusual sight to see the two together since they were best friends. The model clung to
the volleyball player like a safety net, always sticking close to her one and only companion in the school.

While Airi and her were on good terms, the class president had been much too busy to really reconnect with her old middle school classmate, leaving the half foreigner with only one real friend to talk to. She felt bad about it, but hopefully once this Kamoshida issue was solved, they could hang out once in a while.

Peeking out from the corner, Airi watched as the two conversed to each other.

“Everyone’s saying a lot of bad stuff about that transfer in your class, Ann...” Shiho remarked, tucking a few black strands behind her ear.

Her companion grunted in agreement. “I know. I hate rumors already, but they’re only getting more and more complex as time goes on.” Ann replied, twirling her ponytail agitatedly.

“I wonder if he’s all right...I hope he’s not letting it get to him too much.” The volleyball member murmured, lips pursed in worry.

Ann sighed. “That’s just like you, Shiho. Always worrying about others before yourself.” She shook her head exasperatedly before grinning. “Don’t worry, I’ve seen him around with Airi-senpai. She’ll make sure he’s OK.”

Shiho blinked. “’’Airi-senpai’’? You mean Kimisawa-chan, right?’’

She nodded. “Yep. Don’t you remember her?” She asked curiously, tilting her head to the side.

Hesitantly, the black haired girl nodded. “Yeah. She asked me how I was when we were both changing in the locker room...She said she was worried about me.”

Ann giggled. “That’s just like Senpai. She probably saw you looking down and thought, ‘I have to cheer her up!’”

Shiho looked at her in surprise. “But she doesn’t even know me! We weren’t in the same class in middle school..!” She exclaimed. ”Why would she care so much..?“

“Well...” Ann drawled. “It’s a lot like how you were for me, remember?” She grinned warmly.

Smiling fondly, Airi continued on her way out the courtyard, taking another route. ‘Takamaki-chan still thinks so highly of me...’ She thought happily. ‘And Suzui-san, now..! She’s just like...’ She shook her head. ‘Don’t think about it.’
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Revised and edited as of 6/21/17.

“Attention...Attention...All matches have concluded. Please get ready to go home for today...”

Akira bit back a curse. He had only just started questioning a first year volleyball member when the announcement rang out.

The first year ran away down the hall, taking the opportunity to escape from the scary transfer student.

His phone buzzed. Turning around the corner, he leaned against a wall next to the stairwell and unlocked his phone.

R: Dammit, we’re outta time. How’d it go?
Ak: No good.
R: So you didn’t have any luck, either…
Ai: Sorry. I almost got something, but the girl ran away.
R: Let’s regroup for now. See you in the courtyard?
Ak: Sure.
Ai: Already here.

He put his phone away and pushed himself off the wall. Yet another failure.

Walking down the stairs, he crossed the courtyard into the vending machine alcove. He saw Airi sitting on one of the benches with a drink in hand, looking morose with herself. 'She changed back into the regular uniform.' He thought, slightly disappointed.

He walked up next to her and sat down, taking a breather after their wild goose chase. They had spent the rest of the day trying to corner their fellow students, and it all ended in failure. How was it that no one wanted to bust the teacher that was physically and verbally abusing people?

They sat in silence for a bit, but it was broken by the arrival of Takamaki Ann who walked up to them, still in her gym uniform. “Hey. Can I talk to you guys for a sec..?” She asked hesitantly.

Akira tilted his head, looking at her. “What is it?”

Airi looked at her curiously.

The model crossed her arms. “It’ll be quick.” She assured them. “What was up with you? Like, how you were late the other day and all. We both saw you in the morning, on the way to school.” She gestured to Airi and herself. “So you should’ve gotten here on time...And there’s that rumor about you, too.”

“Whaddya want with him?”
The three members of Class 2-D turned around to see Ryuji stomping up to them, glaring at the model.

Ann glared back at him, irritated at the interruption. “Right back at you. You’re not even in our class.”

Ryuji looked away. “...We just happened to get to know each other.” He answered awkwardly.

Putting her drink down, Airi walked up to the two with her hands out. “Please, let’s not fight.” She soothed the two. She had had enough of this back in middle school, especially during that project. That argument had went on for hours...

Ann looked at her guiltily, but held her stance, crossing her arms. “What are you guys planning on doing to Kamoshida-sensei?”

“Oh I see, I getcha.” Ryuji narrowed his eyes, glaring at her. “You’re all buddy-buddy with Kamoshida after all.”

“This has nothing to do with you, Sakamoto!” She scowled.

He hmphed. “If you found out what he’s been doing behind your back, you’d dump him right away.” Ryuji clenched his fists.

Taken aback, Ann flinched. “Behind my back..? What’s that supposed to mean?” She asked, looking at the three curiously.

The two guys glanced at each other, silently questioning each other. Akira shook his head. They shouldn't involve anyone else.

Ryuji nodded before turning back to the half foreigner. “You wouldn’t get it.” He said shortly.

Airi closed her eyes and sighed. Boys.

“Well, whatever.” Ann retorted. “I don’t know what you guys are trying to pull, but no one is gonna help you.” She looked down dejectedly. “I’m warning you, just in case.” She finished quietly, before turning to leave.

Furrowing her eyebrows, Airi followed after her down the courtyard, calling out her name. “Takamaki-chan! Wait!”

Ann turned around, blinking in surprise. “Senpai?”

Biting her lip, Airi leaned in close while covering her mouth from any onlookers. “Please, keep a close eye on Suzui-chan...I saw several bruises on her earlier in the locker room.”

She flinched back. “What?”

Airi nodded. “The one on her lower back looked suspiciously like a hand print... A large male one.” She bit her lip, her eyes pleading at Ann to understand. She didn't want to think that another fellow student was being sexually harassed too.

Ann took a step back, staring at her with wide eyes before nodding faintly. "Right..."

Airi sighed in relief. “And it’s just Airi, Takamaki-chan. We’ve known each other for four years, after all.” She added, shooting her a fond smile.
The model pursed her lip and shook her head. “I don’t know if I believe you, but I’ll keep a closer eye on her.” She smiled impishly. "And it’s Ann to you then, Airi-senpai.”

They both giggled.

“Well, I’m off then. I have a shoot to get to.” She stated apologetically.

Airi waved her off. “Don’t worry about it. Good luck.”

Ann nodded and walked through the doors leading to the school entrance. Airi walked back to the alcove where Akira and Ryuji were waiting, shooting them a sheepish look, before sitting down and grabbing her drink.

Gray eyes darting between the two, his brow furrowed. “How do you know her?” Akira asked them both. He felt like such an outsider.

With a roll of his eyes, Ryuji opened his mouth. “We all went to the same middle school.” He replied curtly, taking a seat next to the class president. Akira made to sit down as well, the three occupying the bench. Now that school was over, not a lot of people stuck around, so only one or two students wandered the courtyard.

“Well, I had no luck.” Ryuji began, leaning back against the seat. “Did anythin' like someone’s name turn up?”

Akira nodded. “A first year mentioned that Mishima was getting special coaching from Kamoshida.”

Airi grasped her chin thoughtfully. “So what he said earlier was true...”

Ryuji looked at her questioningly. "Who?"

“After you left the nurse’s office, Mishima-kun woke up.” She explained, taking a swig of her drink. “I begged him to tell me what was going on, and he told us that all the parents and faculty know about this.” She finished, eyes darkened. "They aren't doing anything..."

He stared at her incredulously. “Are you fucking serious?!” He growled, clenching his fists.

Akira looked at him sharply. “Hey!” He admonished the punk. He didn't have to curse right in her face like that.

Ryuji flinched. “Right... Sorry, Airi.” He apologized, rubbing the back of his head guiltily. "Didn't mean ta curse at ya."

Shaking her head, she gave him an understanding smile. “Don’t worry about it. I’m angry as well.” Getting up, she threw away her finished drink and turned to the two Persona users. “We should go see if Mishima-kun is OK. He’s our only lead right now.”

The two delinquents nodded in agreement, and the three walked around searching for their bruised classmate.

They finally found him near the snack store, preparing to leave school. He seemed downtrodden, his head held down as he dejectedly walked toward the entrance. There was the occasional student leaving as well, the school building slowly emptying out.
“Mishima-kun!” Airi called out, running up to him, the two outcasts following behind her.

The volleyball player turned to look at her. “Oh, Senpai.” He greeted quietly, giving her a minuscule smile.

“Are you feeling better?” She inquired softly, her concern for the injured classmate welling up. He didn't look any better, in fact, there were now bags under his eyes from being knocked out earlier.

“Did Kamoshida give you all those other injuries?” Ryuji asked brusquely, looking him up and down.

Eyes darting around, looking at all the people still in the building, Mishima shook his head. “They’re from practice..! I’m just not very good at volleyball.”

The three looked at him disbelievingly. They didn't believe a single word he said, especially when he had already confessed in the nurse's office. Why was he still denying it?

“What's going on here?”

The four students stiffened, turning to the new voice.

Kamoshida walked up to them, looking down at Mishima disapprovingly. “Mishima, isn’t it time for practice?”

Said student took a step back, looking away. “I-I’m not feeling well today...” He answered meekly, his hands trembling around the handle of his bag.

Resting his hands on his hips, the gym teacher frowned. “What? Maybe you’re better off quitting then. You’re never going to improve that crappy form unless you show up to practice.” He remarked callously.

Ryuji glared at the teacher, walking up to him with clenched fists. “Didn’t ya hear? He ain’t feelin’ well!”

Kamoshida ignored him. “Well, Mishima? Are you coming to practice or not?”

“...I’ll go.” He reluctantly acquiesced, hanging is head in defeat.

Airi looked at him worriedly. “Mishima-kun, are you sure?” She whispered to him. Was he really going to willingly walk back into that hellish nightmare?

He didn’t respond, his dark eyes staring blankly at the floor.

“As for you.” Kamoshida began, looming over the ex-runner with his height. “Any more trouble and you’ll be gone from this school for sure.” He threatened, glaring down at him past his nose.

“Tch, bastard...”Ryuji muttered angrily, reluctantly taking a step back.

The gym teacher’s eyes zeroed down at Akira. "Same goes for you. Didn’t the principal tell you to keep in line?"

Said student placed his hands in his pockets, face unreadable. "I was just leaving.” He replied shortly. This guy pissed him off...

He sneered. “Well, just don’t get in the way of my practice. All these unsettling rumors are making the students anxious, after all.”
The punk narrowed his eyes at the remark. “That’s your own goddamn fault.” Ryuji muttered.

Turning to face the only girl in the group, Kamoshida gave her a grin. “Kimisawa, you shouldn’t be hanging around these delinquents.”

She blinked, taken aback by the 180 in his attitude. Was he...flirting with her?

“If you want, you can come watch the practice!” He offered, grinning down at her in a playful manner.

She glanced over at her friends, unsure of how to respond. How do you reject a teacher who could technically be sexually harassing you..?

Ryuji looked at the teacher with disgust. Akira furrowed his brows, anger flashing in his dark stormy eyes.

“Um...” Airi began, eyes darting around. “Thank you for the offer, Sensei, but my shift starts soon.” She replied apologetically, giving him a polite smile. There, that should be fine, right..?

“Another time then.” Kamoshida sighed, leaning back. “Let’s go, Mishima.” He turned to walk away, but paused. “Shujin Academy is a place where those with aspirations come to learn. Unworthy students like you, don’t have any right to be here. Get with the program!” Kamoshida declared, glaring at the three male students.

“Yes, sir.” Mishima replied quietly, keeping his head down.

Narrowing his eyes, the teacher left, walking back to the gym.

Ryuji clenched his fists. “That asshole’s gonna pay for this...!” He declared quietly.

“It’s no use...” Mishima interjected. “Proving that he’s physically abusing us...is meaningless. Everybody knows. The principal, our parents...They all know, and they all keep quiet about it,” He finished quietly.

“But Mishima-kun, if we can get more people to prove he’s doing this, we can go to the authorities.” Airi protested, furrowing her brow. "Don't you want this to stop?"

He clenched his bag tighter, glaring at the three in front of him. “...Don’t be a pain. You don’t understand what I’m going through.” Mishima argued, locking his eyes with Ryuji’s. “Shouldn’t you of all people know that nothing’s going to help..!?”

Taken aback, the ex-runner flinched.

Taking the opportunity, Mishima fled, running toward the gym. A drop splashed against the wooden floors, a tear streaming down his face as he furiously rubbed his eye.

Biting his lip, Ryuji lifted his hands in a strangling motion, before letting it go limp. “Dammit...” He muttered, watching the volleyball player run away.

Akira turned to look sympathetically at him. Everyone loved to bring up his past with the track team and Kamoshida. "What now..?"

Slumping, Ryuji looked down. “...I’ll try one more time to persuade the other guys. That’s...all I can do.” He ended quietly.

The three Persona users stood in the hall silently, each trying to figure out a way to help the
situation.

How could the adults, the ones children were supposed to trust, allow this to happen?
After finishing his school work for the day, Akira changed into his sleepwear and got into bed. Shujin Academy was a lot tougher than his old high school, most likely because it's in Tokyo and that it was an elite institution. Why did this place accept him? All the rumors about him would only drag their reputation down...

Just as he closed his eyes, his phone rang. His eyes snapped open, laying there for a moment with a blank face, before he reluctantly reached out and grabbed his mobile. This was going to happen everyday, wasn't it...

R: This doesn’t make sense.
R: The principal and even the parents know about the abuse.
R: But why ain’t anybody speaking up?!
Ak: They don’t care that it’s happening.
Ai: I don’t like thinking like that, but it’s most likely true...
R: That can’t be true!
R: It’s basically because Kamoshida made the volleyball team famous, yeah?
R: Even so, that don’t give him the right to do what he wants!
R: He’s beating kids up, and all they’re allowed to do is endure!
R: And that follower of his doesn’t give a single shit...
Ak: Who are you talking about?
Ai: Are you referring to Ann-chan?
R: Yeah.
R: Wait, you call her Ann now?
R: When did this happen?
Ai: Today, but Ryuji-kun, I think you’ve got it all wrong.
Ai: Akira-kun, do you remember when you first met her?
Ak: Yeah, under the awning. Kamoshida picked her up.
R: See? She’s just so in love, she can’t see the real him.
Ai: No. She isn’t. If she was really in love, she wouldn’t have looked scared about getting in the car with him.
R: ...Whatever. I’m gonna try to find someone who knows about what’s going on with Kamoshida during break tomorrow.
R: Just you watch, I ain’t giving up!
Ai: Good luck, Ryuji-kun.
Ak: Tell us how it goes.

Flopping his arm on the bed, he stared tiredly at the wooden ceiling, his eyes burning for relief. He felt like he had seen too much today, like a gym teacher spiking a student right in the face with a volleyball and no one but them had cared.

Pulling up his comforter, he laid on his side. ‘I still don’t know where Airi-chan lives…’ He thought absentmindedly, drifting off to sleep. She was so interesting in this sea of gray people, her uncommon pink hair standing out like a gleam of color. Why was he so curious?

----4/14, THURSDAY, EARLY MORNING, YONGENJAYA BACKSTREETS

Akira waited outside the cafe, fiddling with his phone. It was a little earlier than they had scheduled, so he wasn’t surprised to see that Airi hadn’t arrived yet. The early morning sunlight shined gently onto the streets, reflecting off his glasses. The older folk who lived in Yongenjaya were strolling about, basking in it.

Following their example, he lifted his head up and closed his eyes. Feeling the warm rays on his face, he let out a content sigh. It was nice to feel the sun since they were stuck in a classroom for hours. At least one thing stayed constant in his life.

“Good morning, Akira-kun! You look well today.”

Opening his eyes, he turned his head to smile at the arrival of his classmate and friend. "Good morning."

Airi smiled back, walking up to him. The two then headed toward the station to go on their way to school.

Walking on the streets of Aoyama-Itchome, they overheard two students who were ahead of them.

“Did you see Kamoshida-sensei play yesterday? He was so awesome!” A female student gushed. “I think I might ask for his autograph after school.”

“I dunno if that’s such a good idea...I hear you shouldn’t go near the P.E. office.” Her friend replied nervously. “People say you can hear weird sounds, like screaming, even though no one’s there…”

“What? That’s probably just a rumor spread by fans to scare the competition.” The female student dismissed.

Akira and Airi glanced at each other, stunned from what they were hearing.
The entire school really did know then, they just hadn't realized it.

During Ushimaru-sensei’s lecture, two phones buzzed. Discreetly taking them out, the two Yongenjaya residents looked at their screens.

R: So about witnesses…
Ai: Pay attention to class, Ryuji-kun.
R: I can’t, OK. All I can think about is socking Kamoshida in the jaw.
R: Did you get anything out of Takamaki yesterday?
Ai: No, she was busy. Why?
R: I was wondering if we can get something out of her.
Ak: Because she’s with Kamoshida?
Ai: Is it because she’s friends with Suzui-san?
R: Yes to both!
R: Since she’s best friends with someone on the volleyball team, she probably knows something.
R: I tried to talk to that girl during break, but got nothing.
Ai: She doesn’t really…
Ak: How so?
Ai: The girl who I was talking to in the locker room yesterday was Suzui-san.
Ai: I had to tell Ann-chan that she had a giant bruise in the shape of a hand on her back.
Ai: She almost didn’t believe me. So I don’t think she knows anything.
R: A giant bruise?…
R: Maybe we could ask Takamaki to ask her?
Ak: It’s certainly possible.
R: Then again, I guess it’d be hard getting her to help us.
Ai: Should I try?
R: Not yet, lemme try finding something else.

The two put their phones away, locking eyes for a moment, before turning back to the lesson. What could they do?

“Shouldn’t you be heading to volleyball?” Ann inquired, looking at her friend. They were in the courtyard again, sitting on a bench in the vending machine alcove. ‘If what Airi-senpai said is true, then...I don’t know what to do.’ She thought despondently.

She didn't want to face it. It would mean that her friend had been suffering for half a year, and hadn't told her about it. Even worse was that she hadn't done anything to help other than to try to distract the gym teacher with the thought of her body. Just thinking about it sent a shiver down her spine. She hated him so much...
The volleyball member nodded dispiritedly. “Uh-huh...”

Blue eyes narrowed, observing her closely. “That bruise above your eye...Is that from practice, too?” Ann asked hesitantly. It was definitely new.

Dark eyes darting around, Shiho nodded jerkily. “Y-yeah...”

Ann's eyes widened and looked at her friend in worry. “Are you sure you’re not pushing yourself too hard?” She pressed further. Please, just say it. Let me help.

“I’m OK...Volleyball’s the only thing I can do right...” Shiho stated defeatedly.

Just then, Ann’s phone rang out. Glancing at her pocket, she ignored it, knowing exactly who it was. She had assigned a specific ringtone to his number so that she could ignore it.

Shiho glanced over at her. “Shouldn’t you answer that?”

She shook her head. “It’s probably just my part-time job...I think.”

They sat there quietly for a bit. “I...should get going.” The volleyball player said reluctantly.

Ann stared at her worriedly. “Shiho...” She whispered. Say it. Just say it. “…Are you sure you’re OK?”

Shiho nodded. “Uh-huh.” She replied blankly, before getting up and walking away.

Ann stared at her retreating back, concern shining in her eyes. “She lied to me...” She whispered to herself. She wasn't going to tell her...

Her phone rang again. With a groan, she picked up the call. “Hello?” She said. “Today won’t work...I’m...I’m not feeling so good. “ She replied bleakly. “Sorry...bye.” Hanging up, she gripped her phone. She was so sick of this. How long did she have to play the bimbo...

Taking a deep breath, she typed in a text message.

An: I believe you.
Ai: Did something happen to Suzui-san?
An: No...Yes. I don’t know anymore.
Ai: Can we meet up soon?
An: Sure.

"That's the transfer, right..?"

"He's scary...Don't go near him. I hear he has a knife on him!"

"Did you see he was hanging around Kimisawa-senpai and Sakamoto? Why would she hang out with such dangerous people?"

"Maybe they're blackmailing her..."

Akira ignored the gossip with a heavy heart. It was so much worse here than back in his hometown
of Mishima. Now that he had a record, people came up with all sorts of ridiculous theories around him. It wasn't like he could avoid it either. He just had to deal with it.

Walking toward the courtyard to meet up with Ryuji and Airi, he spotted a lone girl in Shujin gym clothes. ‘That looks like Volleyball gear.’ He contemplated, before walking up to her.

She was staring at her phone blankly, not moving from her spot in front of the doors. She seemed to be too deep in thought.

He stood nearby with his hands in his pockets, waiting for her to notice him.

Blank eyes glanced up. “...What?” She said quietly. “Oh...I’m in the way, aren’t I? Sorry...”

Gray eyes narrowed slightly behind glass, focused on the large purple bruise on her eyebrow. “Are you hurt?” Akira asked softly. Was she also being abused? Or was it even worse...

Flinching, the girl hugged herself. “Um, well...” She stammered, looking away, before looking back at him. “Hm? You don’t look familiar...” She tilted her head. “Could you be that transfer student from 2-D?”

He nodded, noticing the subject change but had let it slide.

“Um, this might not be any of my business, but don’t let the rumors get to you, OK..?” She quietly bolstered. "I know you're friends with Kimisawa-senpai, so hopefully they'll die down soon..."

Giving her a small smile, he nodded again. Everyone had such good things to say about the class president. “Yeah. They don’t bother me.”

She nervously tucked her hair behind an ear. “I’ve helped with this situation before...My best friend is often misunderstood too, because of her looks.” She paused. “Ah. Sorry, I didn’t mean to drag on like that. Anyway, I have to go to practice...I’ll see you around.” Giving him a slight bow, she stepped around him and walked away.

He stared after her pensively, before resuming his walk out. She seemed OK for someone who seemed beaten down, but he shouldn't think that. He didn't really know her, but he appreciated her kind words. They were a rarity in this school.

Arriving at the alcove, he saw that Ryuji was already there, furiously pacing back and forth.

“Dammit. What the hell...” He muttered, scrunching up his face in frustration.

Already knowing the answer, Akira walked up to him. “Did you find someone?”

Ryuji sighed. “Is that what it looks like?” He etorted sarcastically. Slamming his fist into the vending machine, he ducked his head, glaring at the ground. “All of them kept sayin’ the same shit that Mishima talked about!" He gritted his teeth. “Kamoshida had to have told ‘em something!” Slumping, he looked over at the transfer student. “At this rate... it looks like we’ll have to go to him directly.” Ryuji stated grimly.

Akira gave him a pitying look. They wouldn't be able to win. “There’s no point.”

“I know...” He replied softly, furrowing his brows in frustration. “But isn’t there something we could do? No way am I gonna leave it like this!” He declared desperately. “Can you think of anything?”
Tapping his chin, the bespectacled student thought of what they could do now. “Have we asked Airi-chan?”

Ryuji perked up. “Oh yeah! Where is she, anyway?” He asked, looking around to try to find the class president.

Shrugging, Akira checked his phone to see if he had any new messages from her. He did. Opening up the text, he read it out loud.

Ai: I’m really sorry but I’m going to be late.
Ai: Kawakami-sensei had to talk to me.

“What?” Ryuji sputtered. “Well, let’s just wait for her. Any other ideas?”

Akira bit his lip. Should they? Nothing else was working. He looked up at his friend with a serious expression. “Let’s punish the king.” He declared.

“The king..? You mean that other world’s Kamoshida?” Ryuji questioned, eyes wide with shock. “I didn’t think of that...” He trailed off. “Is there any meaning to-”

“I finally found you...”
Chapter 19

As always, thank you to Ghosty_ghost for your lovely comment! I'm so happy to see I've gotten over 130 kudos and 17 bookmarks!!! Thanks so much to all you wonderful people who would read my trash -cries-

Confused at the new voice, the two outcasts looked around for who had spoken. “Uh, did you say something?” Ryuji questioned slowly.

Akira shook his head. That wasn't him, and he knew it wasn't the ex-runner's voice either. Who..?

A black and white cat wearing a yellow collar walked up and jumped on the table in front of them. “Don’t think you can get away without paying me back for helping you.” It declared, slowly waving its tail.

Staring wide-eyed at the strange scene in front of them, they took a step back in shock. “That voice...Is that you, Morgana?!” Ryuji yelped, gazing at it incredulously.

The cat shook its head at them disapprovingly. “How dare you, up and leaving me the other day!” It chastised, glaring up at the two teenagers.

“The cat’s talkin’!” Ryuji exclaimed hysterically.

Akira just stared, his mouth slightly open. He was kind of speechless. Was he dreaming?

“I am NOT a cat!” Morgana yelled. “This is just what happened when I came to this world!” Settling down, the feline twitched its whiskers. “It was a lot of trouble to find you two.”

Yep, definitely not a cat, Akira thought sarcastically, sweatdropping at the situation.

“Wait...” Ryuji began. “You came to our world?! Does that mean you’ve got a phone?” He asked curiously, taking a few steps closer to examine the feline.

Morgana hmphed, grooming itself. “You don’t need one when you’re at my level.” It said cockily. “Though I did get pretty lost making my escape...” It trailed off.

Shaking his head, Ryuji raised his fist. “That aside, how can you talk?! You’re a cat!” He argued.

Scratching its ear with its hind leg, Morgana glared. “How should I know?!”

The ex-runner looked up at his companion, eyes slightly neurotic. “You hearin’ this, too..?” He asked faintly, barely coping with the change in his reality.

Smirking, Akira turned to his friend. “Meow?” He said jokingly. He had to.

“Arrgh!” Ryuji growled, furiously rubbing his head. “Don’t do that! This is no time to be jokin’ around!”

Morgana looked on in amusement. “You guys are having a rough time of this, hm? I heard you
mention something about witnesses.” It said haughtily.

“Oh shuddup.” He retorted irritably.

The feline slowly grinned. “You know,” It began. “I could tell you a thing or two about what to do with Kamoshida.” It looked up at the bespectacled student. “You were pretty close just a moment ago.”

Rolling his eyes, Ryuji crossed his arms. “God, that condescendin’ attitude! This thing’s gotta be Morgana!” He proclaimed with a scowl.

Said cat looked up at him, affronted. “You were still doubting me?!?” It yelled, its voice reverberating through the alcove.

Panicking, Ryuji shushed it. “Quiet down!” He hissed.

“We really have to be looking for a cat in a busy time like this..?”

The three Persona users looked out. Two teachers walking side by side were complaining to each other.

“I just heard a meow somewhere near here. Didn’t you hear it?” One teacher said.

“Make sure you check every nook and cranny around.” The other ordered. They walked away, heading further down the courtyard and away from the Persona users.

Ryuji furrowed his brows. “Meow..?” He murmured. “Does that mean only us three can understand what you’re sayin’?”

Said cat licked its paw. “Looks like it.” It stated calmly.

Grabbing his head, he let out a sigh. “What the hell’s goin’ on..?” He complained exasperatedly. “Anyways, what you were talkin’ about earlier...Is it for real?” He asked quietly, wary of eavesdroppers.

Akira moved in closer as well. They didn’t need anyone coming up to them and seeing them talk to a cat.

“You’re quite the skeptic for being an idiot.” Morgana replied, giving the punk an exasperated look.

“This probably isn’t the best place to continue this.” Akira interjected quietly. “We should go somewhere else, and tell Airi-chan about this.”

Its eyes glowed with delight when he mentioned her name. “Oh yes! Lady Airi is here somewhere, right?” It asked excitedly.

At that moment, Ryuji grabbed Morgana by the scruff, holding it out to his fellow delinquent. “Here, stick it in your bag for now! It should be just small enough to fit!”

“Hey!” Morgana yelped. “How dare you treat me like-”
Quickly sending a text to Airi informing her where they were, Akira put his wriggling bag down and unzipped it. A black blur escaped the confines and stood on the school rooftop, shaking its body. “Don’t be so rough with me!” Morgana yowled, glaring at them.

“Enough of that!” Ryuji exclaimed irritably, rattling the chain link fence that encircled the rooftop. “You said you know how we can do something about Kamoshida, right?”

Giving them a smile, it nodded. “It has to do with what this guy was talking about earlier.” It gestured at Akira, who put his hands in his pockets. “You’ll need to attack his castle.”

He scratched his head in confusion. “What do you mean?”

Morgana sat down, prepared to give them a lecture. “That castle is how Kamoshida views this school.” It began, lazily waving its tail. “He doesn’t realize what happens in there, but it’s deeply connected to the depths of his heart. Thus, if the castle disappears, it would naturally impact the real Kamoshida.”

Ryuji crossed his arms. “What’d happen?” He asked contemplatively.

“A Palace is a manifestation of a person’s distorted desires. So, if that castle were no more…” Morgana trailed off with a smile.

“His desires would be no more.” Akira finished, frowning thoughtfully. Was that really applicable in the real world though?

It purred happily. “Precisely! You sure pick up things fast!”

“For real?! H-He’s gonna turn good?!” Ryuji sputtered, then paused. “But...is that really gettin’ back at him?” He questioned quietly, face drawn with uncertainty.

Morgana flicked its ears. “Erasing a Palace essentially means forcing the owner to have a change of heart.” It lectured. “However, even though their warped wants disappear, the crimes they committed remain. Kamoshida will become unable to bear the weight of those crimes, and he’ll confess them himself!” It proclaimed, grinning at its own intelligence.

Ryuji exhaled giddily. “You for real?! That’s possible?!”

Morgana nodded its head. “And since the palace will no longer exist, he’ll forget what we did there as well.” It purred smugly. “Not only will we be able to bring Kamoshida down, but there won’t even be a trace of our involvement.”

He let out a laugh, smiling for the first time today. “That’s amazing! You are one incredible cat!”

“True, except for the cat part!” Morgana snapped, but its expression showed that it was joking.

“So?” Ryuji asked excitedly. “How do we get rid of a Palace?!”

Metal creaked and they looked over at the door. “You have to steal its Treasure.” Airi stated, closing the door behind her. She gave them a sheepish smile. “Sorry I’m so late, I had to call my boss after I finished my duties.” She apologized, before looking down at Morgana with a happy smile. “Morgana! I’m so glad you’re OK.”

Blue eyes shining, the feline jumped at the class president. “Lady Airi!” It purred happily, rubbing its head against her jaw.
Airi giggled at the affection, scratching behind its ears.

Akira looked at the scene before him, slightly smiling, even though part of him silently wished that the cat would stop.

Ryuji scratched his head. “Steal the treasure..?”

Morgana, still nestled in her arms, turned its head at him. “I’ll tell you more once you agree to go ahead with this. It’s my most valuable, secret plan, after all.” It stated coolly. “If you want to help me out. I’ll gladly teach you. What’s your call?”

The punk turned to his fellow delinquent. “Our luck’s runnin’ dry lookin’ for witnesses. Guess we have no choice but to go along...” He trailed off.

The bespectacled student looked over to the only lady. She was silently pleading at him with her dark red eyes.

Akira nodded in acquiesce. He wanted to help with this. No one deserved to be treated badly and they had the power to do something. “You’re right.”

Airi awarded him a grateful smile in response. She was glad to have him on their side. They wouldn't be able to do this alone and having more help was great.

“...Good.” Morgana purred. “Oh, there’s one more thing I should tell you three.” It said, jumping out of the class president's arms and sat down on the floor. “If we erase a Palace, there is no doubt that the person’s distorted desires will be erased as well.” It lectured. “But desires are what we all need in order to survive. The will to sleep, eat, fall in love--those sorts of things.”

Airi furrowed her brows. What? “Are you saying...If we do this, Kamoshida will lose his will to live?” She asked quietly, biting her lip.

Ryuji looked at her questioningly. “What does that mean?”

Flicking its ears, Morgana licked a paw. “If all those yearnings were to vanish, they’d be no different than someone who has shut down entirely. They may even die if they’re not given proper care. So...” It trailed off, glancing away.

Taken aback, Ryuji stiffened. “They might die..?!”

It gave him an irritated look. “Will you listen to everything I have to say first?”

He looked around hesitantly at his companions. “Would their death be our fault..?” He asked quietly.

“Aren’t you determined enough to face those kinds of risks?” Morgana inquired, giving him a sharp glare.

Ryuji turned to his fellow students. “Hey...What do you guys think?” He asked morosely.

Akira pursed his lips. He didn’t want to commit murder, but with how everything was escalating... “We’ll have to risk it.” He replied with a grave expression. They had to help their fellow students. He wasn't going to leave them to suffer when he could do the right thing.

Ryuji turned to look at Airi.

The class president gnawed on her lip. “I...have to agree with Akira-kun. There’s nothing we can
do on this side.” She began hesitantly. “No one else is going to do anything. This is our only chance.” She finished, closing her eyes sorrowfully. She didn't want to be a murderer, she never wanted to be like him, but the lines blurred in this kind of situation. It was only a risk, meaning there was a high chance he would still live afterward.

“Sheesh,” Morgana groaned. “I come all this way, and this is what I get. It’s not like anyone will ever find out.” It remarked, flicking its tail.

Facepalming, Ryuji glared down at it. “That’s not the point! If we just go around secretly doin’ whatever we want, we’d be no better than that fucking Kamoshida...” He finished cynically.

The feline rolled its eyes. “Isn’t this your only option?” It retorted before getting up and walking over to the door, looking back at them. “I’ll come back later. Make sure you’ve made your decision by then.” With that, the cat left the three teenagers alone on the rooftop.

Airi made her way over to a nearby chair and sat down, sighing deeply. Akira moved close by, leaning against a desk.

Ryuji crouched in place, putting his head in his arms. “What do we do?” He asked morosely, his voice muffled by fabric.

The other two didn’t respond. Airi bit her lip, looking down at her lap guiltily. She hadn’t even done anything yet but she still felt terrible. Was she going to kill someone...? Did this make her better or worse than him?

“I’ll try and see if I can figure out another way...” Ryuji stated quietly. “C’mon, let’s get outta here.”

They walked down the stairs and split, Ryuji going one way and the two from class 2-D going another.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

PLEASE READ: more texting but there's also feels!

NEW WARNING: I'll be adding some anti christian-extremism themes to the story starting from this chapter. Just to clarify, it means I will be writing things that will be against extreme christianity practices. If that makes you uncomfortable, please do not read any further!

As always, I'm thankful for your support!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Taking the train at Aoyama-Itchome, the two didn't say anything, too lost in thought.

Phone buzzing, Akira took it out of his pocket. It was from Ryuji, and it was a direct message. Glancing over at Airi who stared ahead blankly, not paying attention, he opened the message.

R: Hey, I heard something that got my attention.
Ak: ?
R: About that Suzui girl...Looks like rumors are going around about her and Kamoshida.
R: If they're true, it's no wonder I couldn't get her to talk.
R: Still, something doesn't seem right…
Ak: What do you mean?
R: It's just impossible.
R: Me and Airi have known Takamaki and Suzui since middle school.
R: There's just no way Kamoshida's their type, y'know?
R: So I gotta wonder where those rumors came from.
R: I'm starting to think Airi was right...
Ak: You think he's a sexual predator?
R: It's not impossible. We did see him hit on Airi yesterday.

He gripped his phone a little tighter. That bothered him and it was more than just a friend who was being sexually harassed. It was because it was Airi being harassed.

Ak: Right.
R: Hope she's not gonna end up his next victim...
R: Anyway, I'm gonna keep asking around. Don't tell Airi about this, K?
R: I don't want her to worry even more.

He put his phone away, and pursed his lips. Not telling the class president seemed wrong, but...

He glanced at her depressed expression. He shouldn't burden her with this.

Getting off at Shibuya station, the two walked up the stairs to the station square. Walking through
the throngs of people, they overheard shouting.

"Will you please give it a rest?! I told you, I'm not feeling up to it…"

They turned their heads curiously, looking through the crowd.

There was Ann, glaring angrily at the air while talking on her phone. "Wait, what?!" She gasped. "That's not what you promised! And you call yourself a teacher?!" The model remarked indignantly. "This has nothing to do with Shiho!" Flinching, she moved her phone away. "Ah...he hung up on me." She crouched, hiding her face in her arms. "Shiho's...starting position.." She sobbed quietly.

Covering her mouth, Airi looked at the girl with concern. What the hell had happened during that conversation that had led to the model being in tears? She had never seen her cry until now.

She walked up to the model curled up in a fetal position. "Ann-chan, are you OK?" She asked quietly, Akira standing behind her.

Flinching, Ann quickly stood up and looked at the two with wide eyes, tears still clinging to her lower lashes. "Wait...Were you two listening?"

Putting his hands in his pockets, Akira shook his head. She was in a delicate spot and he didn't want to upset her. "Not on purpose."

Ann looked at them indignantly. "Haven't you heard of privacy?" She snapped, before slumping. "...No, I was out of line. Sorry." She muttered apologetically, wiping her eyes.

Airi moved to comfort her, putting her arms around the downtrodden model. "C'mon, Ann-chan, let's go somewhere more quiet." She consoled softly, subtly guiding her toward Central street. She had to do something now. She couldn't keep putting off her distant friendship with her just because she was busy.

Sitting in a booth at Big Bang Burger, the three Shujin students silently drank their waters. There weren't too many customers around in the fast food restaurant, so they were left alone.

Staring blankly at the table, Ann twirled her straw absentmindedly. "I shouldn't tell you guys anything...It was just an argument." She declared sullenly.

"...With Kamoshida?" Akira asked quietly, sitting across from his two classmates.

She sighed heavily and slumped. Resting her head on her palm, she idly fidgeted with her napkin. "You've heard the rumors, haven't you? About Kamoshida-sensei." Ann began, avoiding both their gazes. "Everyone says we're getting it on but...That's so not true!" She sneered.

Airi scooted closer, wrapping an arm around her classmate. She was sharing something personal here.

Ann rested her head on her shoulder, a tear falling from an eye. "That was him on the other line." She muttered quietly.

The class president stroked her arm silently, trying to give her some comfort. How terrible could Kamoshida get...

"I avoided giving him my number...for the longest time..." Ann paused, taking a deep breath. "He
told me to go to his place after this." She gritted her teeth. "You know what that means." She spat. "If I turn him down, he said he'd take Shiho off as a regular on the team."

She clenched her eyes, tears slowly spilling down her face. "I've been telling myself this is all for Shiho's sake...But I can't take it anymore." She whispered, voice cracking. "I've had enough of this...I hate him!" Breaking down, she pushed her face into Airi's neck, sobbing quietly.

The class president wrapped her arms tighter, leaning her cheek on top of Ann's head, letting her cry. Her heart ached for her. Did all this really happen right in front of her eyes and she never noticed?

Akira averted his eyes, uncomfortable with what was happening in front of him. He had never been near a woman crying before.

Leaning back, Ann wiped her eyes. "But still...Shiho's my best friend. She's all I have left at that sorry excuse of a school!" She cried out, fresh tears spilling from her blue orbs. "What should I do..?"

He gripped his knees, clenching his jaw. He had no good answers for her.

Sighing morosely, the model looked away. "Sorry...I shouldn't have asked. It's not your problem." Ann stated forlornly. "What am I saying...? I've barely even talked to you before..." She muttered sullenly, before turning to her neighbor. "Sorry, senpai..."

Airi shook her head and hugged her tighter. The guilt of leaving both her and Ryuji to deal with this for the last year was eating her inside. How could she not have seen this? "Don't worry about it."

"Yeah, It's fine." Akira added quietly. "Maybe that's why? Since I don't know you very well."

Blue eyes stared at him incredulously, before scoffing. "...You're so weird. Usually everyone just ignores me except for Senpai." Ann stated. "Are you really a bad person as the rumor says...? You just don't seem like it..." She asked hesitantly.

He crossed his arms, leaning back against his chair. "I'm bad to the bone." He joked, a faint smirk on his face, quickly dropping it when he noticed her glaring. She wasn't in the mood for his terrible jokes. "What do the rumors say about me?"

"I kinda had a feeling they were all just exaggerations." She replied. "You seemed lonely. It was almost like you didn't belong anywhere until Airi-senpai talked to you..." She locked gazes with Akira's. "We're the same in that regard. Maybe that's why it was so easy for me to talk to you." She observed before looking away. "Is there really no way for me to help Shiho..?"

"Don't go." Airi said firmly. "Don't...Don't let him touch you unless you want it." She tightened her jaw.

She sighed. "I know...I just wish he would forget me, forget everything..." She pursed her lips. "As if something like that would ever happen."

Akira and Airi looked at each other, communicating with their eyes silently. He nodded slightly. "It could happen."

Airi glanced away for a second, trying to fight a smile. What they could do in that other world could change everything for the better. They had to.

Ann giggled. "I wasn't looking for a serious response." She sighed. "But I do feel a bit better
now...Thanks, guys." She smiled gratefully. "...I'm going home." She declared. "Don't tell anyone else what we talked about, OK? I'll try and think of a way to persuade Kamoshida."

Airi looked at her classmate fondly. She was so strong, even now. "Ann-chan, I'm sorry I wasn't there for you before. I should have noticed sooner." She looked down guiltily. "If you need anything, you can always come to me, OK?" She smiled gently. "Don't let that scumbag win."

Smiling back, Ann stood up and grabbed her bag. "Thanks, you two." She said quietly, before leaving.

The two Yongenjaya residents watched her leave, before looking worriedly to each other. Airi sighed. "I hope everything will turn out OK." She looked down at her phone dejectedly. "I have to buy something before I go to work. I'll see you tomorrow, Akira-kun?"

He nodded. "Don't work too hard." He smiled slightly.

Sitting alone in a dark empty house with the lights turned off, her eyes bore into the dusty instrument. She felt the brushes of strings against her slightly calloused fingertips, the phantom whispers of practice from years ago. Biting her lip, she reached out to grab it.

"That was beautiful, honey!"

"Thanks Kaa-chan!"

"How about we get some cake to celebrate your recital?"

"Really, Tou-chan?!"

"Let's go, my little hime-sama!"

"Hey, be careful with our daughter!"

"You don't deserve to play the Lord's instrument!"

The memories flashed relentlessly before her eyes. She flinched, her hand faltering mid-air.

Sighing, she hugged her knees. She still couldn't do it. Every time she felt the itch and gathered the courage to play the cello, her mind couldn't help but flashback to when her parents were still alive. Her mother and father would smile so gently at her...then it flashed to that matron's face, glaring coldly. She wished she could avoid the instrument, but it held so many fond memories.

Flopping back on her bed, she let out a bone weary sigh. 'When can this cycle of reach-and-fail end?' She asked herself bitterly. At least she got her gun today. Luckily her boss didn't notice even though it was so huge. Her phone rang.

R: What do you think about what Morgana told us?
R: I dunno if I get all that stuff about stealing desires...
R: And Kamoshida's gonna turn like, brain dead if we mess up, right?
R: I mean, sure I'm pissed at him…
R: But I dunno if I really wanna kill the guy.
Ak: Yeah that's a bit too much.

Frowning sympathetically, she typed in a reply.

Ai: Basically, you steal his heart.
Ai: It consists of his twisted desires and thoughts.
Ak: So if you take out the bad from a person, they're no longer bad.
Ai: Yep, although it doesn't excuse their actions when they WERE bad.
R: I'm probably just freaking out, but I don't wanna end up a murderer because of this shit.
R: Oh well…
R: I'll try and see if I can come up with some other way tonight.
Ai: We might not be able to. Kamoshida sexually threatened Ann-chan today.
R: Whoa, what?!
Ak: She said that he'd kick Suzui out of the team if she doesn't sleep with him.
Ai: He better keep his filthy hands away from either of them…
R: That motherfucker. I'll keep an eye on Suzui.
Ai: You're in the same class, right? Thank you, Ryuji-kun.
R: np.

Placing her phone under her pillow, she snuggled under her blankets.

Her eyes snapped open. 'I forgot to tell them my birthday is this Saturday.' She thought frantically. I'll tell them tomorrow, she promised herself, closing her eyes again.

Chapter End Notes

-Hime-sama means "Princess"
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

WARNING: Suicide attempt, language, implied PTSD.

I’m very proud of how I wrote this chapter, I hope you all can feel the emotions I tried to convey!

----4/15, FRIDAY, MORNING, AOYAMA-ITCHOME

“I can’t believe Suzui-senpai missed such an important meeting. I wonder what happened.” A first year volleyball member mentioned as they walked down the small street to school.

“Kamoshida-sensei asked to see her...” Her fellow volleyball player added. “You know, I’ve been hearing rumors about how Kamoshida-sensei and Suzui-senpai stay late...She always shows up to meetings though. It’s weird she wasn’t at the one yesterday...”

Airi blinked in surprise. ‘Suzui-san didn’t go?’ She mused. ‘Hopefully Ann-chan told her to stay away from him.’ She frowned softly to herself. ‘I don’t want her to end up broken too…’

“So, I assume all of you know about the separation of powers? There are three branches in our government.” Ushimaru-sensei lectured. “The National Diet is legislative, the Cabinet is executive, and the Supreme Court is judiciary. This division of power provides checks and balances, which ensures no one branch becomes unstoppable.”

Airi raised her hand. Ushimaru raised a brow. “Yes, Kimisawa?”

She lowered her arm, taking a deep breath. “Is there a possibility of all three becoming corrupt from the inside of each branch?” She questioned, curiosity burning in her eyes. "If they were all corrupt, then no one would stop them from passing unfair laws or running this country into the ground simultaneously.”

The class broke into whispers.

“Whoa, I never thought of that...”

“Kimisawa-senpai is so smart!”

“Ugh, politicians don’t do anything right.”

Ushimaru-sensei raised his eyebrows. “Good question, Kimisawa.” He remarked. “Unfortunately, that is a real possibility within our country. If the citizens are lazy about voting and don’t pay attention to the lawmakers, several politicians would slack off and forget that they serve the people.”
Airi nodded in understanding, a faint frown on her face. Ushimaru went back to his lecture.

Akira raised his eyebrows, letting the teacher's voice fade away. That was a question he had thought about as well, especially when...he was incarcerated. His eyes darkened at the memory. Don't think about that right now.

“Have you made up your mind?” A voice whispered.

Startled, Akira looked down at his desk. A cat popped its head out, giving him a lazy smile. “No matter how much thinking you do, there’s only one option.” Morgana stated, licking a paw. “You’d be better off just listening to me.”

Akira glanced over to Airi, who was staring at his desk with wide eyes before quickly turning back to the lesson. She leaned closer though to hear the conversation.

He glanced back down at the cat in his desk. “Why are you in there?” He whispered awkwardly.

“Hm? Did I hear a cat just now?” Ushimaru thought out loud, scrutinizing around the room with narrowed eyes. Some of the students started looking around as well, curious if there actually is a cat.

Akira and Airi tensed in their seats, grimacing. Airi made quick tiny motions with her hand under her desk, trying to signal to Morgana.

Frantically, the feline hid back inside. “M-Meow!” It let out.

Akira glanced down at it incredulously. That wasn't going to help!

“Could that rumored cat be somewhere nearby...?” Ushimaru muttered suspiciously. He looked around the room again, trying to find his intended target. “Settle down! We’re in the middle of an important lecture!” He yelled out to wherever the meowing was coming from.

Akira and Airi sweatdropped. Their phones buzzed. Discreetly, they took them out.

R: It’s no use...I can’t think of any other way...
Ai: Concentrate on class, please.
R: I can’t deal with that shit right now. I mean, what’re we gonna do about Kamoshida?
Ak: Honestly, I would rather do that than let Kamoshida walk free.
R: Do we just gotta go along with what that cat says?
R: Urgh, that damn furball...

“If he only knew I’m reading this too.” Morgana whispered, slightly hurt.

A chair skidded harshly.

Everyone turned to look at the student who had stood up suddenly, looking out the hallway window. “Hey...What’s that...?” Iida murmured slowly.

“Enough! This is a classroom!” Ushimaru scolded, glaring at the disruptive student.

“Wait...She’s going to jump...!” Otani screamed, getting up from her seat as well. The class broke out into fervent chatter.

Mishima stood up, getting a glimpse through the windows. “Suzui...?” He whispered, eyes wide.
Hearing that, Ann snapped her head up. “Shiho?” She whispered fearfully, before running out of the classroom, pressing against the hallway windows.

Akira slowly got up, tense, and walked out behind Ann. Some of the other students followed their example, noisily getting out of their spots.

“Hey! Stay in your seats! Do not step foot outside of this room!” Ushimaru yelled, but it was no use. The entire class moved out into the hallway, along with every other class. The hallways were packed with students, all looking through the windows, wondering what was going to happen.

Airi stood frozen, her eyes wide with horror, before bolting. No no no no no no no.
She ran out of the class and up the stairs, passing the hordes of students clamoring in the hallway. No one noticed as she sprinted all the way to the rooftop, taking two steps at a time. She had to get there in time. She had to make it..!

Slamming the door open, she saw Shiho standing at the ledge limply with her head down. Her entire posture screamed defeat.

“Suzui-chan…” Airi began softly. “Please step away from the edge. It’s dangerous.” She pleaded, quietly and slowly taking a step closer. Please don’t...

Shiho didn’t answer her, but inched her feet closer to the drop.

“Suzui-chan…no. Shiho-chan.” Airi paused, licking her lips nervously. Her heart was pounding as she took another step closer to the edge. “Please, Shiho-chan... Don’t do this.”

“...I can’t take it anymore.” Shiho whispered, still not looking at the class president. “He...took it from me.” Tears streamed down her face, hitting the ground far away.

Airi took another step closer. “What did he take from you?” She asked softly, slowly reaching out with her hands.

Beginning to tremble, the volleyball member hugged herself, her nails digging through her sleeves and into her arms. “Kamoshida-sensei... touched me...he h-hit me...he r-r-raped me!” Shiho bit out, sobbing. “All I had left was volleyball!” She screamed. “And he took it from me!”

Now standing behind her, Airi slowly reached out with her arms, encircling the poor girl who was wailing her heart out.

“I can’t -hic- take it anymore...No one cares that -hic- he’s hurting us, hurting me...” Shiho blubbered hysterically.

“That’s not true,” Airi soothed, staring at the broken girl in anguish. How could this happen and no one stopped it? She glanced over at the door, not a single person coming through. Was she the only one who cared enough to come up? “We do care. I care. Ann-chan cares so much for you.”

She rubbed the volleyball player’s back comfortably. “You know, Akira-kun and I bumped into Ann-chan yesterday at Shibuya. She told me how much she loved you. How all she wanted was for you, her best friend, to be happy. She was trying so hard for Kamoshida to focus on her and not you.” Airi proclaimed quietly, fibbing a little. Anything to help her state of mind right now.
Sniffling, Shiho looked up at her with tear filled eyes. “Really?” She whimpered.

Airi nodded, giving her a warm smile. “That’s right. Ann only wanted to protect you.”

She looked down again, covering her face with her palms, calloused from years of sports. “And I wanted to protect her.” She whispered, her voice muffled against her skin.

Lowering her hands from her embrace, Airi placed her hands lightly on the other girl’s arms. “I won’t let Kamoshida get away with this.” She swore. “You’ll have to tell what you went through to the authorities, but he’ll be put behind bars for this.” Then they wouldn’t have to risk killing him.

Her trembling, which had subsided a bit, came back in full force. “N-No...” Shiho whispered shakily, eyes dilated with fear. “No more...I can’t...” Her breath hitched as the hands on her arms felt larger, more stronger, more entrapping. “Don’t make me remember...He..!” Her breathing quickened, Shiho started hyperventilating. It was too much. She didn't want to remember.

She struggled against the class president, breaking free from her grip and leaped off the building.

“No!” Airi screamed, quickly leaning over the edge and reached out. Her hand snatched the suicidal girl’s wrist, leaving both of them hanging over the ledge.

“Shiho-chan, please!” Airi gritted, tears glossing her eyes. “Please don’t!” She yelled, trying hard to pull the other girl up, her other hand balancing her upper body on the rim. Give me the strength to save her...

Shiho struggled against the grip on her wrist. “Just let me die!!!” She wailed, sobbing hysterically. Her tears fell and splashed onto the grass in the courtyard far below them, reminding the class president that they were too high up.

Her violent movements caused Airi’s grip to slip a little. “Shit.” She spat, trying to tighten her grip, sweat dripping from her forehead. Their damp skin didn’t help as the other girl started to slip more.

Clenching her jaw, Airi used her other hand, the one she used to balance herself so she didn’t fall over, to grip over her clenched hand. She then secured her knees under the railing to balance herself and began pulling the panic-stricken student up slowly, her muscles straining. Please...!

“No!” Shiho screamed, distraught, and used her other hand to lash out. Her nails cut deep into flesh, ribbons of blood flying in the air.

Airi cried out in pain, accidentally releasing her grip. Shiho fell all three stories, her body rebounding up from the impact before laying brokenly on the ground, unmoving.

The resounding crack that echoed through the courtyard would haunt her for eternity.

Frozen, red eyes stared widely at the still body below her, arms still reached out. “No...Not again...” Airi whispered, trembling. “SHIHO!” She screamed down, tears spilling down her cheeks.

There were a large gathering of students shrieking in the courtyard, surrounding the body, while teachers tried to herd them away. None of them moved closer to the body, not even trying to help.

“Someone!” She screamed frantically down at the mass. “Check her pulse! Call an ambulance!”

Feeling faint, her body gave out on her, and she slowly leaned back from the edge, sliding down
onto the floor in defeat. Her eyes stared blankly at her bleeding hands, tears still running down her face. She couldn't do it. She couldn't save her. She couldn't save her again.

NotAgainNotAgainNotAgainNotAgain.

Suddenly, arms wrapped around her, pulling her into a warm chest. It felt so comforting.

Trembling, Airi pushed her face into their shirt, and broke down.
The hallway was packed with students from all the classes, staring out the windows with wide eyes and whispering to each other. The atmosphere was tense, no one knowing what was going to happen.

“Shiho...” Ann whispered, clasping her hands tightly in a praying motion, her nails digging into her skin. “Don’t do it...”

Gray eyes observed the scene tensely, and Akira clenched his fists. ‘This is because of Kamoshida, isn’t it.’ He thought to himself, narrowing his eyes. Someone who had been suffering under his abuse was about to take her life. He was going to pay.

“What the fuck is goin’ on??” He heard being yelled from behind him and he turned around.

Ryuji ran up to them, eyes wide with horror. "Is that Suzui...?"

Akira nodded grimly. He couldn't say anything else. All he knew was that this was wrong. Wrong on so many levels and no one was doing anything.

"What the fuck..." He furiously rubbed his head, exhaling sharply at the revelation. "What the fuck can we do??"

“Hey, she’s moving back!”

He looked up through the window. Shiho had taken a step back, away from the edge, and a hand was outstretched to her. Narrowing his eyes, he tried to make out who it was, but all he knew was that it was another student based on the blazer sleeve. After a moment, they both disappeared from view.

“Thank god! How scary was that!”

“Is someone up there talking to her?”

“She’s gonna be in so much trouble.”

“I wonder why she wanted to jump?”

Ann sighed out in relief. “Shiho...” She whispered, slumping her shoulders. She gripped her hands near her chest. "Why would you even think of...?"

Ryuji exhaled, slumping beside him. "Thank god...Can't believe Suzui even felt like that, though...” He muttered.

Akira nodded in agreement. Someone almost killed herself because of a teacher. He looked around the hall, noting that none of the teachers were absent. ‘Not one staff went up to check...?’ He scowled. At least it didn't happen.

He turned away, about to head back to his desk. “Get back to your classes!” The teachers yelled,
trying to direct the students’ attentions away from the windows.

“Hey wait...”

“She jumped!”

“Holy shit!”

“Someone grabbed her!”

“Is that Senpai?!!”

“Ah, I can’t look! This is so scary!!”

Quickly turning back to the window, his breath hitched. It was Airi. Airi, who was struggling to pull up the suicidal girl. They were both dangling over the edge, the class president gripping Shiho by her wrist and trying to pull her up. What was she thinking?!

After a tense moment, everyone saw the dangling girl claw at the grip on her wrist. She fell and hit the ground with a muffled thump, body stilling after the impact.

Ann cried out, “Shiho!” before frantically running down the stairs, as did Ryuji and the majority of students.

Akira however, ran up. Pushing past the crowd of students all clamoring for the stairs leading down, he was the only one to go up. No one noticed as they rushed to the scene of interest. Making it up to the now empty third floor, he heard a voice shout, “Someone! Check her pulse! Call an ambulance!”

He sprinted up the last steps up to the top and opened the door. Looking out across the roof, he spotted a crumpled figure on the floor. ‘She’s OK.’ He thought with relief. She didn't fall too.

He slowly walked over, stopping behind her. She hadn't noticed a thing, just staring blankly at where the other girl used to be.

Frowning sorrowfully at her back, he crouched on his knees and gently wrapped his arms around her, pulling her into his chest. She just witnessed a friend attempt to commit suicide and couldn't stop it. This was the least he could do, and he didn't even know if it would help.

She pushed her face into his jacket. He felt her shoulders tremble underneath his palms, and a blossoming wetness in the front of his blazer.

‘Her hands are bleeding.’ He observed the ripped skin with a worried frown. ‘And her tights are ripped.’ He slowly rocked back and forth, trying to comfort her. He wished he could help more than this.

“Why...” he heard. He looked down, and locked with red rimmed eyes, still flowing with tears.

“Why did she have to do that?” Airi whispered, voice cracking emotionally. “Why couldn’t I save her, too...”

He furrowed his brows, embracing her tighter. Too? “It wasn’t your fault.” He replied firmly. “This is all because of Kamoshida.”

She slumped tiredly, curling her body and resting her head on his chest. “We’ll make him pay.” She whispered. "We have to, no matter what...Please..."
He nodded solemnly. "I promise, we will." ‘I sense a strong urge to protect…’ He leaned his cheek on top of her head, slowly stroking her hair, and they sat together in silence, the chatter below unable to penetrate the somber atmosphere.

They had to do something.

Pushing past the crowds, Ann and Ryuji made it out to the courtyard where Shiho fell. The ambulance had already arrived, the paramedics gingerly placing the broken student on top of a stretcher.

“Shiho...” Ann teared, her breath shaking from the force of her tremors.

Ryuji grimaced in anguish and looked away. Around him were fellow students out in the courtyard with their phones out, taking pictures and recording the scene before them. “What the hell is wrong with these people?!” He muttered angrily.

“Class is still in session!” A teacher yelled out to no avail.

A paramedic got up and walked over to the crowd. “We need someone to go with her...Are there any teachers around?”

None of the teachers present stepped forward. “I-I’m not in charge of her class...”

“We should leave this to Principal Kobayakawa...” Another teacher stated hesitantly, taking a step back in case they would be chosen.

Ann looked at the teachers with frustration before turning back to the paramedic. “I’ll go!” She insisted.

“Please hurry!” The paramedic urged, turning back to create a pathway through the crowd of students for the other personnel.

She ran up and knelt next to the near unconscious girl. “Shiho...why?” Ann whispered, tears clouding her vision.

The injured girl slowly rotated her eyes to look at her. “Ann..? I’m sorry...I-I can’t take this...anymore.” Shiho whispered, wincing in pain as the darkness approached. “Please...t-tell Airi-senpai...I’m sorry...Kamoshida made me do..this...ngh.” She breathed before falling unconscious.

Ann cried out in panic, gripping onto the stretcher. The paramedics moved to carry the stretcher out of the school, Ann following closely behind.

Mishima stood frozen in the same spot, his eyes not moving from where Shiho fell. Trembling, he clenched his fists. “Hah...ah...” He uttered, terrified at what he just witnessed. He ran away inside the building, unnoticed by all except one.

Dark brown eyes followed him and Ryuji frowned. “He knows something.” He muttered.

The students around him gossiped to each other, still on their phones with the recorded evidence. “Return to your classrooms at once!” A teacher yelled.

Ryuji stood still in his spot, clenching his fists. “Volleyball team...” He muttered, knowing now that the abuse wasn't something they could just put off. He stared up pensively at the spot where
Shiho fell from. “Wasn’t there someone else up there?” He wondered to himself, and decided to head up to check. Running into the building, he passed the principal.

“Teachers, return to your classrooms for the time being! Please do not let any students go home yet!” Kobayakawa announced, slightly sweating from the situation. Grumbling, the students started walking back to their respective rooms, the school staff that were present herding them into the buildings.

Sniffling, Airi leaned back from Akira’s embrace. Wiping her tears away, she gave him a watery smile. “Thank you, Akira-kun.” She bit her lip, trying to keep herself contained but barely succeeding. “I’m sorry I got your jacket wet.”

Akira shook his head. “Don’t worry about it. Your well being is more important.” He reassured, giving her a sympathetic smile.

Her eyes widened and she stared at him, stunned by his words.

No one had been there for her since Takase and her. At the orphanages, she had to stay strong for herself and the younger kids, as well as in school for her classmates. She had never taken a break to really care for herself. No one had asked or even offered their help because they thought she could handle it. At this moment, Akira had been the first person since to really care about her.

Blushing slightly, she looked away shyly. Her gaze fell on the roof ledge, and she felt her heart crumble again at what had just happened. “I hope Shiho-chan is OK...”

“Don’t worry.” Akira placed his hand on her shoulder. “She’ll be fine. The ambulance got here by the time I arrived.” He consoled, having heard the telltale sirens nearby.

She nodded automatically, not really listening to his words of comfort. It won’t change the fact that she failed again. Why did people even trust her to help when she failed at every turn? She couldn't help her, she couldn't help Mishima, she couldn't help Shiho...

The door slammed open and Ryuji walked out, looking around. His eyes landed on the two near the edge of the roof. “Hey!” He greeted but paused. “Uh...am I interruptin’ somethin’?” He asked, rubbing the back of his head awkwardly.

Confused, Airi looked over at her classmate and noticed how close he was, their faces only inches apart. Blushing brightly, she scooted back a bit. Now was not the time to be a pervert.

Akira noticed as well and glanced away uncomfortably, a slight rosy hue in his cheeks beneath his glasses. Had he ever been so close to a girl before?

“So it was you who tried to stop Suzui, Airi?” Ryuji asked, walking up to the two.

“Yeah, not that it made any difference...” Airi answered bitterly. “She told me why before...before she...” She trailed off, biting her lip. It hurt to even think of it. She couldn't imagine the pain Shiho went through.

“What did she say?” Ryuji asked quietly. Akira tilted his head, curious as well.

Her hands trembling, she took a deep breath. “She told me...that Kamoshida had raped her.” Airi whispered, tears filling her eyes again.
They flinched at the news, looking at her with wide eyes. “That...That fucking bastard!” Ryuji spat, angrily making strangling motions in the air with his hands.

Airi flinched a little at the action. It reminded her too much.

Akira glared sharply ahead, clenching his knees. “We’re going to make him pay.” He promised darkly. Suzui didn’t deserve that. No one deserved that. This was so wrong and no one gave a shit except them.

His two fellow Persona users nodded grimly. “Oh yeah.” Ryuji perked up. “I saw Mishima at the courtyard a few minutes ago. He looked like he definitely knew something.”

Grasping his chin, Akira hummed thoughtfully. “We should corner him then.”

“I’ll come with.” Airi added, wiping her bloodshot eyes with the back of her hand.

He shook his head. “No. You should go to the nurse’s office and get your hands and legs checked.” He admonished softly, eyeing the still bleeding wounds.

Blinking, She looked down at herself. Her hands and knees were scraped, bleeding, and raw, and her stockings were also ripped from when she hooked them underneath the concrete ledge. “I don’t even feel it...” She murmured blankly. She just wanted to be numb...

The two delinquents glanced at each other with worry before escorting her to the medical office.

They then went back to their classrooms to grab their bags (and Morgana, who scolded them for leaving it behind) and set off to find Mishima. Looking all over the school that was alive with gossip, the only place they hadn’t checked was the boy’s locker room.
I got a pretty discouraging comment yesterday (well, lots of them) and I've been pretty sad lol they were right of course, but still...

A lot of people who wrote critiques have asked why Airi hasn't changed much of anything and that she's basically pointless to read about, and I understand why. To me though, she's a 16 year old high school girl. One person can't change much, and they don't even know what they should change. As a student, especially one in Japan, you do well in school and at home. You really don't know how to do anything else. Plus, the beginning of the game is really critical to set up everything after.

To the complaints about her being a mary-sue, yeah it's kinda true. But all the characters in the game have their defining characteristics highlighted early. You see their faults and weaknesses the more you play the game and the more you hang out with them. It's the same in this fic with Airi. She's shown right now as a smart, hard working, kind, class president who everyone likes. The more you read, the more you'll see her start to unravel her "nice" face. This was also started as a self indulgent story, so honestly, this is already way better than it was originally meant to be. Both P4 and
P5 protagonists can be argued that they're gary stues, so...I don't know. Don't mind me lol. This is still self indulgent trash.

Thank you to Ghosty_ghost as always for their encouraging comments, and gawsoloy for their comment on chapter 21, it makes me happy to know you guys think I wrote the scene well! Thanks so much for giving me over 150 kudos!

Airi - rank 1
The two delinquents entered the locker room, looking around the humid and slightly putrid area. It was empty, save for a small corner where a certain volleyball member was cowering in. Morgana darted out of Akira’s bag and jumped on a locker nearby, watching the proceedings with an apathetic gaze.

Quickly stomping over, Ryuji pushed the meek student into the corner, sending him into the metal lockers.

Mishima winced, the impact jarring against his already bruised back. “Ow! That hurts!”

“Why’d you run like that earlier?! Huh?!” Ryuji interrogated with a scowl.

Akira rested his hands in his pockets, grimly gazing at the volleyball player. He knew something and they were going to hear it. There were no more excuses to make.

“I didn’t run...” Mishima muttered, eyes darting away.

“She jumped and tried to kill herself!” Ryuji exploded, clenching his fist at the downtrodden volleyball player.

He cowered away from the punk. “L-Leave me alone...” He whimpered, clenching his eyes shut.

Akira put his hand in front of his friend, stopping him in place. He gazed coldly at the pitiful sight in front of him. “You know something, don’t you? We’re not going to hurt you.” He asked quietly but firmly.

Behind him, Ryuji nodded in agreement. “He’s right! We ain’t tryin’ to get you busted. We won’t say you talked either!”

Looking down at the floor, the Mishima slumped. “Suzui...”

Biting back a scowl, Akira took a step forward. “I just had to help Airi-chan who tried her best to save Suzui-san. She’s injured now. You owe them this much.” He stated forcefully. ”If you want to help, then tell us what you know. Do you want this to keep happening?"

His eyes widened. “Senpai did that…? She...” Mishima asked despairingly and grabbed his head. They glared at him as he fought with himself. “She was called out by Kamoshida-sensei!!” He confessed.
Shocked, they stared at him with wide eyes. She was specifically called out? “Wait, what?” Ryuji uttered. "For what?"

Sighing heavily, he continued. “I was called by him a number of times too...to the teacher’s room.” He uttered desolately. “It wasn’t just me or Suzui either. He’d nominate someone when he was in a bad mood...and hit them.”

“So the physical punishment thing was for real...” Ryuji muttered, clenching his jaw.

“But yesterday, he called Suzui out of the blue. She didn’t make any mistakes or anything...” Mishima lamented, eyes downcast to avoid their angered gazes. “Kamoshida-sensei seemed really irritated that day, so it must’ve been...worse than usual...” He trailed off.

Ryuji started. “So that’s when he...That son of a bitch!” He gritted his teeth before running out of the room, slamming the door open in his path.

The two students of 2-D (and one cat) stared after him in surprise. Looking at each other, Akira ran after him, Morgana stealthily jumping onto his bag.

Clenching his fists, Mishima followed.

They ran passed a bandaged Airi who looked up in surprise. “Don’t follow us!” Akira shouted at her. He had an inkling they were going to see Kamoshida, and he didn’t want her anywhere near him.

“I bet...Sakamoto’s going to find Kamoshida-sensei...” Mishima panted. “He’ll probably be in the P.E Faculty office on the second floor.”

They ran down the hallway, flying up the stairs and pushing past the other students.

"Whoa! Wasn't that the transfer student?!”

"Didn't he seem super angry? Do you think he's going to kill someone?!”

"But Mishima's with him...What are they doing?"

Turning the corner as they landed on the second floor, they just caught sight of Ryuji slamming the office door open at the end of the hallway. Hurrying, they entered the office to see him confront the gym teacher.

Kamoshida sat at his desk, idly doing paperwork. “Huh?” He muttered, not looking at who just entered his office.

Ryuji brazenly pointed his finger at him. “You bastard! How dare you do that to Suzui!” He shouted angrily.

Akira stood slightly behind him, ready to help his friend. Mishima stayed in the background, trembling from being in the room where he and others were tormented in.

Turning around, Kamoshida turned to look at them with irritation. “What are you talking about?” He questioned, idly stretching his arms, turning back to his desk.

“Don’t play dumb with me!” Ryuji snapped, kicking a nearby chair over.
It fell noisily, setting the gym teacher off. “That is enough!” Kamoshida yelled, glaring at the punk.

With trembling shoulders, Mishima stepped forward. “What you did...wasn’t coaching...!” He uttered, eyes downcast.

Slowly turning his head, he glared harshly in their direction. “What did you say?” He questioned ominously, clenching his teeth.

Mishima gripped his head, distraught. “You...You ordered me to call Suzui here...I can only imagine what you did to her!” He exclaimed, nervously swallowing.

Akira glowered. They already knew what he did, and it was unforgivable. This disgusting adult...

Getting up from his chair, Kamoshida crossed his arms. “You’re going on and on about things you have no proof of...” He sneered at them. “Basically, you’re simply making these claims up because you can’t be a regular on the team, right?”

Lifting his head to glare at the coach, Mishima glared at him defiantly. “That’s not what this is about!” He shouted, raising his voice for the first time.

The gym teacher hmphed, resting his hands on his hips. “Even if it is exactly as you imagine it to be, hypothetically speaking...what can you do?” He taunted. “We just received a call from the hospital. Suzui’s in a coma, and her chances of recovery are slim. How would someone like that make a statement?” He finished smugly.

The three students looked at him in with wide eyes, shocked that even as terrible a teacher that he was would say such a callous thing. Akira glared at him darkly, hiding his clenched fists in his pockets. Don't fight, don't fight, don't fight...

Dramatically placing the back of his hand on his forehead, Kamoshida mockingly lamented. “There’s no chance of her getting better, I hear...The poor girl.”

Mishima took a step back. “No...That can’t be...” He despaired.

His arms trembling with the force he clenched his fists with, Ryuji took a step forward threateningly. “You goddamn..!” He spat.

Kamoshida scowled down at him. “This again? Does this mean we need to have yet another case of “self-defense”?”

“You shut your mouth, you son of a bitch!” Ryuji growled viciously. He moved to throw a punch, raising his arm, but Akira grabbed his wrist and stopped him. He looked back at his friend, eyes burning with rage and betrayal. “Why’re you stoppin’ me?!”

Akira looked at him coolly, trying to communicate with his eyes. “Calm down. Don’t let him get to you.” We can get him later at the Palace. He knew from personal experience that laying a hand on an adult could come with consequences. Consequences he wasn't going to go through again.

Yanking his arm out of his grip, Ryuji stomped his feet. “But still...!” He gritted his teeth.

Feigning surprise, Kamoshida turned to look at the transfer student. “Oh? You’re stopping him? What a surprise.” He remarked, laughing out loud. “There’s no need to hold back. Why not attack me?” He grinned maliciously. “Ohh but you can’t. Hahaha, but of course you can’t!” Turning back to his desk, he sat down in his chair. “Everyone present right now...Will be expelled.” Kamoshida
stated coldly. "I'm reporting all of you at the next board meeting."

Taken aback, the two students of class 2-D stared at him in shock. This was how it was going to end? "Wha-" Ryuji flinched.

Mishima stepped forward, more confident in himself since he was with like minded company. "You can’t make a decision like that!" He argued firmly. "You're only one teacher!"

Scoffing, the coach turned back to them. “Who would seriously consider what scum like you say?” He remarked ruthlessly. “You threatened me too, Mishima, so you’re equally responsible.”

Stepping back, Mishima let out a confused sound, not understanding what he meant.

“To think you didn’t know why I kept someone as talentless as you on the team. You act like you’re a victim, but you leaked his criminal records, didn’t you?” Kamoshida taunted, jerking his square chin at Akira. “It’s all over the internet, correct? How terrible.”

The two delinquents turned to look at their fellow student. “Mishima..?” Ryuji whispered, silently hoping it wasn’t true.

Akira stared at the volleyball member, resigned. Getting upset now would be pointless. Everyone already knew and it only made his fellow students a bit more hostile to him than usual. It wasn't anything new.

Trembling, the bruised teen got on his hands and knees, begging forgiveness. “He told me to do it...I had no choice.” He uttered meekly.

Kamoshida turned away, disinterested in their inner turmoil. “Now, are we finished here? You’re all expelled!” He announced. “You’re done for; your futures are mine to take. Now get out of my sight.”

Clenching his jaw, Ryuji turned to his fellow students. “Dammit...” He muttered angrily.

“We’ve got another way to deal with him.” Akira replied emotionlessly.

Hearing the outcasts still in his office, Kamoshida turned to scowl at them. “I don’t know what you’re planning, but go ahead and try. All you can do is wait for your disposal though...” the gym teacher stated coldly.

Glaring darkly at the gym teacher, the three students and cat left the office.

Airi was waiting outside of the P.E. office, worried out of her mind. She had followed them even though Akira had told them not to, but she didn't dare go inside. There were other students milling about the hallway, but none of them came near this section of the building.

"Did you see the transfer student run into the PE office after Sakamoto?"

"Are they going to do something to Kamoshida-sensei?! I hope not!"

"They need to stop and grow up. This is High School."

"Why is Kimisawa-senpai standing over there?"
"Maybe she's waiting to scold them. Two of them are in her class and I think I remember Sakamoto and her were in the same middle school...

She gripped her bandaged hands together, splotches of red blooming on the cotton. Today had been too much and her mind was starting to fray. She hoped they were OK in there. With those rumors about how strange noises could be heard from here, she guessed this was where Kamoshida did most of his "hobbies." This was most likely where Shiho was...

She clenched her eyes shut, trying not to cry again. She didn't want them to be hurt too...

The door slid open and she looked up, seeing the three outcasts leave the room with thunderous expressions on their faces. “Thank goodness! Are you guys OK? Did he...” She trailed off uncomfortably.

Ryuji stomped over and slammed his fist against the wall. “I can’t believe that asshole’s gettin’ away with this..!” He gritted, glaring down at the floor.

Taken aback, she looked at them with concern. “What happened in there?” She whispered.

Behind Akira, Mishima quietly answered her with blank eyes. “We’re being expelled.”

“What?” She gasped, looking over at Akira for confirmation.

He nodded, frowning deeply. “He said he’ll expel us by the next board meeting.” He stated grimly. He tried to adjust his glasses, but his hands were too stiff from being clenched in anger. He shouldn't be surprised that an adult would try to screw them over, but to think a teacher could be this awful. It left a bad taste in his mouth.

“The next board meeting? That’s on May 2nd.” Airi murmured worriedly. “What are we going to do?”

Glancing over at her, he placed a hand on her shoulder. “Don’t worry.” He reassured. “He’ll eat his words.” He smirked darkly. They were going to take his Heart and he would enjoy every minute of it.

She stared at him, slightly blushing at this new side of him, before perking up with realization. “You mean...” Airi trailed off, looking at him hopefully.

He nodded, still smirking.

“What’re you two talkin’ about?” Ryuji asked, coming up to them with his hands resting behind his head. His knuckles were bruised from hitting the cement walls, but he seemed to ignore the pain.

Shaking his head, Akira eyed Mishima. “You should go back to class, Mishima. We’ll take care of this.” He reassured calmly. They couldn't let an outside know of what they were about to do.

Still in shock, their classmate nodded blankly and slowly walked away, a slight limp in his steps.

The bespectacled student then signaled to the other two to move to the courtyard.
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

revised 10/12/17

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Now that classes had ended for the day, most of the school building had emptied, students going back home to text about what happened earlier. The group of Persona users were sat at the alcove in the courtyard, no other students in sight since The Incident had happened only a couple meters away from here.

Airi had her phone out and read the school news site with a morose frown, dejectedly scrolling through the comments section. She wasn't surprised to see people on the internet being so heartless, but they had been there. Shiho was their fellow student. How did they just...say these things about her so callously?

If she was honest, she was surprised there weren't any comments condemning her for her inability to pull her up, but then again, everyone had been focused on the volleyball player. She just...wanted a chance to apologize. For not being strong enough.

“We gotta hurry up and go to that world and beat the shit outta that asshole!” Ryuji yelled, slamming his fist against the vending machine.

Morgana got up from its spot on the table. “We’re not beating him up.” It corrected. “We’re simply stealing his distorted desires.”

Putting her phone away, she smiled serenely, though the action had a sort of dark undertone to it. “And beating him up if he gets in our way.” They turned to look at her in surprise and she blinked at their expressions. “What? I can’t hurt someone as terrible as Kamoshida?” She just wanted him to have a taste of his own medicine. What they would or could do to him was nothing compared to what he inflicted upon Shiho.

“U-Uh no, I mean yes!” Ryuji sputtered, taken aback by her casual mention of violence. “I mean no-yes!”

Giving the class president one last odd look, the feline continued. “Can I assume that you’ve made up your minds about this?” It asked seriously. “About how he might suffer a mental shutdown?”

Ryuji turned to look at it. “...I have.” He replied firmly, a grim expression on his face. “Someone almost died because of him! Someone we fucking know! I don’t give a rat’s ass what happens to him anymore!”

Morgana nodded and turned to look at the other two. “And you guys?” It asked, a firm expression on its feline features.

Akira nodded. “I agree. There’s no other way.” He replied coldly. He’d seen one person try to commit suicide. He didn't want to see anyone else suffer this anymore. He could do something this
time...

Airi nodded as well, standing up from the bench. “He’s going to pay for what he’s done.” She replied resolutely.

Purring, it swished its tail. “Then it’s settled.” Morgana stated contently.

“By the way, is gettin’ rid of a Palace hard..?” Ryuji inquired curiously, scratching the back of his head.. “You’ve tried it before, right?”

Morgana looked at him with amusement. “When did I ever say that?” It asked, smiling innocently.

Airi tilted her head. “You’ve never done it then?”

“What?! Were you just pretendin’ to know?!” Ryuji bellowed in disbelief. Akira shushed him, glaring slightly.

“Is it true that you’re both getting expelled?”

Ann slowly walked up to them, posture slumped and a depressed air clouding her features, her eyes still red from crying. “Everyone’s talking about it...” She muttered.

Ryuji rolled his eyes. “That asshole’s at it again with the rumors..!”

Airi walked over apprehensively, wringing her hands in front of her. “Ann-chan...I’m so sorry.” She teared, looking down guiltily. “…I couldn’t save Shiho-chan, even though I was right there!” She confessed, tears spilling down her cheeks. “I'm sorry...” She was useless again. But this time, she had someone to apologize to and somehow it made it so much worse. The guilt was eating her alive...

“It’s OK...” The half foreigner attempted to smile. “I saw, you know...You did your best. Shiho even told me...to tell you she was sorry. She’s stabilized now, but...” Ann trailed off quietly, shoulders weighed down. “At least she’s still alive. Thank you...for trying.” With that, she pulled the other girl into a hug, both of them letting tears slip from their eyes.

The others looked away, uncomfortable at seeing such vulnerable expressions on them.

Sniffling, the girls let go and wiped their eyes. “If you’re going to deal with Kamoshida...let me in on it too.” Ann stated determinedly.

Taken aback, the three thieves looked at her in shock.

“I can’t just sit back and do nothing after what happened to Shiho!” She confessed, anger and self-loathing swirling in her red rimmed irises. "I’m her best friend, but I wasn’t even the one who was trying to stop her from j-jumping earlier!” She bit out. "I can't let this go anymore!"

“Ann-chan...” Airi whispered, watching her worriedly. She had no idea what she was asking.

“This has nothing to do with you...” Ryuji said gruffly, looking away. "Don’t butt your head into this...”

“But it does! It has everything to do with me!” Ann argued, stomping her foot forward.

“I said don’t get in our way!” He yelled, glaring harshly at her.

Flinching at his harsh tone, she glowered before running away down the courtyard.
A moment of silence passed as Ryuji let out a heavy sigh. “That was harsh.” Morgana remarked quietly, staring sadly at where Ann had stood.

Airi looked down, clenching her eyes. “I’m sorry.” She whispered, guilt lacing into her voice. No matter what she did, she was still hurting the model over and over again. She had only wanted to help...

Akira placed a hand on her shoulder, comforting her for the third time today. He didn't know if it was helping, but he’d try either way. He didn't like seeing her so down, especially when he always saw her with a kind smile, but it was understandable why.

“We can’t take her somewhere like that…” Ryuji muttered, looking away guiltily.

Sighing, the feline sat down. “I hope that she doesn’t torment herself over this.” Morgana stated sadly. “When it comes down to it, women don’t hesitate.”

Airi nodded in agreement. If she knew anything about the other girl, it was that she could be pretty hot headed. “She might do something drastic…”

“Let’s go to the Palace.” Akira suggested, straightening his lips. “And get this over with.”

The other three nodded. “We just gotta hurry up and deal with Kamoshida.” Ryuji remarked firmly.

They walked back to the alley where they first transitioned to the Metaverse. Glancing outward to the school gate, where some students were still going home, Ryuji turned to the others. “Ready?” He asked quietly.

The three other Persona users nodded firmly. “The moment we cross over, we’ll treat each other like phantom thieves, so I hope you’re ready.” Morgana informed them.


The feline snickered mischievously. “Those who covertly sneak in and stylishly steal Treasure—that is what we become!” Morgana proclaimed happily.

Akira smirked faintly. “Not bad.” He said, idly tweaking a strand of hair. They sounded pretty cool like that, like in those mangas he sometimes read.

Airi giggled quietly, trying to seem more normal even after such a stressful day. “Sounds like fun, like we’re secret agents.”

“Oh, that sounds kinda cool!” Ryuji said exuberantly. “So we just gotta say the school, Kamoshida’s name, and…castle? Then we end up in bizarro world.” He checked with the others excitedly, pulling his phone out. A thought hit him then. “...How the hell’s all this work? Someone make it?” He questioned out loud, looking at the app with an odd look.

Shrugging, Akira shook his head. “I dunno. Does it matter right now?” All that really mattered was that they could use it to their advantage.

Ryuji looked at him weirdly, putting his phone in his pocket. “That’s kinda creepy, but eh,” He
shrugged. "It seems useful enough. We’ll show that fucking Kamoshida!" He exclaimed, rolling
his shoulder in preparation.

“Let’s make him pay!” Airi declared determinedly. It was the only way left that she could help.
There was no way she would fail this like she failed everything else.

Akira pulled out his phone, ready to tap on the marker “Kamoshida’s Palace.”

Morgana jumped up, ready to pounce. “Let’s go!” It declared confidently.

“They really are going to do something...” Ann whispered, looking at the group from behind the
corner. She squinted, trying to see closer but not wanting them to notice.

“They’re doing something on their phone? A name...School..?” She muttered as she watched Akira
tap on his phone.

“Huh?!” She gasped, looking around in disbelief. She felt something pulse around her. The air
turned purple and wavered, TV static filling her eardrums. Her skin tingled as some unknown
energy filled the air, a floating sensation in the pit of her stomach.

What was going on?!

Chapter End Notes

I want to thank ghosty_ghost, Voidwing, LadyMiittens, Letplayer, AllSmallMimi, and
MalteseGeek96 for your encouraging and lovely comments! Thank you so much for
your support and help, you’ve motivated me to keep on writing and improving! <3
The four observed the castle closely, checking to see if the coast was clear. The dark building loomed overhead, the air as silent as the dead. Not a single sound could be heard from within, not even any screams from the prisoners. The pirate turned to his friends. “All right! Time to bust on through!” Ryuji declared, pumping a fist excitedly.

“What is this?!”

The Persona users turned in surprise at the unexpected voice. Ann walked up to them, completely bewildered as she eyed the European castle and the ancient designs amidst the regular modern buildings in Aoyama-Itchome.


Airi looked away awkwardly, bringing up her scarf in an attempt to hide her face. “Oh no...” How were they going to explain this one.

“That voice...Sakamoto?!” Ann screeched, blue eyes wide before darting to examine the other two. “And Airi-senpai...and Kurusu-kun?!”

Furiously rubbing his head, Ryuji tried to contain his shock. “W-Why are you here?!” He choked out.

“How should I know?!” She snapped back before turning around to observe their surroundings. “What’s going on? Hey, where are we...?! Isn’t this the school?!” She remarked, disbelief written all over her face.

Morgana looked at the blonde dreamily, hearts floating above its head. Akira saw this and sweatdropped, giving the feline an unimpressed look. Couldn't he concentrate?

The cat shook itself from its stupor and turned to its fellow thieves. “I see. Perhaps she was dragged in because of that app thing.” It contemplated. “If multiple people can enter with the person who uses it, it stands to reason it’ll pull anyone nearby.”

“For real...?” Ryuji commented, rattled at the revelation.

Airi tilted her head. “Would that mean that Ann-chan has the potential as a Persona user as well?” She inquired softly. If she did, that would mean one more person on their side against Kamoshida.

“Maybe. We’d have to see.” Morgana answered vaguely, shrugging. "But we shouldn't risk it."

Ann, finished with looking around the surroundings, snapped her head to look at them. “Wait, so THIS is related to Kamoshida?!” She squeaked, still completely lost.

Biting her lip, Airi stepped forward, her embroidered scarf fluttering behind her. “Ann-chan, you should leave. This place is dangerous.” She warned softly, trying to convince the other girl. She wasn't going to hurt her again, and this place was dangerous for normal people.

“No!” She refused vehemently. "I want to help!"

“The Shadows are going to find us if you make a scene.” Morgana scolded slightly.

Ann flinched, taking a step back as she finally glimpsed at the feline. “No way! It talked!? Oh my
god, it’s a monster cat..!” She babbled hysterically, holding a hand near her mouth.

Taken aback, Morgana gawked at her. “Monster..?” It murmured, slightly hurt at her words.

Airi winced, and patted the cat’s head comfortably. He didn't deserve that. Plus, he was honestly really cute just like a plushie.

Frustrated, Ann marched up to the group. “You better explain what’s going on! I won’t leave until you do!” She demanded, glaring at them.

They looked at each other at a loss at what to do. “Looks like we gotta force her.” Ryuji remarked, frowning softly. “But...how’re we supposed to do that?” He questioned, looking at Morgana expectantly.

“Just take her back to where we came in.” The cat shrugged. ”That’s how it worked last time, right?”

Taken aback, Ryuji blinked. “O-Oh, yeah.” He uttered, surprised that the solution was so simple. He looked over at Akira. “Can you lend me a hand?”

Glancing at their only female teammate, who shrugged back at him, the black haired thief looked back at the skull adorned companion. “I feel bad...but yeah, got it.” He answered resignedly. They couldn't put her in danger.

“We can’t deal with Kamoshida if she’s here.” Ryuji mentioned.

The two delinquents turned to look at the model. Noticing them staring at her, Ann took a step back. “What’re you-”

“We’ll explain after everything’s over!” Ryuji interrupted her, pushing her back across the drawbridge.

“Hey! And just where are you touching?!” Ann yelled out indignantly as her shoes squeaked against the rough wood, a hand dangerously close to her rear.

“Whoa, sorry, I didn’t mean-” Ryuji sweated, then interrupted himself. “That’s not important!” They dragged her toward the other end of the bridge.

“You guys seriously- Ugh, Airi-senpai, say something!” She screamed at the other girl.

“I’m really sorry, Ann-chan!” Airi yelled after her, waving a gloved hand sheepishly. They could explain this later, after they took Kamoshida's heart.

“Ah?!” Ann squawked, tripping out of the Metaverse.

Walking back to the entrance of the castle, the four stopped to reorganize. “We better be careful from now on when we use that app,” Ryuji winced, his arms aching from Ann’s struggling.

Morgana squinted at the punk. “You should’ve checked the tools you used!” It yelled, clearly defending the model. “Why do I-the one who was just watching-know more about it than you three?!!”

Akira looked down at it, unimpressed. As if they were supposed to know. They weren't the ones with enhanced hearing like a certain animal's.

“Sh-Shuddup!” Ryuji sputtered, awkwardly looking away.
Airi held her hands up peacefully. She seemed to do a lot of that. “Let’s focus on the Palace.” She reminded quietly.

The ex-runner let out an irritated sigh. “Geez, Takamaki found out right when we were startin’ off...We gotta deal with this fast!”

Letting out little purrs, Morgana looked back at where they entered. “That girl’s name is Takamaki Ann, right?” It asked, eyes shining. “Lady Ann...” It sighed dreamily.

Sweatdropping, Airi herded them closer to the castle, where they staked it out. Not a sound could be heard aside from the rough winds, the banners flapping noisily compared to the dead silence that was the courtyard. There were no Shadows outside, or any guards.

Turning back from its observation, Morgana looked at the three humans firmly in the eye. “The Shadows have noticed us. I can feel their presence getting agitated by ours. You better brace yourselves, got it?”

The three nodded, any trace of humor on their faces gone as they were finally going to do what they set out to do.

The feline turned to Akira. “We’re counting on you, Joker!” It proclaimed, jumping in the air.

Ryuji frowned in confusion. “Joker? That a nickname?”

“Don’t refer to it in such a lame way. It’s a code name.” Morgana chided. “What kind of stupid phantom thief would use their real name?! I’m not down for that!” It complained, shaking its head. “And there’s no telling what kind of effect yelling our real names will have on the Palace. It’s just a precaution.”

Airi nodded in understanding. “That makes sense. We don't want Kamoshida to remember we were in his head...So, why is he Joker?” She inquired curiously.

Morgana turned to the darkly clad thief with a sly smile. “Because he’s our trump card when it comes to fighting strength.”

Akira smirked confidently. “Nice. I’m game for it.” It was nice to hear that he was reliable. The feline seemed to think he was the strongest in the group and he’d gladly try to prove that.

Ryuji grinned at him. “It ain’t too bad, yeah? What should I be?” He asked excitedly.

Morgana crossed its arms, analyzing the his appearance and taking in the black leather and multitude of belts. “You’ll be...Let’s see...” It hummed. “Thug.”

Offended, He stomped his foot. “Are you pickin’ a fight with me?! I’ll choose it myself!” Resting his hands on his hips, he hummed thoughtfully. “Hm...When it comes to me, it’s gotta be this mask.” He thumbed the cool metal skull. "Honestly, I actually kinda like it. What if we named me after this?” He suggested eagerly.

Airi nodded in agreement. “You’ll be Skull then!” She declared happily. It did fit her middle school classmate really well.

“Ooh! That sounds awesome! I’m Skull!” Ryuji, now Skull, proclaimed.

Akira, now Joker, nodded, agreeing with the pirate thief.
Skull gestured at the cat with his foot. “What do we do about this one’s code name?”

Tapping his chin, Joker shrugged. It didn't really matter to him. “What do you think?”

“How ‘bout “Mona”?” Skull suggested with a grin, referring back to the incorrect name he used last time.

It nodded. “Well, if Joker thinks it’s easier to call me that, then I’ll go with it.” Morgana, now Mona, stated firmly.

The three then turned to look at the only lady, humming thoughtfully. Airi grimaced, slightly uncomfortable at how their eyes roamed her body up and down.

“She’s super regal lookin’. How about Empress?” Skull suggested, looking at the other two.

“No, that’s too cold.” Mona replied, looking at her with dreamy eyes. “How about Princess?” It countered, hopping up and down.

“That’s way too girly!” Skull argued.

Airi sweatdropped. 'Is this going to be a regular thing..'? She sighed. Her name really didn't matter. She just wanted to get this over with and make Kamoshida pay.

Joker observed her closely. She was more woman than girl, if he was being honest. The way she acted made it seem like she was of high status since she was so smart, but how she treated everyone made her come off as motherly and caring. Her clothes were rich looking, with its embroidered silks and lace mask, so perhaps Princess would have worked, but her full figure complimented it by seeming more mature and dignified. It all came together really- "Elegantly.”

He murmured, his mouth dry.

The three looked at him curiously, not hearing what he said.

Taking a deep breath, he repeated himself. “Elegant. That should be your name.” Joker stated, heart beating a bit faster. Why was he feeling like this just from observing her?

Humming, Skull nodded his head. “I like it! Works for our class prez!” He remarked, grinning widely.


Airi blinked in surprise and blushed. Hearing her friends, her mostly male friends, call her elegant was flattering, if a bit embarrassing. “Well...if it’s fine with you guys. I’ll be called Elegant.” Airi, now Elegant, stated, smiling cheerfully.

Mona looked at the three seriously. “All right. From here on out, we’re Joker, Skull, Elegant, and Mona. We need to be absolutely thorough about using those code names from now on!” It declared firmly.

Everyone nodded in agreement.

“All right! Let’s go nab this Treasure thing!” Skull exclaimed, grinning viciously.

They set off into the Palace.
They crawled through the vent in the brick walls, emerging into the infiltration point that was the empty and abandoned bookroom. Jumping down from the bookcases, they cautiously opened the double doors leading out into the short hallway. Looking around to see if the coast was clear, they turned to open the door across when they heard clanking in the direction of the foyer. They turned their heads in the direction of the sounds and sneaked closer to the open door.

“Praise be to King Kamoshida! Death to the intruders!”

“W-What the hell?!” Skull sputtered quietly, looking out into the foyer where the chant originated from.

There was a contingent of soldiers gathered in the main hall, their dark silver armor gleaming in the chandelier light. At the top of the stairs in front of the ostentatious painting of himself was Shadow Kamoshida, yellow eyes glowing maliciously down at his troops, still dressed in his gossamer cloak and speedo.

“Those intruders the other day were quite entertaining.” Kamoshida began. “However, I can’t allow that trash to ransack my castle!” He declared, striking out in the air. “Strengthen the security! Kill them on sight! I’ll reward whoever brings me their heads.”

“Praise be to King Kamoshida! Death to the intruders!” The soldiers shouted in unison.

Hiding behind the doors were the thieves, listening in on the announcement with a frown. “Hey, Mona. Can’t we just beat the crap outta him and call it a day?” Skull whispered, sneering toward the warped king.

“Look at all those soldiers, idiot! It’d be suicide, and I’m sure you don’t want a repeat of last time.” Mona snapped quietly. “Besides, don’t you want him to confess his sins?”

Elegant nodded. “We need him to pay, for Shiho-chan, and everyone on the volleyball team.” She stated coldly, taking a silent step back. “The Treasure is more important.”

Skull rolled his eyes. “Fiiiine. So, where is it?” He questioned the feline.

“It has to be somewhere in the depths of this castle. Let’s infiltrate further in while he’s out here!” It suggested, moving back from the open doorway.

Walking away from the foyer, they opened the door further down the hall, revealing a guard standing with its back against them.

Quickly retreating, they hid behind the doors. “Dammit, there’s a guard over here too...” Skull gritted his teeth. “Whaddya wanna do? Should we kick its ass?” He asked Joker.

He nodded. “We have to, this is the only way forward.” He stated, readying his dagger.

“Hold on.” Mona interrupted, stopping them. “This might be a good opportunity to teach you something. All right, let’s go!”

They sneaked up on the guard, Joker jumping on its back and tearing off its mask. "Show me your true form!" He yelled.
It convulsed, turning into a fairy with red hair and a purple unitard that fluttered in the air. The four stood ready with their weapons. Skull held a metal pipe in his hands, Joker twirled his dagger, Mona gripped its scimitar, and Elegant adjusted her stance to accommodate her scythe.

“Remember how I taught you Hold Ups and All-Out Attacks? I’ll teach you their practical use now.” Mona explained. “There’s another use for Hold Ups besides simply defeating enemies. Shadows are beings born from people’s hearts, so naturally, they can talk too. In other words, you can communicate with them. Get it?” It lectured the others. “If you talk to them when they’re cornered, they might offer money or items since they don’t want to die.” It eyed the Shadow with a greedy glint in its blue eyes. "In fact, talking has a better chance of scoring something great, as opposed to just offing them."

“Wait.” Elegant interrupted. “They can give you money? Legitimate Japanese yen? I thought they were fake.” She asked, befuddled at the concept. She had kept them just in case, but to know it was real? Could she do this to add to her savings?

“Yep!” Mona nodded, tightening its grip on its weapon. "Well then, let’s do the first step: Knock all enemies down, and do a Hold Up!"

Joker reached into his belt, pulling out his 9mm and shot one bullet, knocking the fairy down onto the floor. It was disturbingly easy to be using a gun, even if it wasn't "real." As long as it worked, it was all he cared about.

They rushed in to surround it, pointing their firearms at the vulnerable enemy. “Seriously?! You guys are the intruders that king Kamoshida was talking about..?" The fairy complained with her high pitched voice, leaning on her hands. “It can’t get worse than this...What’re you going to do with me?!"

Joker cocked his gun, glaring down at the Shadow. It was an addictive feeling to be threatening monsters like this. He could get used to it. “Give me some money.”

“For real?!” The Shadow sputtered, looking at him hopefully. "You’ll let me live if I give you something?"

Mona shrugged. “Well, something along those lines...Now let it be money or items. Just cough it up!” It demanded, pointing its slingshot at the enemy.

The fairy sweated. “But, this happened so suddenly...I actually don’t have anything on me...” She stammered. “I-I usually do though, you know?!!”

Taken aback, Mona looked at it with disbelief. “W-Wait, what? Oh...This isn’t how I was planning this to go.” It sweatdropped. “Uh...Anyway, it can’t be helped if that’s the case. Time for you to go to hell.” It declared, holding up its scimitar with the sharp edge angled toward the enemy.

“W-Wait!” The fairy shouted frantically, holding her hands up in a surrender.

“Sorry, but we’re in a hurry.” Elegant stated apologetically, readying her sniper rifle. It was heavy, but she gripped it well, kneeling on one knee.

“Can’t we work something out?” The Shadow begged. "Don’t kill me, please! Won’t you let me go?"

Joker shook his head. That was disappointing. “You chose the wrong enemy.”

“Wow...You’re really confident. But I’m the same way. In any other situation, we’d get along
really well.” The Pixie reminisced before it began glowing a white light. “Whoa, I feel different! Something’s happening!” It exclaimed, looking down at its bright

“What the..?!” Mona yelped, watching with wide eyes. "What’s going on?!”

The fairy flew up in the air, a sheen of light surrounding it. “Oh yeah, I remember now! I don’t belong just to King Kamoshida...I’m an existence that drifts about in the sea of humanity’s souls...My real name is “Pixie”!” She proclaimed. “I am thou, thou art I. From now on, I’ll live on inside your heart!” She finished, before bright blue light enveloped her. In her place was a mask, a perfect replica of Joker’s. It flew to him and merged with his own in a sea of shimmer.

He smirked triumphantly, feeling the new power within him. He had no idea what just happened, but the new feeling of completion swelled inside his heart, as if it was an empty well that needed to be filled up.

The rest of the group ran up to him in awe, the room empty and safe now. “What was that just now..? What happened?!” Mona questioned quickly.

Skull turned to look at his feline companion. “Wh-What the hell was that about?” He asked, completely shocked. "The enemy got sucked into Joker’s mask!"

Elegant moved a little closer to their ebony haired teammate, examining his mask. “That was amazing.” She breathed, looking at him in awe.

He smirked at faintly at the compliment. It was nice to be the center of attention, good attention.

“I-I have no idea!” Mona stammered. “I wasn’t expecting that either.”

“Intruders?! Halt!”

A guard appeared in the doorway, its armor clanking noisily. The four thieves turned around quickly. “Shit, they noticed us!” Skull gritted, tightening his hand around his pipe.

The guard convulsed, darkness spilling out of its armor before turning into two Demon Horses.

‘I sense a new possibility within me stemming from the previous battle....’ Joker thought. Slicing three times with his dagger and backflipping away, he brought up a hand to clench his mask. Not Arsene, but...

He spun in place, summoning Pixie and striking out with a Zio. It shocked one Demon Horse, knocking it down on its feet.

Mona looked at him in shock with a slack jaw. “Is that the Shadow from earlier?!” It sputtered. "Don’t tell me...Did you take in the Shadow’s appearance and powers as a Persona?!!"

“Hey!” Elegant called out, twirling her scythe. “Want me to finish it off?”

Joker looked at her and nodded in acquiesce. He had enough this time.

The noblewoman rushed up to the demon and spun in an arch with her scythe, slicing into the Demon Horse several times before jumping into the air and stabbing down with the sharp tip. It halved the Shadow and it screamed out in pain as it dissipated.

Skull yelled out, “Captain Kidd!,” summoning his Persona, and sending out a bolt of lightning to the other Shadow.
They rushed up to surround the enemy. “Ow, ow, ow...Whaddya think yer doin?!?” It groaned, trying to get back up on its hooves.

“Lend me your power.” Joker commanded, pointing his gun. Could he get another Persona right away?

The horse cocked its head, shaking its silver mane. “So that’s yer move?...Then I guess I’ll talk first. I’ll decide if I’m gonna help you after. I was just passin’ by, and you roughed me up real bad. Hey, what’s yer deal?” It asked gruffly. “Somethin’ bad happen in yer life or somethin’, sonny?”

Joker glared at it. “You’re getting on my nerves.” He warned. He didn't want to talk about it, and definitely not to a Shadow.

“Y’know, let’s just drop all this dangerous stuff and go fer a drink. Whaddya say?” The horse suggested nervously. “Humans talk over drinks, right? How ‘bout it? Hell, let me buy you a round, sonny.”

“Quit messing around.” Joker threatened, glaring harder.

“Heh, you don’t like jokes, huh? Reminds me of when-Oh!” The Shadow got up on its hooves, standing confidently. “I remember now. My name is Bicorn. I’ll go with ya.” It stated, before turning into a mask and flying to merge with Joker’s.

He smirked. Another Persona acquired!

Mona gazed up at its leader in awe. “No way...Does that mean you can wield multiple Personas?!”

Skull looked around, clueless to what happened. “H-Hey, Mona! What was that about?!” He asked. “What did Joker do?”

The feline circled their current team leader, observing him. “He sealed the enemy’s appearance and powers into his mask, and made it his new Persona.” It rationalized. “I’ve never seen anyone do that before...didn’t even know it was possible!” It exclaimed, amazed at what it just witnessed.

Elegant hummed. “Perhaps it’s purely unique to Joker then? We don’t seem to have the same ability.” She remarked, tapping her chin. “So a person can only have one Persona each. Joker now has three, which means that he could absorb different Personas with different strengths and weaknesses, making it so he can always have the advantage!” She cheered, feeling more optimistic about their situation. With a power like that, they could definitely get through this. “Really living up to your name as the wild card!”

Joker smirked, pleased at hearing so many compliments. They could keep stroking his ego. “Sounds useful.” He remarked, clenching and relaxing his hand experimentally, feeling the power humming beneath his skin. It was interesting to know he could gain other sides to him that were different from Arsene, but did that mean he wasn't true to himself? Or that he was incomplete?

He felt a deep chuckle from the gentleman thief, as if he understood his concerns. Pixie and now Bicorn also twinged, letting him know that they were at his side, not with words, but more like feelings. He relaxed a bit. As long as he had this power, he shouldn't question it too much. Maybe it was just meant to be. “Let’s keep going.” He ordered, resting his hands in his pockets.

Mona’s eyes shined with excitement. “Hehe, I like you even more now!” It snickered, a grin on its cartoonish face. “I really do have someone special on my hands!”

They moved through the next door, passing through the guard armory and fighting Shadows along
the way. Joker acquired two new Personas in the meantime, a Jack-O-Lantern and a Mandrake.

“Oh!” Elegant gasped. “A treasure chest! Let’s check it out!” She suggested excitedly to her companions, gesturing to the box that was at a corner. The ebony haired thief walked up to the chest, opening it. They all peered curiously over his shoulder as he pulled out a silver dagger.

“Nice! It looks stronger than your current one, you should use that.” Mona suggested.

Nodding, Joker switched out his rebel knife with the silver dagger, testing the grip. ‘It does seem a little sturdier.’ He observed. How did he know how to use a knife so naturally? Since this was all metaphysical, was it his mind believing in it?

Advancing through the next corridor, they passed by a gated hallway and detected a door that was different from the others. It slightly wavered the closer they got to it.

“Oooh, it’s another hazy-lookin’ door! This that thing!” Skull exclaimed, scratching his head.

"Uhh, what was it called..?"

Elegant sighed in relief. “A safe room, perfect.”

“We can discuss our strategy inside. There are a lot of places even I don’t know about in here.” Mona added, pushing the door open. The room shuddered, turning into an empty classroom, before fluctuating back into an abandoned armory.

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Ann walked up to the castle, looking around cautiously. “This is that place from earlier..!”

She gazed around the empty courtyard, not seeing her fellow students even under the harsh red light from the red sky. "Why were they dressed so weirdly..?" Pulling out her phone, she looked at it perplexedly. “…What’s up with this app? I just said the words Sakamoto said, and I ended up-”

“Princess?!”

Taken offguard by the shouting, she shot her head up. “Huh?” She took a step back in bewilderment when she saw three suits of armor run up to her, the metal clanking noisily in the otherwise empty courtyard.

"Princess, you must come with us!” A guard demanded. Another picked her up, carrying her on their shoulder.

“Aaaaaaaah!” She screamed fearfully as she was forcefully taken into the castle, kicking and punching at her captor. ‘Someone help me!’ She prayed fervently.

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Super thank you to LadyMiittens for the fantastic fanart!! I'm so honored and happy to receive this, thank you so much for your love and support!!!
Sitting on one of the chairs in the Safe Room, Skull sighed. “Aren’t there even more Shadows here than before?” He remarked. “Just gettin’ this far’s been a real pain in my ass!” He groaned, stretching his arms in the air.

“It’s all because you guys provoked Kamoshida, you know.” Mona chided, waving its paws. “Still...he seems to be awfully on guard.” It remarked solemnly, glaring at the door with suspicion.

“The entire castle must be mobilized right now.” Elegant added, sitting calmly in her chair, her hands placed on her leather clad thighs. “We need to be as careful as possible.” She had no idea what would happen if they got hurt on this side. Did they stay injured in the real world? Could they...die here? The Shadows were strong, and if they screwed up, it could be game over.

“So how are we supposed to steal the Treasure then?” Skull questioned, looking at their feline teammate.

Mona gave him a warning glance. “Don’t be so hasty.” It chided. “First, we’ll need to secure an infiltration route.”

He crossed his arms. “The what..?”

“Basically, we need to find a safe way to get to the Treasure quickly. I doubt we can defeat the Palace in one day, which means we have to come back.” Elegant explained clearly, making sure Skull can follow. “So we need to find a clear passage from the starting point to the end.” Somehow.

He oohed and nodded his head in understanding. “Gotcha...”

“Since we have four members, I think we can definitely accomplish this!” Mona proclaimed confidently, jumping onto the table.

A thought hitting the pirate, Skull turned to look at it. “Hey, you say you don’t have your memories and all, but somehow you still know about that kinda stuff?” He asked, slightly perplexed, turning to his ebony haired companion. “Do you think this thing’s really got amnesia?”

“I believe in Mona.” Joker replied evenly. The feline was their only guide. “He hasn’t led us wrong yet.”

Mona smiled happily up at its leader. “At least you’re a step above that moron.” It cheerfully commented, ignoring Skull’s shout of indignation.

Skull frowned suspiciously. “You sure talk big, but what if it turns out you’re just some stray cat in the end?”

Mona shook its head. “That can’t be...” It muttered morosely.

“Still, why was the princess in such an odd place..?”

Turning toward the door where they heard the voices, the four pressed against it, listening in on the passing conversation. “Princess?” Elegant murmured, frowning in confusion.

The other three shrugged, also confused. They could have sworn it was only Kamoshida around.
“I could have sworn we were pursuing the readings of an intruder…”

“It doesn’t matter now. We must take her back to King Kamoshida!”

Hearing the clanking of metal getting farther away from their room, they relaxed their guards and straightened up from the doors. “Who’s this princess they’re talkin’ about..?” Skull asked, trying to remember if someone else was supposed to be here.

Joker shrugged, not knowing either.

Furrowing her brows at a thought, Elegant turned to the others. “Could they mean Ann-chan? She was the only other girl around and they said “intruder”…” She frowned worriedly. “But we sent her home, didn’t we?”

Mona pushed the door ajar, peeking out. “I should probably look into this!” It declared, sprinting down the hallway.

The three Shujin students looked at each other exasperatedly. “And yet another question goes unanswered…” Skull remarked sullenly. “Stuff like the castle and that navigation app are mysterious…but Morgana’s got ‘em both beat.”

“Mona.” Joker corrected him.

“Crap, sorry!” Skull winced. “Who am I again?...Oh yeah, Skull!”

Elegant frowned. "Mona's taught us a lot about this world. We can trust them enough. Even if they haven't told us their origins..." She trailed off uncomfortably. Even if the feline had other intentions, it was still helping them take revenge for Shiho. That was enough for her. "I'm sure they'll tell us when they're ready."

They stood there awkwardly for a moment, before it was interrupted by Mona’s reappearance. “Guys, this is bad!” It exclaimed, blue eyes wide. “It’s Lady Ann! She’s been taken by the Shadows...!”

Alarmed, the three humans looked at each other apprehensively. “I hate when I’m right.” Elegant commented, wincing. “She must have the app on her phone now.”

Skull furiously rubbed his head. “Dammit! We let her out for her own safety, and she just came back in by herself!…” He gritted. “Dammit, we don’t got time to be takin’ a break! We gotta go save her ass!”

They exited the room and ran down the hallway. Going back the way they came, they noticed the barred corridor was now open, the carpet slightly scuffed as if someone had dragged their feet on it. It was decorated with red walls and hearts, two rows of armor lining the entire passage. Rose petals spread all over the ground dramatically, as if beckoning a lover to a nest.

“Get off!”

“Let’s hurry!” Elegant urged, running down the hallway toward the closed black doors. They followed her, passing a knocked down suit of metal.

“Look, I’ll apologize for touching the armor without permission!”

“She totally doesn’t get what’s goin’ on…” Skull groaned, arriving at the doors.
“Let’s hurry and save her!” Mona exclaimed, rushing after them speedily.

They pushed the doors open and the sight that greeted them had them all biting back a swear.

Ann was shackled to an “X” shaped cross, two guards standing in front of her. The dark room was showered with flower petals and candles, a horrific portrait of a shirtless Kamoshida hung right in the center of the wall.

“What’s all this about?!” Ann yelled, frantically trying to break free. "Seriously, I’m gonna call the cops!"

“So, this is the intruder.”

Kamoshida walked up to observe the blonde model with his glowing yellow eyes, still dressed in his plush cape and green speedo.

“Kamoshida?!” Ann yelped in surprise, her blue eyes staring at the cape-clad teacher incredulously. A perfect copy of her walked up next to him, clad in a purple leopard print bikini and cat ears.

“Who is that..?” She whispered, her eyes not leaving her copycat. “More importantly, what is this place?! Why’s the school turned into something like this?!” She demanded, wanting an answer.

Smirking amusedly, the Shadow king turned to his soldiers. “I can’t believe you mistook my Ann for someone like her.” He chuckled before turning back to the student. “Are you afraid?” He asked menacingly.

She looked back at him warily. “What is that outfit..? Have you lost your mind?” She asked skeptically, fear starting to creep in.

The king flared his arms out, showcasing the room. He gave her a large grin, madness in his eyes. “I do as I please here. After all, this is my castle...The world of my desires.” He declared loudly.

Ann stared at him in disbelief, her eyes darting around the room. “What the-?! Is this some kind of red light district?!" She screeched, struggling against the cross.


“This isn’t funny!” She yelled out at him, the binds beginning to cut off the blood supply to her hands. "Enough of the bullshit, Kamoshida!”

The evil king’s eyes narrowed at the insult before he turned to Not-Ann. “The girl’s decided to tell me off. What do you think of that?” He asked languidly.

She smiled back at him seductively. “Talking back is, like...totally unforgivable...” Not-Ann replied back slowly, as if drugged.

He turned back to the school girl. “In that case...she should be executed.” He declared, sneering at her. “Now then, how should I play with you? Shall I tear you into little pieces?” He taunted, a mad grin spreading across his rectangular face.

One of the suits of armor began to approach her and Ann felt a stone drop into her stomach as reality set in. “Are you kidding me..?” She whispered, scrunching up her face.
“This is fucked up.” Skull spat out, yellow gloved hands clenched tightly at his sides. “Is that what he thinks of the girls on the volleyball team?!”

In front of the phantom thieves were topless teenage girls, mewling and sprawled out seductively on the carpet. Every single one of them wore the Shujin volleyball uniform shorts, signifying them as the female players on the team.

Joker grimaced and looked away from the horribly violating sight. To think a male teacher would go this far. Kamoshida was proving himself to be the most disgusting man he'd ever heard of.

Staring at the sexualized girls in horror, Elegant clenched her fists. ‘That’s Watanabe...Nakamura...Harada....and Tanaka.’ She listed to herself coldly, remembering their names and faces for later. She knew of them from the other classes and had never really talked to them, but they didn't deserve this. None of them deserved this.

“Hey, that’s...!” Mona yelped, staring off to the right of the room.

The three humans looked in the same direction, seeing Ann strapped down on a cross and surrounded by Shadows, including Kamoshida and Not-Ann.

They rushed forward, stopping just a few feet away with their weapons ready in their hands. “Takamaki!” Skull shouted, clenching around his steel bar.

“Just when I was about to start enjoying myself...” Kamoshida scowled, turning to look at the new arrivals.

Struggling against her bonds, Ann looked at her school mates with disbelief and fear. “What’s the deal with this guy?!” She cried out.

Skull growled, glaring darkly at the distorted king. “You little..!”

“...How many times are you gonna come back?” Kamoshida sneered when his eyes landed on Elegant. “Oh? What a beautiful young woman you have there.” He licked his lips salaciously, yellow eyes roaming up and down her body. “I wouldn’t mind having a taste…”

Disgusted, Elegant took a step back with a grimace, feeling naked even with a thick embroidered sleeveless coat on. So he was interested in her that way.

Her three teammates moved in front of her, shielding her from the king’s roaming gaze, and glared at him hatefully.

Shrugging, the distorted teacher turned back to his prisoner. “I bet you’re just like those thieves. You came because you’re pissed at me, huh?” Kamoshida asked mockingly. “But ah...I forget that chick’s name, but it’s your fault she jumped, you know.”

“How?” Ann breathed, looking at him with wide eyes.

He chuckled. “You were so reluctant to throw yourself onto me that I had her take your place.” He stated loudly to the whole room.

Narrowing her eyes in anger, Ann struggled harder. “You bastard!” She roared at him but gasped when a guard moved closer.
“No!” Skull shouted, taking a step to intercept the guard but was stopped when Kamoshida raised his hand. “Take one more step and I’ll kill her on the spot.” He threatened, sneering at the intruders.

The pirate flinched and stopped. “Dammit..!” He gritted his teeth in frustration. "You bastard..."

The king chuckled darkly and turned back to his hostage. “Just sit back and enjoy the dismantlement show.”

Ann gasped and pulled at her cuffs, even as the skin around her wrists began to bruise from the rough treatment. “No! Don’t!” She objected profusely.

“Maybe I’ll start with her clothes.” Kamoshida giggled, nostrils flaring at the perverted prospect.

Not-Ann simpered, shaking her bikini-clad breasts on his arm. “You’re such a perv!” She purred.

Skull gritted his teeth. “Dammit, what are we gonna do?!”

They stood there, uncertain of what they can do to get out of this situation. If they took another step, Ann could die. But if they don't, she would be violated right in front of them and they wouldn't be able to do anything.

Joker bit back a curse. What could they do? Guns? His eyes darted from his own, to his teammates. It won’t kill all the enemies. But...

His eyes landed on Elegant. That might work. He made a small gesture with his chin, trying to signal the female thief.

Her tense eyes darted to him, awaiting orders.

He put his pointer and middle finger together, mimicking a gun.

Her eyes lit up with realization and nodded, discreetly readying her rifle behind them, their coats doing a good job disguising her efforts from the distorted king.

“Is this...my punishment for what happened to Shiho..?” Ann whispered, looking down in defeat as the soldiers moved closer.

The Palace ruler chuckled with amusement. “That’s more like it. You should’ve looked like this from the start.” He remarked darkly. "No more of your rebellious shit."

Light blue eyes teared up at her own helplessless, staring blankly at nothing. “Shiho...I’m so sorry..” Ann whispered, clenching her eyes.

“You’re just going to listen?” Joker questioned his classmate, a serious look on his face. She couldn't give up. She had to rebel. “Don’t give in!”

Lifting her head, Ann looked at the thief with surprise. “Huh..?” She breathed out.

“Ann-chan, this is the man who raped Shiho.” Elegant stated grimly. “Are you going to let this disgusting piece of shit get away with it?!?”

She bit her lip, jaw clenching as she was finally pushed to her limits. “...You’re right.” She replied resolutely, a determined expression overcoming her moment of weakness. “Letting this piece of shit toy with me...” She struggled in her bindings. “What was I thinking..?!” She yelled at herself, her anger rising at her situation, her friend, at herself.
Kamoshida frowned at her resistance. “It’s like I always say. Slaves should just behave and-”

“Shut up!” Ann interrupted loudly. “I’ve had enough of this...” She declared, glaring at the teacher. “You’ve pissed me off, you son of a bitch!”

‘My...it’s taken far too long.’
Gasping, Ann convulsed in her chains, pain wracking through her body. She felt something pulse, something within her. Deep inside, it had awakened from its slumber.

‘Tell me...who is going to avenge her if you don’t?’

Clenching her eyes, she let out little gasps of pain. ‘My body feels like it’s on fire!’ She jerked around, trembling as she tried to hold in her screams.

‘Forgiving him was never the option…Such is the scream of the other you that dwells within...’

Sweat drenching her forehead, hair sticking to her face, she couldn't help but scream out in anguish. She tensed and thrust her torso in the air before slumping down, exhausted.

‘We can finally forge a contract…’

Head down, tears streaming down her face with saliva dribbling from the side of her mouth, she answered. “I hear you...Carmen.” Ann whispered.

She flung her head back, revealing a red feline mask covering the entire upper half of her face, her eyes glowing yellow with untapped power. “You’re right. No more holding back..!” She declared loudly.

Kamoshida gasped at the mask, taking a step back.

‘There you go...Nothing can be solved by restraining yourself.’

Body flaring with blue flames, Ann broke through her shackles, the shrapnel falling to the floor with little clinks. Taking her right hand, she clenched her mask.

‘Understand? Then I’ll gladly lend you my strength.’

Ripping it off with a splatter of blood, she screamed, a funnel of power enshrouding her from everyone else.

The Persona Users covered their faces as the harsh winds whipped at their outfits, and Elegant switched her safety off. It was time.

When the energy dispersed enough, it revealed a slim red skinned woman with two dark curly pigtails, clad in a layered red dress, roses and thorns encircling her torso. In one hand she held a doll resembling a lovesick man, another beneath her stiletto clad foot. Staring predatory-like through her feline mask, Carmen floated behind Ann.

Ann, whose school uniform was replaced with a red leather catsuit with zippers, clinging to her every curve. It left open a large window of her cleavage, showing satin smooth skin and the tops of her breasts. A leather whip-like tail was attached to her backside, simulating a feline predator. Her hands were encased in pink leather gloves, and her darker red boots encircled her upper thighs.

Opening her eyes, she stared defiantly at the enemies around her. Rushing up to one, she launched an upper kick to its hand, making it release its sword into the air. Jumping up, she grabbed it by the handle, and with a loud cry, swung down at Not-Ann.
The fake screamed, dissipating into nothing.

Kamoshida stared wide eyed at the red clad woman. A shot rang out, hitting the floor in front of him, and he frantically took a few steps back. A soldier moved to shield him, but another bullet shot it into a wisp.

Done with her job, Elegant put her rifle away, taking her scythe out.

Sweating bullets now, the distorted ruler moved away even more, tripping and landing on his backside.

“You know what?” Ann began, standing up from her landing crouch and glaring at the disgusting man in front of her. “I’m not some cheap girl you can toy with, you scumbag.”

Gritting his teeth, Kamoshida glared up at her. “Bitch..!” He muttered angrily.

The new Persona user took a step forward, her comrades backing her up. They all glared down at him. “You stole everything from Shiho...You destroyed her...Now it’s your turn!” Ann yelled, pointing a finger at the despicable teacher, an inferno lighting her eyes. “I will rob you of everything!” She declared as a whip appeared in her hand, and she cracked it experimentally.

“How dare you!” A lieutenant shouted, more soldiers backing him up. “Enough of your insolence!” They convulsed and merged into one being. The black shadows crept back, showing a horrid looking demon with large horns and a beard, sitting on a toilet.

Ann glared at it. “No. I’ve had enough of you!” She retorted, clenching her fist at it. “No one’s gonna stop me now!” She crouched into a feline battle position. “Let’s go, Carmen!”

“How dare you deny King Kamoshida’s love, you selfish lass?!” The demon exclaimed angrily. "Pay for this insolence with your life!"

She snorted derisively. “That dirtbag just sees women as sexual outlets! Don’t make me laugh with that “love” bullshit!” Holding a hand to her face, her red feline mask appeared in a flash of flames, accentuating the fiery rage in her eyes. “C’mon, Carmen! Let’s give ‘em hell!” Cracking her whip, the dominatrix moved in and whipped the Shadow several times, leaving several black lashes on its body.

Joker moved in after, slicing it with his dagger before back flipping away and out of its range.

"Captain Kidd!" Skull sent a Zio at their opponent, paralyzing it with a sudden strike of lightning.

Elegant dashed from behind him and he high-fived her as she passed by. “Jeanne!” She yelled out, the finely clad Persona in purple and white appearing behind her. “Kouha!” She snapped her fingers and sent a beaming white light into the opponent, knocking it down.

The four rushed in to attack it all at once, their weapons leaving their marks on its grotesque body.

Moving back, they observed the heavily injured Shadow.

Ann called out, “Carmen!” The fiery dancer appeared behind her, dragging her boytoy around callously. “Agi!” A burst of fire encased the enemy, burning it into nothing.

She panted, body hunched over as the battle was finally over. The thieves stood protectively in front of her, glaring at the only opponent left inside the room.
“Oh shit.!” Kamoshida cursed, sweat dripping down his face at the realization that his guards were annihilated. He moved to dash out of the room, running away from the five thieves.

Elegant quickly held up her sniper rifle and aimed, pulling the trigger. Just at the last second, he turned the corner and the bullet lodged into the wall, missing its target.

“Wait!” Ann called out, moving to go after him, but collapsed onto her knees in exhaustion. "Dammit..." She cursed, beads of sweat rolling from her hairline.

The noblewoman quickly moved to kneel beside her, handing her a Recov-R. “Here, this will help.”

She swallowed it, instantly feeling better from the medicine as it cured her fatigue.

The others relaxed now that there were no enemies around, and Skull walked up to the newest Persona user. “Why’d you come here, man?!” He shouted. "And more importantly, how?!"

Mona glared up at him. “Hey! Is that how you speak to a woman?!” It chided firmly, before turning back to the half foreigner. “Are you alright, Lady Ann?” It asked softly, its tone completely changing.

Ann looked up at the cat with confusion. “Lady Ann.?. Wait, what is this thing? Is it alive.?. How can it talk?” She shot off, staring curiously at the creature in front of her.

Mona flinched, rejected as he was treated as nothing more than a wonder.

“And...” Her eyes darted around to their dungeon like surroundings, the situation finally catching up with her. "Where in the world are we?!

“J-Just calm down.” Mona pleaded, panicking at her distress. “Everything’s going to be OK; don’t worry.”

Ann swiped her hand on its giant head, making it wobble in place. “How am I supposed to calm down?!” She yelled, before stiffening with surprise as she glimpsed at her pink glove. “Huh?!” She looked down at the body suit she was wearing with disbelief. “Why am I dressed like this?!! When did I?” She covered her body with her arms, face red with embarrassment. "Don't look at me!"

Sweatdropping, Elegant interrupted. “Let’s move to a Safe Room so we can explain it to her. Kamoshida might send more guards.” She suggested, looking at Joker.

He nodded, agreeing with what she said. “Let’s go.” He commanded, gesturing with a red clad hand. The others followed after him, Elegant gently guiding Ann who was still in shock. Making it back to the Safe Room without any confrontations, Joker opened the doors and let his teammates enter before closing the door behind him.

“What is going on?! Can someone explain to me?” Ann pleaded, brows furrowed in confusion as they sat down at the table. "Where are we? What is this place? Why do I have Carmen?!!"

The thieves looked at each other, wondering who should explain, before three pairs of eyes landed on the other female in the room.

Noticing their silent volunteering, Elegant sighed and stepped forward. “All right, I’ll explain.” She was used to doing all the talking anyway.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She spun their tale that began with her on April 9th, to meeting the three behind her earlier this week, until the moment they barged into the chamber where she was held. “And then you gained your Persona. Meaning you now also have the power to take down this Palace and the Shadows living in it.” Elegant finished, wetting her dry lips after talking so much.

“So...I have a Persona I can fight with?” Ann repeated hesitantly, getting a nod from the four in front of her. "And it’s only in this “Metaverse” which I can access with the red eyeball app on my phone?"

“Yep! Cool shit, huh?” Skull grinned, lacing his hands behind his head.

She nodded. “And I’m a fire user..?” She looked down at her pink latex gloves.

“Which means you’re weak to ice.” Elegant informed.

Ann scrunched up her face. “OK..? I’m a fire user, so I’m weak to ice...What about you guys?”

Skull leaned back in his seat. “I’m a lightning user, and I hate wind attacks. Mona there’s a wind user,” He gestured to the feline standing on the table. "And he’s weak to lightning. Got that?"

Joker leaned against the table. “I’m weak to bless and ice right now, but I can change with other Personas.”

Ann looked at him in surprise. “Wait, you can have multiple Personas?” She grimaced. "Do I have to go through that pain again?!"

Mona shook its head. “Not at all! Joker here is the only phantom thief who can hold more than one. Elegant there is null to bless and weak to curse, so we all balance out pretty well.”

Ann nodded in understanding. “OK, I think I get it...”

Skull gestured to the black haired thief next to him. “If you need any help, you can always ask Joker.”

“Joker..Elegant? Are those some kind of nicknames?” She inquired, blinking curiously.

Mona nodded. “They’re codenames because we’re phantom thieves! Plus, who knows what would happen if we said our real names in a Palace.” It replied, smiling at her. “I’m Mona! He’s Skull, and she’s Elegant!” It pointed to each respective person in the room.

Ann looked down at her leather clad legs, still unused to the skin tight outfit and thigh high dark red boots. “So if we get Kamoshida’s Treasure,” She whispered pensively. "He’ll have a change of heart and confess his crimes?"

Joker nodded. “That’s the plan.” He replied evenly. It was what they hoped would happen at least. They had no real way to know if it would even work.

“If guys like us try and complain at school, they’re just gonna shoot us down.” Skull growled, clenching his fists. "Goin’ all in on this plan is the only choice we got.”
Elegant idly grasped her arm. "No one else is going to do anything." She frowned morosely. "The volleyball team is too scared to act, and the others looks the other way...I can't influence the school that's in love with him, and the student council won't do anything unless they get complaints, so the cycle continues..." Even when they all knew, deep down, that he was a terrible person.

Biting her lip, Ann looked up at the four thieves. “Let me join you!” She pleaded and held up a clenched fist, determination roaring in her eyes. “I need to make him pay for what he did to Shiho!”

“Wait, what?” Skull sputtered, taking a step back. “Did I just hear you say 'Let me join you'? As in you want us to take you along?”

She glared at him, slightly hurt. “Don’t act like I’m going to drag you down. Weren’t you watching? I can fight too.”

Joker watched her contemplatively. “Are you sure? It’s dangerous work.” He asked his classmate, raising an eyebrow. “No one can know we did this either. Suzui-san will never know.”

“That doesn’t matter!” Ann argued. “Shiho...Shiho might never wake up again." Her jaw tightened. "He just keeps going like nothing happened, even after what he did to her...I’ll never forgive him!”

Elegant nodded approvingly at her speech, scowling darkly at the mention of the teacher. She could make up for hurting her by teaching her what they knew. They'd have one more ally in this distorted world.

The leader stared at her before smirking. “Welcome aboard.”

Skull turned to him in disbelief. “You serious, man...?” He whispered.

He nodded. They could use more allies in this dangerous world, and she also had a personal reason for going after the Treasure. He could at least give her a chance.

“Don’t worry, I’ll protect her.” Mona stated firmly, jumping on the table.

“Even if you say no, I’m just gonna go alone.” Ann added, crossing her arms. "I'm not going to give up."

Huffing, Skull relented. “Alright, fine. You better keep up, Takamaki!” He warned, looking at the model with a worried frown.

Ann stuck her tongue out at him in response. “Then it’s decided. Well, I hope we get along!” She stated determinedly. “I’m going to make Kamoshida atone for what he did. Not just for Shiho’s sake...but for everything he’s done. I won’t let any more people suffer because of him. I’ll do whatever it takes!”

Joker nodded. ‘I sense a strong will from her…’

Mona stared at her with glimmering eyes, infatuated. “What a kind girl...Such admirable consideration for others.” It commented dreamily. “She cares about her friends, and she’s beautiful to boot...What a girl! She’s captured my heart...”

Elegant crossed her arms. “Since she’s our new member, what should her codename be?” She asked the room. “We can’t keep calling her her name in this realm.”

They turned to the newly awakened thief in the room, scrutinizing her. “But daaamn…” Skull
whistled in appreciation as his eyes roamed down her skin tight catsuit.

Ann, not realizing his ogling, looked at the others. “Hm? What’s up?” She asked, playing with one ponytail.

“N-nothing.” Skull grinned, a hint of perversion in his eyes. "I mean, she’s got that tail and stuff, so...how about Sexy Cat?"

Recoiling, she looked at him in disgust. “Wait! Is that what you’re going to call me from now on?! I am SO not down with this!” She rebuked harshly, cringing at the suggestion.

“What do you wanna be called then?” He asked.

She placed a hand under her chin. “Um, something better than just a little cat...” She replied sullenly. “Maybe…”Panther”?” She suggested, looking at the others hopefully. “That sounds pretty cool, doesn’t it?”

Skull scratched his head. “Huh? Why?”

“’Cause it sounds more...ferocious?” Ann replied, sounding it more like a question as if she wasn’t sure herself.

They nodded in agreement. Mona smiled dreamily. “She’s a cougar..!” It murmured happily at its fellow feline.

Ann, now Panther, stomped her foot. “Don’t call me that!” She yelled, blushing slightly in embarrassment. She turned to her fellow classmates. “More importantly, Kamoshida..!”

“Oh, right.” Skull sputtered, before glaring determinedly. “Let’s go!” He pumped his fist.

They set out into the den of monsters, the Safe Room closing behind their departure. They made their way through the various hallways, checking rooms and corners for hidden treasures and enemies.

Walking into a large room, they noticed a glowing chest. “Huh, it’s locked.” Mona remarked. “It needs a lockpick to open. Do we have any?” It asked the others.

They shook their heads.

“Oh!” Elegant perked up. “I have a bobby pin on me. Give me a second.” She took out a bobby pin from her braided bun, letting it fall down in tails. She twisted the thin metal, inserting it into the lock and fidgeting for a second, before they heard a “click” sound. The lock snapped off, and she opened the lid, taking out a plate of gold and a piece of onyx. She turned back to her friends, putting her bun up again, and stopped.

They shook their heads.

“Oh!” Elegant perked up. “I have a bobby pin on me. Give me a second.” She took out a bobby pin from her braided bun, letting it fall down in tails. She twisted the thin metal, inserting it into the lock and fidgeting for a second, before they heard a “click” sound. The lock snapped off, and she opened the lid, taking out a plate of gold and a piece of onyx. She turned back to her friends, putting her bun up again, and stopped.

They all looked at her with wide eyes. “Dude, where’d you learn to pick a lock?” Skull whistled, impressed at her skill.

“Uh...places.” Elegant replied, eyes darting away uncomfortably. “Let’s just keep going.” She insisted, walking down the hall.

Joker stared at her contemplatively before following. ‘I’ll ask her later.’ He noted.

Chapter End Notes
To clarify: Airi's Persona, Jeanne, is null to bless, weak to curse, and strong to nuclear. Her weapons are a scythe and a sniper rifle, capable of holding 2 shots per reload. Her attacks are Kouha (bless), Hama (slight bless kill), Snap (med gun), and Media (slight party HP).

In the game, you're only allowed a limited amount of ammo which doesn't make sense. Morgana explained that as long as the enemy believes it's a real gun, then it'll shoot like a real gun, meaning that you should have infinite ammo as long as you reload another mag. So in future chapters, you'll note that I'll be writing them using their guns frequently without running out of ammo.
Making it through the maze of hallways, they arrived on the second terrace of the foyer that marked the Palace entrance. They looked down from the railing, noticing the main hall was filled with enemies, soldiers lined up on the red carpet.

“This way!” Joker whispered, gesturing at the nearby bookcase.

He jumped up on it, before walking down an arch that connected the columnns. They followed him, jumping from chandelier to chandelier until they made it to the other side of the main hall. Opening up the nearest door, they ran up the spiraling staircase to the third floor. Sneaking and attacking Shadows along the way, the thieves acquired a lot of money and items.

Stopping at the next safe room, some of them changed their weapons to better ones, keeping the old ones to sell later. Hopping back out, they sneaked around a grand dining hall, filled with patrolling guards. The next room seemed to be a cellar, with no way out.

Looking around, Joker noticed a vent that they could go through. Heading into it, they emerged into the adjacent room, heading out from its door. The intruders went up to the next floor, arriving at a new hallway. Opening a nearby door, they noticed that it was a study.

Walking in, a particular book caught the leader’s eyes, and he took it with him, scrutinizing the hard cover.

“The Slave Book, huh..?” Mona looked up at the novel's spine. “That sounds kind of important…”

They moved on, facing a gated door. Next to it was a black ram’s head, in its mouth a handle.

“Hey,” Skull began. “This is just like the one we saw before! If I’m rememberin’ right, we just gotta pull this…” He gestured to the handle before pulling it.

Nothing happened.

“There’s a round indentation underneath.” Elegant pointed at the empty spot inside the statue. “It looks like it won’t activate unless we fill that.”

“So we need a key… I wonder where it could be.” Panther mused.

“Most likely with an enemy.” Joker sighed, turning back to look for more soldiers to kill.

They turned down a hallway with large white arches separating the corridor, two guards patrolling. They snuck up on one and killed it, before dodging into the room it was blocking. It was another library, the filled shelves reaching up to the high ceilings.

Panther coughed, trying to disperse all the dust particles in the air. “Whoa, it’s so musty…”

“A library, huh? This definitely seems fishy.” Mona remarked before perusing the room.

“Whaddya mean?” Skull asked, following after it.

“Come on, it’s a library in a castle.” It stressed, giving him an unimpressed look. "There has to be some kind of secret mechanism in here.”

The others followed its example, looking around the bookcases and tables. One book caught Joker’s eyes and he picked it up to examine it. “It looks familiar…” He mused, taking out the other
two he grabbed from the earlier rooms.

Skull walked up, looking over his shoulder at the open book before recoiling in shock. “These’re the names of the volleyball team members!” He looked at the other books still on the bookcases, finally seeing the names instead of just words. “Wait, what the hell?! All of the titles are boys from our school!”

“‘Sakamoto Ryuji: The Vulgar Ape.’ There’s one here for Skull.” Mona commented, peering at the book.

Skull gritted his teeth, glaring daggers at the unopened pages. “That bastard! Who the hell does he think he is?!”

“What about the book from earlier? Are they connected?” Elegant asked, frowning at the shelves as she recognized most of the names listed on the rows and rows of books.

“Maybe I should put it on the shelf.” Joker mused, pursing his lips. "There's an empty spot right there..."

“Yeah,” Panther agreed, peering into the dark sliver of space on the ledge. “Maybe something will change.”

The leader inserted “The Slaves Book” into the slot, hearing a click once the edges hit the back.

Skull peered closer at a nearby bookcase. “‘Tracing Kamoshida’s Steps’...”Kamoshida’s Heroisms”...”Kamoshida’s Law”...?” He squinted in disbelief. “What the hell?! All these goddamn books are about Kamoshida!”

Joker sneered. What an egotistic bastard. He placed “The King’s Book” in the empty spot on the shelf and it clicked as if it had always meant to be there.

They moved onto the only shelf left with an empty spot. “There are all sorts of books here." Panther remarked, perusing the spines. “The titles don’t have any rhyme or reason to them.”

“Wait.” Elegant interjected, eyes wide as she read the titles, feeling cold fear in her stomach. “That book has Shiho-chan’s name on it...” Her eyes slid to another one. "And my name...All of the books on this shelf are about female students...!” She stated, looking at it in horror. How many were he preying on? How many girls did he touch? How...How long had this been going on without her knowing?

“Takamaki Ann: The Charming Doll.”... “Kimisawa Airi: The Lovely Rose.”..holy shit.” Skull winced, backing away from both the books and the women they talked about.

“What the heck is this?!?” Panther yelled, glaring disgustedly at the bookcase as if she wanted it to burst into fire in front of her.

Joker frowned but inserted “The Queen’s Book” in, hearing an answering click. The Charming Doll and The Lovely Rose? Those were just objects to admire. They had nothing to do with their actual personalities.

Hearing a rumbling nearby, they turned their heads to look at where it emanated from. A wall separated and slid back, revealing another altar room similar to the one Panther was held in.

Skull gaped in wonder. “Whoa, it opened up!”
Mona jumped up in glee. “Yes! Let’s take a look around.”

They slowly walked in and looked around with wide eyes. Next to the cross shaped shackle were two wooden stocks, steel handcuffs dangling ominously from the sides of the head hole. The floor was lit by candles, illuminating the rose petals on the plush carpet. Plastered all over the walls were photographs of Shiho in various poses and locations, focusing on her face, breasts, and rear.

“Ugh...The hell is this room?” Skull exclaimed, cringing while he looked around. "There’re only pictures of Suzui in here!"

Panther looked on in despair, not saying anything. Latex squeaked as she clenched her hands, her nails digging through the fabric and into her palms for every agonizing second she stared at the photos tacked to the wall.

Elegant silently placed a hand on her shoulder, trying to comfort her even though this was hard for her too. To think Kamoshida would create an altar for the girl he abused...Her lips tightened. There would be no mercy for him.

“We’ll make him pay for this.” Joker growled, narrowing his eyes at the predatory-like photos.

“Yeah...Definitely.” Panther replied determinedly, anger and conviction bleeding together in her voice. “I feel even more motivated to do this now.”

Mona looked up at her sympathetically. “I’m sure it’ll feel awful, but we should search this room.” It recommended quietly. "There has to be something in here if he was hiding it with such an elaborate trick.”

They spread out to investigate, looking around the horrible room in its corners and surfaces. “Hm?” Elegant narrowed her eyes, inspecting a small bookcase near the entrance. She perked up when she spied a golden round medal. “Guys, I found the insignia for the door!” She called the others who walked over to her. She handed it over to her leader who pocketed it.

“Hey, there’s a piece of paper there.” Panther pointed out, grabbing it and unfurling it to show it was an old map.

“Oh! It’s a different map from the one we have!” Mona remarked happily. “This is lucky...Let’s take it with us!”

Joker took out their old map and pieced them together, making one large map of the castle. They peered down at the completed atlas of the Palace, eyes roaming the paper.

Mona grinned. “Aha! Our map’s complete now!”

“So is it gonna tell us where the Treasure is?” Skull asked, looking over Joker’s shoulder.

Mona nodded, pointing to a far away point on the map that was in a U-shape. “Yeah, look. It has to be here.” It replied, frowning faintly.

“It’s a pretty unique shape for a building.” Elegant remarked thoughtfully. “Is it a tower?”

“Considering our current position...I’d say we’re about halfway there.” It declared, crossing its paws satisfactorily.

“All right! Let’s hurry over there!” Skull proclaimed, pumping a fist in excitement.
Mona shook its head. “No. Now that we know how much we have left, we can calculate the best way to pace ourselves.”

“Let’s keep exploring.” Elegant suggested. “But if anyone is tired, speak up so we can take a break. Time doesn’t really pass in this world, after all.”

The others nodded, hope blooming in them with the knowledge that they were getting close.

They sped back to the barred door from earlier, the hallways now empty of any adversaries. Joker placed the medal into the indentation, and with a click, the ram head lowered. He pulled the handle and the bars slid into the floor, opening a new path for them.

Skull grinned. “Sweet! Looks like it worked.”

“Now we can keep going!” Panther cheered.

They went through the door, walking down a short set of stairs. “Hm?” Mona peered at the nearby door at the end, the wooden panels shifting its shape. “It’s a Safe Room!”

They went in to take a short breather and sat down on the chairs. Elegant did her rounds to check for any injuries that needed treatment. When she was done, she sat down on a free chair, letting her tired legs take a rest.

Panther sighed heavily, leaning her elbows on the table.

Skull raised a brow. “Wassup?”

“My mind just keeps coming back to what Shiho must have been through...” She whispered, her jaw tightening as if she was resisting the urge to cry.

Elegant frowned. “Panther...” She looked down guiltily. She could've done more.

The pirate sat back in his seat. “We’re ‘bout halfway, so we just gotta go the other half and then we can get revenge for her!” He reassured.

Panther looked at him, and nodded. “Yeah...You’re right. Sorry for being such a downer. I’ll do my best from now on!” She declared determinedly.

Refreshed, they left and continued on.

The next room was a grandiose chapel, rose petals falling and disappearing from the air. The archways were covered in rose bushes, in a parody of wedding halls. At the very end of the chapel stood a large statue of Kamoshida with his arms held out benevolently, light shining on it from the glass stained windows from behind as if he was some sort of godly figure.

As they walked in, the entire church wavered, turning into the Shujin Academy gym, before changing back.

Panther gasped and blinked rapidly, testing her vision. "Wait, was that...the gym?"

“I get it...” Skull grunted, glaring at the statue disdainfully. "The gym’s some kinda holy place for him. He’s a god there.”

“How disgusting of an ego can he have?” Elegant murmured.

Joker didn’t say anything, sharp eyes darting around to check for enemies and escape routes. They
couldn't let their guard down, even if it seemed safe.

They walked up closer to the statue, peering up at it with animosity. "I can’t believe he can think like that..." Panther gritted her teeth angrily. "Especially after what he did to Shiho..."

Skull nodded in agreement. "God, that bastard makes me so freakin’ sick! Just you wait, Kamoshida..!" He swore, clenching a fist.

“I see...So you’re the ones who tampered with the library. It seems my time waiting here has paid off...”
Super long chapter because I want to get the Palace over with lol Thank you so much for 200 kudos and 20 bookmarks!!!

The five thieves turned their heads, looking for whoever said that.

In a splatter of black and red, a golden suit of armor appeared in front of them, barring the way to the statue. “Just as that ape there said,” the guard captain gestured to Skull. “This place is a holy ground for our great King Kamoshida. It is preposterous for miscreants like yourselves to come waltzing in like this.” It declared sternly.

“There’s nothing holy about this place!” Elegant retorted, twirling her scythe in her hand. "He’s a perverted rapist who should rot in hell!”

The Shadow convulsed and changed into a Heavenly Punisher, it's golden and silver accented armor gleaming from the glass stained windows, its wings helping it hover it in the air. “How dare you...You will pay for foolishly defying King Kamoshida...with your lives!” It shouted as it raised its sword, striking at them.

They dodged the attack, rolling farther away within the chapel and readied their weapons. “I knew this would happen!” Mona yelled. "Well, we don't have a choice! Let's take it down!"

Joker dashed up to the enemy and lashed out with his dagger, leaving a few black cuts upon the pristine armor. The Shadow shook him away with a flutter of his wings before charging up, chanting underneath his breath.

“Watch out!” Mona advised as he bounced in place. "Make sure you guard!"

The infiltrators guarded themselves in preparation, holding their weapons in front of hem. The Heavenly Punisher sent a Cleave at Skull, tearing his arms up a bit, but otherwise doing barely any damage.

“Persona!” Panther called out, Carmen appearing behind her. “Agi!” She sent a burst of flames, only slightly damaging the suit of armor with scorch marks. Elegant then pulled out her sniper rifle and shot it, knocking it down.

“Let’s rush it!” They surrounded it and performed an All-Out Attack, everyone taking a strike at the Shadow with their weapons.

“Arsene!” Joker called out, the gentleman thief appearing with a flutter of his black wings. “Eiga!” He sent a curse attack at the enemy, knocking it down once more, and the thieves rushed in. Landing from his attack, Joker adjusted his gloves before smirking as the Shadow behind him dissipated into nothing. "The show's over."

They lowered their weapons, letting them fade. “Didn’t realize those things could be that tough...” Skull panted, coughing a bit from the exhaustion.
“Yeah,” Mona nodded. “It looks like he’s making a concerted effort to stop us now.” It turned to its leader. “Joker, I’ve helped you learn a few different things so far, but there’s no more time for lessons.” It stated. “We’ll have to do our best from here on out!”

Joker nodded in understanding. It was time to get serious with what they knew.

Suddenly, four guards appeared in a burst of meta energy and began patrolling the chapel. Alarmed, the thieves hid behind the benches, peering over the back. “Crap, more of ‘em...” Skull grunted quietly.

“What should we do? Head back?” Panther asked worriedly, fingering her whip in case they would enter another battle.

“No.” Elegant shook her head, observing the Shadows as they walked the sides of the large hall. She wasn’t quitting now when they were so close. “The Treasure is up ahead, and there’s most likely a path to it somewhere. We just need to be smart about this.”

Joker looked around, his eyes catching a balcony close by. Gesturing to the others to follow him, he ran and jumped, flipping onto the next platform. They followed, making sure the guards didn’t notice them. Straightening up from their crouch, they tried entering the nearby door but to no avail.

“There has to be another way.” Elegant insisted, biting her lip, looking around the room. “There!” She pointed to a nearby balcony with a treasure chest. “If the layout is correct, there should be another balcony on the other side of the room.” She stated, pointing to the metal walkway filled with Kamoshida statues. “We can get across by walking on that.”

Joker nodded. “Good eye.” He complimented.

They jumped on the pillars, platforming to the chest. Grabbing whatever was inside, they balanced their way over the grate, crossing the room without being noticed by the Shadows below in the church. There was one guard patrolling the balcony and they ambushed it, making sure to keep quiet as it dissipated.

Brushing themselves off, they headed toward the door, swinging it open. Sneaking through the hallway, the checked the rooms for treasure and whatnot. Opening one to their right, they realize it was the locked door they couldn’t open in the chapel.

“Now we have a quicker way.” Joker mused, before continuing on.

Walking up the spiraling stairs, they opened the door, revealing a rooftop. The blood red moon hung in the dark purple sky, casting the castle with ominous light.

“Hey, take a look at that!” Skull pointed up. Next to the rooftop was a large circular tower, piercing high into the sky.

“Oh! That matches up with the map." Mona perked up. "There’s no doubt that’s the tower we’re headed for.”

“So the Treasure’s up there!” Panther cheered, their goal fast approaching.

“Hell yeah, we did it! So...where’s the entrance?” Skull asked, looking around. They noticed a door on the other side of the roof, the way populated with several crates. “All the way there?” He muttered.

As soon as he said that, four guards spawned, an aura of intimidation surrounding them as
they patrolled around the small roof. They slipped back into the doorway, making sure to keep to the shadows. “Dammit...” Skull groaned, glaring out at the patrol unit.

“It’s no surprise that security would be tight around here.” Mona remarked, observing the enemies. “But as they say, nothing ventured, nothing gained! Let’s go, Joker!”

They snuck around the guards, ambushing them one by one. They were slowly getting the hang of fighting, even Panther who had the least experience. Her passion and determination to see this through powered her through any complications.

Clearing the rooftop of any enemies, they walked up to the door and tried to open it. Tried. “Are you fucking serious..?” Skull groaned as he stomped his foot.

“Maybe we can go up on the ledges?” Panther suggested, pointing up.

They jumped up on the stacked boxes before flipping onto the ledge, running toward the looming point. They circled the platform, up around the tower, and into an open window. They jumped down into the empty room and opened the door cautiously. The room had a purple tint to the atmosphere, the checkered floors jutted haphazardly at different heights.

“Wh-What’s going on?!” Panther asked, looking around with wide eyes. She took a step back as the tiles next to her rumbled and protruded up.

“The distortion is getting stronger...The Treasure has got to be nearby!” Mona stated firmly.

They cautiously crossed the room, jumping back when parts of the floor would rise up unexpectedly. Joker slammed his shoulder against the door, but it didn’t open.

The five sighed, crossing to the other door. The hallway was lined with female upper body mannequins, their breasts jutting out of the wall provocatively. Walking through slowly, they avoided touching the statues, grimacing at the grotesque imagery. The next room they came across had much larger upper body female statues, acting as pillars. Cringing in disgust, they opened the door closest. It revealed a platform with four female statues and nothing else around.

“Huh...What’s this?” Panther inquired, looking at it curiously.

“It looks like some kind of elevator.” Elegant mused, walking up to the control.

The four got on after her and she pulled the mechanism. With a start, the platform descended all the way to the bottom, stopping at a certain level. They got off and looked around. Down the hallway was a large portrait of Kamoshida topless, grinning “handsomely”, and down the other path was another elevator.

Joker narrowed his eyes at the portrait. Why would it be here? He walked up to the large frame and pushed, revealing the foyer.

“Hm, this place looks familiar.” Skull commented, eyes scanning the area.

Mona looked at him incredulously. “It’s the entrance hall! Have you already forgotten?!”

“I didn’t realize we would end up here...” Panther mused, amazed at the castle’s design.

“Hey, look!” Skull pointed out to the empty hall, a silence pervading the air. “There used to be tons of soldiers wanderin’ around, but I don’t see any of ‘em now...”
“The other elevator probably leads to the dungeons then.” Elegant concluded.

Walking to the second elevator, they pressed the button but a Shadow appeared instead. Killing it, they took the items from the treasure chest it was guarding, and left back up into the tower.

The next door opened into another cavernous room, a single guard patrolling. They quickly took it out, and walked into the safe room for a breather. Standing next to the table, Joker looked at his teammates. “How’s our progress?” He asked.

Skull sighed, stretching his arms out. “We finally got in the tower...It’s startin’ to feel like we’re closin’ in on the end...” He commented.

Mona nodded. “Yeah, the distortion in here is particularly strong. We should be getting close to the Treasure.” It explained to its fellow thieves.

“But that means the enemies will be stronger too, right..? We better be prepared for that.” Panther warned, pursing her lips worriedly.

Joker nodded. “How is everyone, then?”

“I’m good to go!” Skull replied, grinning.

“Me, too! I want to finish this.” Panther nodded determinedly.

“I’m feeling pretty good!” Mona added, jumping on the table.

Elegant smiled. ‘I’m a little sore but I can continue.’

“Alright then, let’s go.” Joker commanded, pivoting on his heel.

“Hold on.” Mona interrupted, holding out a paw. “We have five members now, and it’ll be hard to sneak around with so many people. Joker should decide who should be in the advance group, while the last one should stay as backup.”

Panther tilted her head. “So we should have four people in the advance group?”

Mona nodded. “That’s right. We should have four people as the first line of attack. I’ll volunteer as support for now, since you’ll need my guidance.”

The teenagers nodded in understanding. The feline was the most knowledgeable concerning this world, and they needed its advice.

They left the safe room, immediately darting behind a pillar to ambush a nearby Shadow. After taking care of it, they went up to the locked treasure chest. Joker gestured to Elegant, who stepped forward and unlocked it, taking out a new accessory and handing it to him.

Looking around, they noticed what should have been stairs, but most of the steps were laying on the stone floor. Hesitantly taking a step, the pieces flew up, completing the stairs underneath their feet.

They walked up to the next floor. It was filled with naked female statues, obstructing most of the rotund room. The spaces that were open had Shadows patrolling back and forth.

Hiding behind one of the statues, they ambushed the Shadows, killing them. There were two staircases leading up to an upper platform, but one was barred with golden spikes. Taking the other way, the thieves moved up to another staircase.
Opening the door, they traveled up the stairway that circled, leading to a flat hallway, a red carpet covering the stone floor. To their left was a large open room, missing a floor. Instead, there were metal grates held up with large metal chains from the ceiling. To the side of the entrance was a large bust of Kamoshida, grinning widely.

“Ugh, seein’ this face pisses me off every time...” Skull grumbled.

Joker started walking into the room, the others moving to follow him. He suddenly jumped back, a giant blade swinging down at where he just was.

Panther gasped, taking a couple more steps back. “Whoa, that was close..!”

“Are you OK, Joker?!” Elegant asked worriedly, holding her hands up in preparation for a heal spell.

Joker nodded. ”Yeah, I’m fine.” He breathed out, heart pounding at the close call. Off with his head, huh.

The entire walkway now had axes blocking the path, swinging ominously above the grates. There was no way they could go through here without sustaining serious injuries.

“It’s a classic security measure.” Mona explained. “My tail might be in danger if we try to force our way through.” It shook its head dejectedly.

“Oh yeah, same for Panthers. So...what do we do?” Skull questioned, furrowing his brows at the new obstacle. ”No way we’re gettin’ through here as is.”

“What about down the hall?” Elegant suggested, turning around.

They tried walking down the hallway but a few feet away from the trap corridor, the ground erupted, too high for them to climb over. Sighing, the phantom thieves walked back to the entrance of the trap room.

Joker tapped his chin, his eyes observing the giant bust. Why would it be here? And why would there only be one? Could it be like the one in the dungeons where it was actually some sort of mechanism?

“Oh, you think that thing’s controllin’ it?” Skull asked, resting his thumbs in his pockets.

He nodded, walking up to the statue and tugging on the jaw handle a couple of times. ‘There’s no reaction..’ He thought, frowning faintly. But it pulled, so it must be something.

“I didn’t think it would be that easy.” Mona crossed its arms. “We’ll probably need some kind of key for it...”

"We gotta look for a key again?" Skull groaned, slouching his back. "What a pain in the ass...”

“Where would it be though?” Panther mused, trying to think. "There weren’t any suspicious rooms on the way here."

“Probably a special enemy.” Elegant suggested, peering at the statue with a frown. “Let’s go back down and take a look?"”

Joker nodded, crossing his arms. “Agreed. If there aren’t any special rooms, then it has to be an enemy that has it.” Just like his old video games.
“Then we just need to look for Shadows like that and defeat them!” Panther replied cheerfully.

They all nodded and went down the stairs again, arriving on one of the lower floors. The room was filled again with more soldiers, with one of them dressed in gold. Killing all of them, they found a gem that was named “The Randy Right Eye.”

“H-Hey, that Shadow did have something...” Skull scrutinized the object in Joker’s hand. "But what the hell is this? An eye?"

“That’s it!” Elegant exclaimed, snapping her fingers in realization. “The bust was missing its eyes! If we put them in, it’ll activate the mechanism and we can cross the bridge!” She said hopefully.

“You’re right!” Panther agreed. "Now that I think about it, it didn’t have eyes…"

Skull scowled. “Ugh, how much grosser can he get? So this is gonna stop those things, huh?”

“Well, we’ll need one more.” Mona stated. “Another guard captain probably has it. Let’s try checking the other floors, Joker!”

Going down one more flight, they noticed from the top of the stairs that there were three golden suits of armor patrolling and they crouched down near the floor.

“Crap...They all look like high-rankin’ soldiers!” Skull whispered fervently. "Are we gonna have to beat all of ’em?!"

“That would work, but there should only be one actual guard captain among them.” Mona replied quietly, observing the enemies. “Do you have any way to tell them apart, Joker?”

He nodded. His “third eye” sense could see one was much stronger than the other two. “That one.” Joker pointed. “The one that’s patrolling through the door and back.”

They snuck around the other two, ignoring them, and ambushed the guard captain. Killing it, it dropped a “Lusty Left Eye” on the floor and Joker picked it up, putting it in his pocket.

“That’s it!” Skull whispered. “Let’s go stop those scythes!”

Rushing back to the trap corridor, Joker inserted the gems into the empty eye holes in the bust. The gems glowed, powering up the mechanism, and he pulled down the jaw. After a couple of swings, the scythes slowed to a stop, sheathing into the ceiling and the way finally was clear for them.

Skull pumped his fist in victory. “All right! We can get across!”

They ran down the metal grates, grabbing the treasure on the side before continuing up another staircase. They entered a hall that was filled with Kamoshida busts lining the dividers, parts of the floor having eroded away due to the distortion.

Looking around, they spotted the same floating stairs mechanism and walked up to it. Unlike last time, the stairs didn’t appear in front of them, the steps lying motionless around the room.

“Huh?” Skull uttered, scratching the back of his head. "Why ain't it movin'?"

“Hmph. You are gravely mistaken if you think stairs will appear for you whenever you’d like.”
Startled at the unexpected voice, the five thieves turned to look behind them. A guard captain had spawned without their knowing, glaring directly at them.

“So this guy’s stopping them.” Mona remarked, smirking slightly.

The captained turned to Elegant and let out a low hum. “Oh..? Aren’t you the new princess?”


He hmphed. “So it seems. It was foolish of me to think you were her. This majestic tower penetrating the sky represents the admirable King Kamoshida’s most sacred place.” The Shadow droned, brandishing its sword. “It is nowhere for children like yourselves! Prepare for your punishment!”

“What kind of selfish reasoning is that?!” Panther argued, glaring at the enemy. “The only one who needs to be punished is-”

She didn’t finish, for the enemy had convulsed and turned into a horrific green phallus shaped monster, the hood of the penis acting as its brows. “A-Ahhhhhhhh!” She screamed in disgust.

Cringing, Elegant looked away from the vulgar sight in front of her. Now there were penis Shadows? They couldn't even be nice looking penises?

“It’s coming!” Mona warned, jumping back with its scimitar.

The Shadow, Torn King of Desire, stared at Panther underneath the hood of its tip and it began drooling. Disgusted, Panther shrieked. “Carmen!” The beauteous Persona appearing. “Agi!” The fires damaged the enemy slightly, but didn’t affect it as much as she wanted.

Skull ran up and attacked it with his bat, but somehow missed the enemy with each strike. “W-What the?! I missed!” He gritted his teeth.

“Let me!” Elegant shouted, summoning her Persona. “Kouha!” She snapped her fingers, sending a ray of light at the enemy, damaging it greatly.

Joker followed up with a couple of slashes with his dagger, knocking it down. They rushed in and killed it, letting it scream out in pain as it disappeared into nothing.

“OK! We can keep movin’ now!” Skull grinned, running for the stairs.

“I-I’m so done with this place...” Panther cringed, hugging herself.

“Same.” Elegant agreed fervently, equally rattled. “That was gross...Who did he think he was, calling me “princess”?” She grimaced.

“Hang in there, Panther, Elegant.” Mona reassured. “We’re almost at the Treasure.”

The thieves continued on, running upwards now that the stairs were functioning. At the very top of
the tower next to the stairs was a large ornate door, guarded with two female statues. Joker tried opening it, but it was locked.

Shrugging, they continued on to the end of the hallway where a Safe Room was. Entering the small but secure area, they sat down tiredly on the chairs. “Aren’t we gettin’ pretty close to the top of the tower?” Skull asked excitedly, leaning forward in his seat.

Mona nodded. “Yeah, the Treasure’s presence is very near now. We should be just about there!”

“It’s almost time...” Panther murmured, clenching her fists on her lap. "My heart’s starting to beat a little faster.”

“We’ve gotten close, but...” Elegant paused. “I doubt we can just steal the Treasure without Kamoshida noticing. It’s his most valuable object, there’s no way he wouldn’t know.” She looked at Mona, who nodded in confirmation. ”We should prepare as much as we can.”

The others nodded, frowning determinedly. “How is everyone?” Joker asked.

“I overestimated myself, but we’re close enough I can push on.” Mona replied awkwardly.

Skull leaned back in his seat, propping his feet on the table. "I'm good to go!"

Panther nodded. "I'm a little tired, but I can keep going!"

“...My hands are starting to hurt again.” Elegant grimaced, experimentally clenching her fingers.

“From earlier?” Joker asked worriedly. Shouldn't they have healed in here with their magics?

She nodded. “...I don’t regret it, though. We should keep going.” She replied resolutely. She wasn't going to let this little bit of pain stop her now. She had to do something to show she was sorry. Sorry for not noticing his abuse of the students. Sorry for not noticing him pressure Ann into a relationship. Sorry for not being able to save Shiho.

“Elegant...” Panther whispered, staring at her with gratitude and hints of admiration. “Thank you again for trying to save Shiho. You're so strong...” She looked at their leader determinedly. "Let’s keep going, Joker!"

Elegant flinched, looking away. She shouldn't be thanked. She didn't do anything.

They left the safe room and observed the giant doors once more for a way in. A glimmer of light caught his eye, and Joker looked up to the left. There was a windowless square above one of the statues.

Jumping on the female statue, he gripped the next platform and flipped himself up then jumped through the opening. The thieves jumped down on the balcony, now inside the large hall at the top of the tower.

Skull grinned as they crouched behind the railing. “All right, we’re in!”

“Quiet down, you idiot!” Mona shushed him.

They peered over the railing, seeing the distorted king at his throne, a contingent of soldiers lined up before him in the long hall.

“Oh shit, it's Kamoshida..!” Skull exclaimed quietly, scowling down at the Palace ruler.
“And a ton of soldiers...” Panther added, biting her lip worriedly.

“How have you not captured the intruders yet?!” Kamoshida yelled, angrily glaring at his guards.

A soldier got on his hands and knees, bowing for forgiveness. "I apologize, my liege!"

He turned to the other guards, who also quickly got on their knees.

Mona snickered. “I bet he’d never imagine we’re in the same room as him. Come on, let’s keep moving.”

They snuck around the balcony, all the way into the two doors at the very end of the hall without being noticed by any of the Shadows.

They emerged into a dark stone hall, a huge contrast from the brightly lit throne room, and there was another large door at the end. “This sturdy-lookin’ door’s pretty promisin’. Let’s head inside!” Skull insisted, opening the door.

It revealed a large stone room that was filled to the brim with gold. The floor wasn’t even visible under all the shine and glimmer of wealth. Crowns, jewels, necklaces, all sorts of accouterments littered the ground in a disgustedly prosperous mountain of gold. In the very middle of the room floated a glowing white ball of energy, wavering in place.

“Whoa, what is this place?! Holy shit!” Skull exclaimed, looking at all the treasure with wide eyes. “That Treasure thing’s gotta be in here!” He grinned, making grabby motions with his hands.

Elegant eyed the glowing ball curiously, ignoring the obnoxious currency. “What is that?”

They all walked up to examine it. “It’s...floating in the air.” Panther observed.

Mona jumped up on a grail, grinning happily at the object. “Hehe...That’s the Treasure. We finally found it!”

“Are you sure?” Joker questioned, looking at it dubiously. How was this a Treasure? Did Kamoshida like balls of light? “That cloudy thing..?”

Mona turned to the humans. “Just hold on a second. I was planning on telling you more once we made it this far.” It stated, twitching its ears. “Simply finding the Treasure isn’t enough. We’ll need to make it materialize before we can steal it.”

The looked at it curiously. “Whaddya mean?” Skull asked, leaning against a large chalice.

Mona crossed its arms. “Desires have no physical form by nature. Hence, we’ll first need to make the real person aware that their desires are in fact a Treasure. Once they’re conscious that their desires might be stolen, the Treasure will finally show itself.”
Panther crossed her arms and tilted her head. “But how do we do that?”

Mona let out a purr. “We warn them. Tell them, 'We’re going to steal your heart.'”

Skull perked up, eyes shining with excitement. “So we’re gonna send a calling card?! That’s totally what a phantom thief would do!”

Mona nodded its head, equally excited. “Once we do that, the Treasure will appear for certain!” It proclaimed. “...I think.”

He deflated, looking at the cat with an unimpressed frown. “That again...?” He muttered, shaking his head. “Either way, sounds like it’s worth givin’ it a shot!”

The feline jumped in place and looked over at their leader. “Our infiltration route is secure. All that’s left now is to pump out a calling card in reality, then come back to take the Treasure!”

“This is it, then.” Elegant stated, a determined expression on her partially covered face.

“It took so long, but we’re finally here. Let’s do this.” Joker declared, looking at his teammates. They were going to right this wrong.

They all nodded. “Once we send out the calling card, there will be no turning back.” Mona mentioned. “Just let me know when you’re ready. We’ll head back to the roof and send out that calling card!”

“We should leave now that we’ve gotten here.” Elegant stated, idly grasping her arm. “We’re all pretty tired, and we need to prepare.”

“Let’s head back.” Joker commanded, jerking his head toward the door.

They snuck out of the throne room and into the Safe Room down the hallway, using the app to transport them back to the entrance of the castle. “So the app remembers the Safe Rooms and we can move back and forth between them?” Panther marveled. “That’s pretty neat.”

“Yeah, it saves us time and energy when we come back.” Mona grinned. “It’ll be perfect for when we come back to steal the Treasure!”

Joker eyed the jail cell door that was guarded by Justine, the young parole officer spinning her clipboard in boredom, and his eyes darted to his teammates who didn't acknowledge the little girl. Could they not see her..?

They walked out of the courtyard and passed the bridge.

“You have returned from Kamoshida’s Palace. Thank you for your hard work.”

The four humans and one cat appeared back in the real world, still in the same alley they disappeared from. Looking at each other, Ryuji gestured up to the top of the school. They silently moved up to the rooftop, no one else stopping them in the hallways at this late afternoon hour.

Sitting down, they suddenly felt all the exhaustion piling on them. “I didn’t know we could still come up here.” Ann remarked, looking around.
Ryuji sighed, sitting backwards and straddling his chair. “All we gotta do now is steal the Treasure that shows up, yeah?”

“But we need to send the calling card first.” Ann twirled a ponytail, looking at their leader. "When should we do it?"

Akira shook his head. “Not yet. First, we need to prepare ourselves.” He idly twisted a strand of hair. "Like Airi-chan said before, we might have to fight the Shadow version of Kamoshida if we can’t move the Treasure, and since it’s his Palace, there’s no doubt he’s strong.”

Airi nodded. “First, we’ll need to find better firearms for all of us.” She bit her lip worriedly. "What we have is all right for now, but our basic guns won’t do much against stronger enemies.”

Ryuji perked up. “Oh, you talkin’ about guns? I know a kick-ass place!” He exclaimed, grinning at the others.

“In that case, you can handle that side of things.” Mona announced approvingly. “The only other thing would be stocking up on medicine. Fatigue is unavoidable in a Palace.”

Airi nodded in agreement. “You’re right. We also used up all our bandages and medicine today, so we have nothing left.” She stated grimly. What they used today were common pharmaceutical drugs that could be bought from any drugstore, but they only healed up to a certain point in the Metaverse. They needed stronger supplies.

“Where can we get medicine, then?” Ann asked worriedly.

She smiled. “Don’t worry, I know just the place. Dr. Takemi has a clinic in Yongenjaya.” She turned to the transfer student. “I’ll take you today, Akira-kun.”

Akira nodded. Seemed she knew more that could help the group. “Then it’s settled.” He announced. “I’ll let you guys know when we should send the calling card.”

Ryuji rubbed his chin. “What should it look like?” He rubbed his hands excitedly. “I’ll make it something cool!”

“You can all come over to my house to plan this.” Airi offered. “I...actually forgot to ask, would you guys be free tomorrow after school?” She asked shyly, a slight blush on her cheeks.

The three humans and cat looked at each other questioningly. “Yeah, of course. Wassup?” Ryuji asked, lacing his hands behind his head.

Biting her lip, cheeks stained with embarrassment, she looked away. “It’s my birthday tomorrow.”

“Huh?!” They all gasped, staring at her in shock.

Ryuji quickly stood up, knocking his chair back. “Shit! You’re right! I can’t believe I forgot…!” He gaped. “Of course I’m gonna come!” He pumped his fist excitedly.

Airi smiled at him happily. The ex-runner was always up for food and celebrations, even back in middle school.

Ann covered her mouth in surprise. “Oh wow, with all that happened, it completely slipped my mind. I remember back in middle school I gave you a dress as a present.” She grinned teasingly, a nostalgic glint in her eyes. "Do you still have that?"
“Of course I do!” Airi exclaimed. “It’s still in perfect condition.” She grinned sheepishly. “Not that I can fit it anymore...” Well, in her chest area at least. They grew pretty fast in the last two years.

She looked over at Akira. “Would you be free, Akira-kun?” She asked hesitantly, smiling hopefully at him. It would be nice if he would come as well. He seemed lonely but he was a nice person.

Akira perked up and smiled back. “Of course. It’s your birthday, after all.”

The class president clapped her bandaged hands together in bliss. “Then it’s settled!” She cheered. “My house, tomorrow after school!”

Morgana purred, looking at her with adoration. “Should we bring anything, Lady Airi?”

She shook her head. “Nope. Just your appetites.” She winked.

Its ears perked up. “Are you cooking for us?” It asked excitedly, swishing its tail back and forth.

She nodded happily. “Let me know if any of you have allergies!”

Ann blinked. “But wait, it’s your birthday. Why are you cooking for us?”

“I just want to, OK?” Airi answered softly. “It would be a great present from you guys if you would enjoy my cooking.” She finished, blushing a bit from that confession.

The last time someone ate her cooking was five years ago and they threw up. She had improved by leaps and bounds since then and she never threw up eating her own cooking. She wanted to show them her appreciation and making food was cheaper than buying it. "Think of it as thanks for doing all this phantom thief business with me. I could never have gotten this far without you guys."

Ann softened. "Yeah...Of course. Anything for Shiho." She clenched her fists. "We're going to make sure she'll be avenged, and we'll use this as a meeting for the calling card!"

“Hell yeah! I can't to try your food!” Ryuji grinned excitedly. “Then we'll beat that smug bastard up and steal his Treasure!”

The others nodded in agreement. Morgana jumped on one of the tables, sitting down. “Since we've decided for tomorrow, I should let you know I can’t contact you guys from inside a Palace, so I’ll stay in this world.” It announced to its human teammates. “That being said, I’ll need someone to take care of me. I’m personally nominating Lady Ann!” It purred happily.

“Wait, what?!” Ann yelped in surprise. “There’s no way I can house you, I’m never home!”

The feline’s ears drooped. “Then...Lady Airi?” It looked over to the class president hopefully.

She smiled sadly. “I would, Morgana. Unfortunately, I’m also never home for half the week.” She informed reluctantly. "It wouldn’t be fair to you."

The cat sighed. “Then fine, I’ll stay with Akira. You should feel honored.”

Stiffening in surprise, Akira looked at the cat hesitantly. “Me?” He sputtered, glancing over at Ryuji. He'd never had a pet before.

Ryuji shrugged. “This’s all you. There’s no way I can have him at my place.” He stated, giving him a look of pity.
Akira sweatdropped and sighed. “All right, fine.” He muttered. “Let’s all exchange contact info with Takamaki-san.”

They all took out their phones and sent each other their numbers. “See you two tomorrow, then?” Akira asked, putting his hands in his pockets.

“Yep! Tomorrow after school.” Ryuji confirmed.

Ann waved. “See you guys then!”

Chapter End Notes

To explain the birthday thing, I know it's super awkward timing in the story, but my birthday was April 16 and because of new health problems, I didn't really have the best of times. So please excuse my shameless fantasy lmao I promise it won't be too bumpy in the overall storyline!
“Dr. Takemi’s office is actually a couple meters away from Leblanc.” Airi explained to Akira, the two students walking out of the station and into the alleyways leading to their neighborhood. “A lot of people in the neighborhood say that she doesn’t really do her job and that she sells illegal drugs, but that’s not true.” She shook her head exasperatedly. “She’s a competent doctor and takes her job seriously, even if it doesn’t seem so. I’ve volunteered there once.”

Airi tilted his head, his hand in his pockets. “How was it, working for her?”

“It was very interesting.” Airi smiled nostalgically. It was an entirely new experience to be wanted at a clinic instead of being shooed away for being a nuisance. “I learned a lot from her in just one day, like dressing cuts and burns. She’s pretty no nonsense.”

They arrived at the entrance of the building across from the supermarket, the clinic being on the third floor. “Should I go in with you?” She asked.

Akira nodded. “If you don’t mind.” He replied, adjusting his glasses nervously. He never usually went to the doctor’s.

Morgana popped its head out of his bag. “Now, how can we get her to give us some medicine..?” It asked quietly.

He pursed his lips. “We’ll have to make something up.”

They called the elevator and went up to the third floor. Getting out into the dim hallway, there were two doors on either side. One listed, “Takemi Medical Clinic” and the other was blank.

Opening the clinic door, they entered a small brightly lit waiting room, a small bathroom at the end. Next to the door was the receptionist window, where a blue haired lady in a lab coat sat. She was decorated in a spiked collar with several hanging chains, a short gray dress, and black high stiletto heels.

The doctor languidly dragged her eyes away from the monitor in front of her and up to them. “..Is this your first visit?” She asked Akira monotonously.

He nodded. She seemed all right so far...

“Hello, Dr. Takemi.” Airi greeted the older woman.

“Oh, Kimisawa-chan. It’s been a while.” Takemi’s face softened. “Have you come to volunteer again?”

She shook her head. “I’m here just for him, if you don’t mind.” She gestured at her classmate.

The doctor lifted an eyebrow. “Oh? Just for him, huh.” She repeated, making the class president blush a bit at the wording. “So, what are you here for today?” She asked, looking at Akira.

He adjusted his glasses awkwardly. What could he say? “..My body feels lethargic.”
She stared at him with hooded eyes. “…Fine. Please head to the exam room.” She relented, getting out of her chair.

The three sat in the examination room, Akira describing his symptoms, and Takemi occasionally writing on her clipboard. Airi stared concernedly at a poster on the wall, showing a happy teddy bear stabbed with vaccines. Was that child friendly?

“…In a case like yours, it’s usually just due to stress.” Takemi theorized, looking at her patient. “I’m going to prescribe you some pain relievers, OK?”

Akira nodded, relieved that he can get supplies so easily. That took care of their medicine in the Metaverse.

The doctor paused, glancing at her screen. “Actually, I still need to restock those…” She mused. “So let’s go with sleeping pills instead. Sleep is the best medicine anyway.” She turned to the male student. “Which type of pill do you want, a sweet-tasting one or a bitter one?”

He pursed his lips. “I want painkillers.” He stated firmly.

Airi fidgeted slightly.

Takemi looked at the two, unimpressed. “All right, why don’t we stop beating around the bush.” She commented, slightly narrowing her brown eyes at them. “You’re not sick at all, are you? I’m not as dumb as I look, you know.”

Taken aback, the bespectacled teenager frantically searched his mind for an excuse. How to save this…?

The doctor sighed. “…I’m guessing you’re here because you heard the rumors about me, huh?” She closed her eyes tiredly.

He blinked. “…Are the rumors true?” He asked quietly.

“Yep. I’m the quack.” She replied flatly. “I have so many new patients with ulterior motives, so I knew you had one, too.”

He looked away, slightly embarrassed at being caught.

“I guess high school kids have it tough nowadays too, huh?” Takemi sighed. “Fine. I’ll prescribe you some medication.”

Blinking, Akira looked at her in surprise.

“But only medication that will help you recover your health.” She added, scribbling something on her clipboard. “I guess it’s fine. You seem pretty earnest, and you don’t look like you’ll be any trouble.” The doctor shrugged. “This is my private practice. All the medicine I dispense is original.”

“Her medicine is the best.” Airi butted in. “They’re more effective than the mass produced drugs at pharmacies, and they work almost instantly.” She grinned proudly.

Takemi gave her a smirk in response, pleased at the compliments. “Yes, I have a license to make my own formulas. You’ve likely seen them being sold at various hospitals.” The doctor paused and
gave the transfer student a stern look. “It’s your responsibility to take care of yourself. So,” She softened. “If that’s OK with you, stop by anytime.”

“That’ll really help.” Akira nodded, smiling slightly. No nonsense, indeed.

“Great. It’s nice that you’re so quick on the uptake... Saves me the hassle.” Takemi commented, waving her clipboard around. She peered closer at the two students. “You’re a pretty weird kid, you know?” She mused. “I wonder what you’re going to use the medicine for.”

Akira sweatdropped, squirming slightly in his seat.

“Make meth, of course.” Airi stated with a straight face.

He turned to look at her incredulously. Why would she say that now when they just got permission?

Noticing his look, she grinned sheepishly. “I’m joking.”

Raising an eyebrow at her old volunteer, Takemi shrugged. “Well, as long as you don’t cause me any trouble, it’s not my problem... Here,” She handed him a list. “This is all I’ve got right now. Come back in a week once I’ve restocked.”

Gray eyes roamed the list, not really knowing what any of the medications were. They were not at all like the ones he’d buy in pharmacies.

Airi scooted closer, peering over his shoulder. “I’d recommend the 100mg of Recov-R, it speeds up recovery better than the 50mg.” She advised, pointing to the specific medication.

Akira nodded, letting her take over. They pooled their designated team budget together and bought as many of each as they could, mostly Recov-R's and Revivadrins.

Takemi nodded, handing them the plastic bag full of drugs. “...Take care.” She murmured languidly.

Airi waved bye, and the two students walked out, pausing as they left the examination room. Standing in the waiting room was a middle aged man in a suit, tapping his feet impatiently. They moved out of the way and he pushed the door open, closing it behind him.

The two Persona users glanced at each other, not really knowing how to respond to what just happened.

“...What’s the reason for your visit?” They heard through the door. “Do you have a cold? Stomachache? Athlete’s foot? Whatever it is, you’ll need to take a number...” Takemi droned on.

“Enough of this!” The man shouted.

They stared wide-eyed at the door. After a moment, they leaned in closer to eavesdrop.

“You’re the only one who could have developed that type of medicine.” The man exclaimed forcefully.

“I’m afraid I have no idea what you’re talking about...” The doctor responded boredly.

“Don’t play dumb with me. Rumor has it, it’s a drug so potent it can give a person unlimited power.”
Airi raised her eyebrows. Unlimited power? What kind of video games had this guy been playing?

“Really? That’s news to me.” Takemi retorted.

They pressed closer to the door. “Developing experimental drugs, medicine, and herbal remedies violates all health regulations. Are you attempting to create a super-stimulant? A drug like that will only become a social issue.”

“You’re really persistent, you know that? I’m just a quack…” Takemi replied quietly.

“The police may not be taking action, but I imagine the media will soon pick up on it. You intend to ruin my reputation again, huh? You’re a disgrace to the medical community.” The male yelled condescendingly.

Wide eyed, the two students looked at each other.

“What’s with the look? That was your mistake, was it not?” He asked mockingly. “I won’t be responsible for your criminal actions. Dispose of that “medicine” immediately and resign.” He stated resolutely.

Airi glared at the door. How dare he! Coming in here to threaten a doctor who was just trying to do her job.

“The name “Takemi Tae” will never-Hey, is somebody there?!” The man yelled toward the door, the handle turning.

Panicking, the two teenagers quickly left the office, running to the elevator. They stopped once they were outside the building, sighing in relief. “Geez, they almost caught us.” Morgana sweatdropped. “Sounded like they were talking about something dangerous. Could that woman be hiding some extra strong medicine?”

Akira adjusted his glasses. “We should use that.” If it could help them take Kamoshida's Treasure, then it'd be useful to have.

“I agree.” Morgana cheered, tail swishing back and forth. ”If it’s that strong, it might come in handy at the Palace.”

“We don’t have access to that medicine yet, remember?” Airi chided. As if the good doctor was going to let them buy it from her when she barely let them buy pain killers. “I hope Dr. Takemi is OK...That man seemed really aggressive.” She pursed her lips worriedly. “What did he mean, though? About her ruining his reputation “again”? I only know she makes her own medicine...”

Shrugging, Akira placed his hands in his pockets. “Let’s ask the next time we visit.” He suggested. His phone rang. Taking it out, he saw it was from Ryuji.

R: You know there’s a shop in Shibuya that sells model guns.
R: I’d be glad to take you if you want!
Ak: Now?
R: Yeah! If you’re busy, we can go Sunday or something.
R: Not tomorrow since it’s Airi’s bday.
R: You gonna bring a present?
Ak: All right, I’ll meet you at in front of the station.
Ak: I hope so.
R: Let’s try to find something while we’re out in Shibuya!
Putting his phone away, he gave her an apologetic smile. “Ryuji just asked to meet me at Shibuya, so I’ll be going now.”

“OK then, I’ll see you tomorrow!” Airi smiled, waving his apology. “I need to do some shopping, anyway.” She tilted her head curiously. “Is there anything you would like to eat?”

He grasped his chin, humming thoughtfully. What did he like to eat? His eyes slid to the side, looking away. “Maybe...something you enjoy a lot?” He smiled a bit shyly, shrugging. He just wanted to know more about her...

“Oh.” Airi breathed, blinking in surprise. “W-Well, OK! I’ll be sure to make it extra special for you, then.” She smiled, a slight hue in her cheeks.

“I want fatty tuna!” Morgana exclaimed loudly, breaking the slight awkwardness in the air.

Airi blinked, then laughed. “OK then, quality sashimi for Morgana!” She gave the feline some scritches behind its ears. “I’ll do my best to live up to expectations.”

Morgana purred, happy to get some attention, before going back into the bag.

Akira smiled back, giving her a wave of goodbye before turning to walk back to the station.
Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

Warning: implied rape, mentions of abuse, mentions of assault, etc. I'll be putting this at the beginning of every chapter just in case!

Airi stared after his back as he walked further away, before clapping her hands together. “Well, let’s get ingredients.” She told herself determinedly, walking over to the supermarket just a few feet to her left.

Grabbing a basket at the entrance, she perused the vegetable section first. “Hmm...maybe some string beans?” She murmured, inspecting some greens. Selecting a large bunch, she moved on to the baking aisle, grabbing packets of flour, cream, and icing sugar. She walked to the meat section, grabbing several packets of thinly sliced beef.

“Oh!” She blinked, remembering the earlier conversation. “Fatty tuna for Morgana, right right right.”

She moved over to the fish section, looking for choice fishes. “Excuse me!” She called out to one of the fish market employees. “Four black throat sea perches and this one chunk of tuna, please.” She requested politely, pointing at the fishes she wanted.

“Sure!” The employee replied jovially. “The best way to cook sea perches is with some salt and grilling it!” They advised, wrapping up the fish and putting them into styrofoam boxes to keep fresh, before handing it over to her.

“Thank you!” Airi gave them the appropriate amount of money, about ¥2500, and got in line at the cash register.

“¥3450, please.” The cashier stated once they scanned all her purchases.

She winced. There goes yesterday’s paycheck. Resigned, Airi handed it over and grabbed her groceries.

“Thank you very much! Have a nice day!” The cashier called out as she walked out of the supermarket.

Getting to her front door, she struggled to get her keys out while holding so many bags. After a couple of minutes, she finally gained entry into her house. Quickly taking off her shoes, Airi hurriedly walked to the kitchen counter and dropped her bags next to her mint plant.

“Phew.” She sighed heavily, rotating her shoulders.

Rustling through her bags, she took all the meat and fish products and stored them in her fridge. Putting on an apron and washing her hands, she started preparing some of the ingredients for tomorrow’s meal. She wouldn't have time tomorrow to do all this so it was better to get a head start now.

She whipped the cream, soaked the beef in a sugar sesame oil marinade, and cleaned the guts from
the fishes before storing them all back in the fridge. There. Now all they needed was to be cooked tomorrow.

Taking out a couple of eggs, she quickly whipped herself an omurice for dinner, hungry after such a long day. The only sounds heard were from the clinking of her chopsticks against the bowl, echoing through the empty home.

After taking a long hot shower, she completed her homework in the Study before reluctantly turning her laptop on. She stared bleakly at the new bills emailed to her from the electricity and water companies.

She clenched her hands, her nails starting to cut into the bandages. 'There’s no end to them.' She thought resignedly. Entering her credit information from a special account, she paid them off for another month.

Sighing heavily, she leaned back into her chair and closed her eyes. Was this really what being an adult was like? There was more freedom but so many more restrictions. She only had this much because of how hard she fought for it, but there were those who never had to lift a finger. At least she didn't have to pay taxes...

Getting up to move to her bedroom, she took a recov-R gel from her dresser. Sitting down on the bed, she unwrapped her hands and knees gingerly, showing scabbed cuts and bruises from when she had scraped them on the school roof. They had healed inside the Palace, but not out here.

Slowly rubbing the medicine into her injuries, they quickly dissipated, the skin knitting together, leaving it pink and sensitive.

“I can’t -hic- take it anymore...No one cares that -hic- he’s hurting us, hurting me...”

She flinched at the memory of earlier, her hands gripping the sides of her head. "No..." She whispered. "I'm sorry..."

Her nails dug into her scalp. She clenched her eyes, trying to stop the tears, but all she could see behind her eyelids were Shiho's terrified face, her eyes filled with hysteria. Her cries for death rung in her ears, her need to get rid of herself because someone they were supposed to trust violated her in the worst ways possible.

When Shiho's shirt had ridden up from dangling at the wrist, Airi had glimpsed at the lingering bruises of hand prints peeking from the waistband of her skirt.

Her heart felt heavy at the memory. It wasn't supposed to end like this...not again. When was she able to finally help someone? Someone who wouldn't end up hurt because of her mistakes, her weakness, her human flaws...

"Just let me die!!!"

Shiho's cries were slowly replaced with the sound of wood cracking. The matron yelled at her, holding a hammer in one hand.

"You deserve this! The Lord will not accept a sinner like you!"

Flesh met flesh as he backhanded her, anger and hurt in his eyes, tears spilling down his chubby
"Shut up! Shut up shut up shut up shut up! God will choose me! He'll come back for me!"

His screams of rage melted into blissful silence as the brunette knelt next to her, holding out an ice pack.

"Hey...Are you OK?"

The sound of hitting the floor assaulted her ears, her shoulder bruising from the impact.

"You dumb bitch! I'm going to kill you!"

A spray of crimson spewed out like a water fountain, her chokes sounding louder than the blood pounding in her ears.

"Airi! RUN!"

Tears slipped down her face, wetting the discarded bandages in her lap. Of course those memories would come back too. The police had told her it wasn't her fault, but wasn't it? She could've done something, anything. Maybe it would've helped, maybe it would've made it worse, but at least she could say she had the strength to rebel.

Takase had told her it wasn't her fault during those nights when she woke up screaming, soothing her tears with his old baseball shirt. It had helped, but...

She had to remind herself that he wasn't here to do that anymore. It had been a long time since anyone had comforted her. "I'm sorry, Shiho-chan..." Airi cried, the tears crawling down her face without any sign of stopping. "I'm sorry, Takase...I'm sorry, Rui...I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry..."

She couldn't fake her strength in here when she was surrounded by the results of her failures. She just acted like she was strong, like she had some sort of position to help, but everyone around her had to protect her. Even in the Metaverse where she could fight and do magic, she wasn't really that powerful.

Joker, Skull, and Mona had shielded her from Kamoshida's perverse gaze, and even Panther who was the newest member showed more strength than her. Her need to avenge her best friend drove her to keep going, but all she herself had was her guilt and her need to say sorry.

Elegance was useless if she had nothing else to offer.

Shiho had gotten hurt because of her, because she couldn't pull her up. Everyone on the volleyball team suffered because she had never noticed, even when it was right before her eyes. She made excuses of how she was busy dealing with the foster system and the bills, but she was just fooling herself. She was just as guilty as everyone else.

Her quiet sobs echoed throughout the dark and empty house, with nobody around to come and comfort her.

She was all alone.
Stepping off the train, Akira walked up the stairs, swiping his card at the gates. This was only his first week here in Tokyo and the metro system was still a little unfamiliar to him. The city was bright with colors and advertisements, illuminating the streets and the bleakness of the steel gray buildings.

He looked around, searching for blond in a sea of black and brown. Ryuji had said to meet here, right? He checked his phone to see if he had any new messages from his friend, but got nothing.

“Looks like you made it.”

He looked up and saw Ryuji walking up, waving a greeting. He had changed out of his uniform and into a 777 sweater, a graphic tee, and some dark jeans. He grinned at him. “Mmkay, let’s get goin’. The shop’s over this way!” He gestured toward Central Street.

Nodding, Akira followed him. The two chatted a bit while walking out of the station, mostly about their shared interest in video games and some comics.

“Everyone, wake up! This country is twisted! Strange incidents are occurring. What is the cause of them all? The runaway-train incident, the mysterious psychotic breakdown phenomenon. These are all signs of the end of our once peaceful days. Now is the time for our politicians to show their strength, and yet...”

The two students turned to look. An older man in a suit with a politician’s sash shouted from atop his podium box in front of the old tram. People of all ages walked past, not bothering to listen to his message.

Morgana popped its head out of his bag. “This politician’s actually saying some decent things, but not many people are stopping to listen.” It remarked, looking around curiously.

Ryuji shrugged. “Eh, people give speeches all the time. Plus, politics are pretty boring, anyways. We’re almost there.” He pointed his thumb toward Central Street. “Just don’t get lost in the crowd.”

Listening to the politician for a little longer, Akira turned back to his friend. ‘What he was saying sounded right...I should come back and listen sometime.’ He thought idly, squeezing past the crowds of people. The only politicians he ever heard from were the ones on TV, the news reporting their scandals regarding the country's budget and taxes. Weren't all politicians crooked? But this one had sounded sincere in his speech...

Walking into Central Street, his eyes roamed the store fronts, curious to what can be bought here. There were so many more shops here than in his hometown, and they sold things he never even knew existed. There was even a karaoke bar smack dab in the middle, right next to what he assumed was the arcade. Across from it was a Big Bang Burger as well as the gyudon restaurant they went to a few days ago. There was a pharmacy, media renting store, a bookstore, and even a movie theater. All these different stores clashed but strangely still looked like they belonged together.

“This way.” Ryuji gestured with a hand. “The shop can be pretty confusin’ to find sometimes.”

They walked into the alley next to the crepe shop, a man in a salary suit staring after them fearfully. Turning the corner, they saw a shop that had heavily barred windows, camouflage coats on display. The awning read “Untouchable.” There were no other stores in the alley aside from this one, and the the road was barred with multiple bicycles parked haphazardly.
“This is it! Pretty legit, huh?” Ryuji grinned. “Oh yeah, now that we’re here...you know anything about military stuff?” He asked, scratching his head sheepishly.

“Not really...” Akira replied hesitantly, adjusting his glasses. All he knew were from action movies.

Ryuji shrugged, opening the door. “I guess worst comes to worst we can just ask the shopkeep what they recommend. C’mon, let’s go.”

Walking in, the first thing to greet them was the cool air conditioning. The second thing was that the entire store was crammed with militia-esque clothing, supplies, and models. There were different cleaning and polishing products in the glass counter, as well as a selection of blades and bludgeons. Behind the stand was a model of a rifle amidst several ropes and straps.

The third thing they noticed was who they assumed to be the owner, an older man in a moss green jacket and a gecko tattoo on his neck, lounging in a chair and reading a hunting magazine. His eyes glanced over at the new arrivals from under his bucket hat, a dangerous glint shining for a second, before turning back to his read, ignoring them.

Hesitant, they walked up to the counter in front of the manager. Ryuji perused the bat selection excitedly, hunching over the displays.

Aged gray eyes looked up at them. “You know what you want yet?” The manager muttered, chewing a toothpick.

“Not sure.” Akira replied quietly, still looking around the mysterious shop. This was like a whole new world for him. Well, aside from the Metaverse.

“...You lookin’ for recommendations?” The man asked, raising a brow at the two teenagers.

He nodded silently, not trusting himself to not say the wrong thing.

The manager turned back to his magazine. “...I dunno.” He shrugged dismissively. ”Just buy whatever looks interestin’ to you.”

Ryuji rolled his eyes. “Ugh, some customer service...”


The two students looked at each other questioningly. “Uh, automatic..?” Ryuji replied, phrasing it more like a question in his confusion, and scrunched up his face. “Dude, why’re you talkin’ about cars now!!”

The manager narrowed his eyes at his ignorance. “Listen, this here’s an enthusiast shop.” He explained slowly. ”My regulars’ll be mad if I let a casual like you hang around.”

He scowled, stomping his foot. “I’m not a freakin’ casual! I bought shit from here like, last week!”

The manager hmphed. “Can’t remember you.”

He turned to look at Akira. “And you? Lookin’ for somethin’?”

He rested his hands in his pockets. “Something that looks real.” He answered coolly. The more real, the more of an impact it did to Shadows according to Morgana. Airi had a sniper rifle which
could knock their enemies back in one hit, but that wasn't really his style. He was more comfortable being on the move like during his old gymnastic classes, and something that heavy would only slow him down.

Gray eyes narrowed at his answer. “...Oh? You guys plannin’ a nice big bank robbery or somethin’?” He interrogated.

Panicking, Ryuji frantically waved his hands. “Th-That ain’t it! We just like how they look, is all!”

The manager stared at them for a moment before shaking his head exasperatedly. “You shoulda said before you two’re enthusiasts. I’m always up for helpin’ fresh faces.” He stated, closing his magazine and throwing it on the table.

Straightening up in his chair, he gave them a stern glare. “Some precautions first though.” He began. “Don’t go ‘round pointing ‘em at other people. Keep’em in a bag or somethin’ if you’re outside. Oh, and don’t let the fuzz catch wind of you having ‘em. I don’t need them comin’ around here.”

“We’ll be careful, promise.” Akira swore, adjusting his glasses as Ryuji nodded behind him.

“You damn well better be.” The manager snapped, before pointing into the glass counter at a selection of fake firearms. “Now, if you look close, you’ll be able to tell these’re models. Real guns feel...different.” He explained. “Maybe someday I’ll show you the real good stuff though...if you got the guts for it, of course.” He challenged the two teens with a smirk, before getting up from his seat. “...But for now, you get the beginner selection. Just sit tight, I’ll bring ‘em out.” With that, he walked toward the back storage.

Akira and Ryuji looked at each other, full of relief. They had a supplier.

“We did it, dude.” Ryuji grinned, giving his friend a thumbs up. “We totally gotta go for some fancy shit, right? I want ‘em to shine!” He exclaimed excitedly. Digging into his pocket, he dug out a roll of money. “Oh, and here’s the cash for mine. Pick me out something good!”

Hesitant, Akira took the money and added it in his wallet. “Are you sure?” No one had ever given him their money like this. Didn't he suspect he'd use it for something else?

Ryuji nodded with a grin. “I trust you, bro!”

He stood still, stunned at his teammate’s declaration. ‘We’ve only known each other for a week, and yet…’ He adjusted his glasses, the glare reflected from the light sitting his moist eyes.

None of his so-called friends back in Mishima stayed once they heard he was arrested. No one had wanted to even be associated with him. His parents couldn’t have sent him away fast enough. Yet here he was, surrounded by two new friends who knew what really happened that night, and two more friends who supported him without even knowing about it. They had fought together. They trusted him.

His lips twitched, fighting back a full blown smile. Life was just getting good.

“Here’s all the basics I got available. Let me know if you wanna buy any.” The owner came back, placing a large case on the counter and showing off a selection of different firearm models.

Blinking the moisture away, Akira moved closer to examine the multiple kinds of weapons. Interestingly, they even had a slingshot available. Picking up the 9mm pistol, he noticed that the trigger pulled a little easier than his current one, and was more balanced as well.
“Huh, they’ve got all sorts of shit here, don’t they?” Ryuji commented, looking around the shop.

Akira nodded, eyeing the ad stand next to him. ‘This looks like an ad for a model gun. There are all these terms that I don’t recognize… I should study up on them.’

“You interested in that revolver?” The surly man asked from his chair. “It’s equipped with a full barrel shroud, and the effect of the stabilizer is outstanding. The spring is stainless steel. If you’re just collecting, I can put in a dummy cartridge.” He offered, chewing his toothpick.

Darting his eyes from side to side awkwardly, Akira shrugged. “OK, sure.” He replied hesitantly, not really understanding all the technicalities the manager listed. He knew these didn’t shoot with real bullets, but they made the right sounds and even recoiled. As long as they did that, they should be fine.

The older man eyed him for a moment. “…Izzat right? Guess you must be the careful type.” He remarked nonchalantly, returning to his magazine.

Shrugging, Akira bought one of each firearm for him and his team mates, including Airi’s rather large sniper rifle, leaving their budget ¥12,910 less. He switched out their current gear and sold it off. The manager lifted an eyebrow at him for it, but didn’t say anything, only handing him a wad of cash in return.

Wincing slightly at his much lighter wallet, he took the large disguised bag. The two phantom thieves left the store, idly walking down the alley. “So, now that we’ve got our team shit done, should we look for presents?” Ryuji questioned, lacing his hands behind his head.

Akira hummed. “Yeah, this is the best time. Where is a good place to shop, though?”

Morgana popped its head out of the bag and gave them both an unimpressed look. "Do you even know what to buy for Lady Airi? Your performance in that shop was bad enough, but at least put some thought into this!"

The ex-runner grinned, and pointed a thumb toward a subway station entrance. “The underground mall is the perfect place! It’s got all sorts of things for sale.” He exclaimed, taking his arm and dragging him. "C’mon! I gotta show you country folk what the city's got to offer!"

Akira could only follow after him, barely avoiding tripping on his own shoes. "W-Wait!"

Shaking its head, the feline went back inside the bag. "This is hopeless…"
As soon as they arrived at the underground mall which was one floor above the train tracks, Ryuji let go of his elbow. Stumbling for a second, Akira righted himself, glaring slightly at the ex-runner for the rough treatment before looking around.

There were a bunch of different shops, such as a music store, jewelry stores, several clothing stores, and even a supermarket. People milled around as they window shopped while music was played over the speakers.

A memory hit him then. “Didn’t Airi-chan mention that she worked in the flower shop here?” Akira pondered.

Ryuji perked up. “You’re right! She did! Back at the gyudon restaurant a couple days ago. I don’t think we should buy her flowers though...” He rubbed the back of his head. “She works around those all the time.”

“How about we split up?” He suggested, already eyeing some of the products.

The two teens separated, doing their own perusing. Walking around, Akira looked for things that would make an appropriate gift. "What are you going to buy?” Morgana whispered.

He shrugged. ‘What does she like?’ He wondered, a bit distressed at finding something so last minute. ‘Clothes? I don’t know her size or preference. CDs? Don’t know what kind of music she likes. Skin care? Maybe...’

Sighing, he stopped. Was there anything that he could buy for her with so little time? He really didn’t know her, other than that she was kind and pretty.

He grasped his chin thoughtfully. She was caring since she was the one who always took care of their wounds inside the castle. She was pretty in that fairy-like way with her uncommon pink hair and deep red eyes, setting her apart from the rest of the school. Maybe she had some foreign blood like Ann did? She was kind in that...in that she had treated him politely. She had every reason to be scared of him too like the rest of their fellow students, but she didn't.

Not even Ryuji or Ann had treated him that nicely when they first met him, but that was more because they were just wary people in general. They were all jaded in some ways.

“Excuse me, sir?”

Surprised, he turned around. A female employee from one of the shops was giving him a polite smile. “Do you need any help?” She asked, her hands held formally in front of her.

“Uh...” He stammered, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly. “I need a gift for a friend. It’s her birthday tomorrow...” He trailed off.
She nodded. “Alright, a female friend. Is she someone special to you?” She inquired politely.

He grasped his chin, thinking deeply for a moment, before nodding hesitantly. Airi _was_ pretty special. She had been the first one to be nice to him in Tokyo, and it really stood out in his mind. She was nice to everyone though, but he was still grateful.

She gave him a smile. “Then how about some accessories? Every girl needs an accessory to compliment them.” She suggested, directing him to the jewelry shop she worked for.

Pursing his lips, he shrugged and followed her in. Gray eyes scanned the jewelry, ranging from rings, to bracelets, to watches. Since this was one of the lower tier jewelry shops, the prices weren’t so outrageous that he couldn’t afford anything, but he’d definitely need a part time job after this.

“So! Can you describe this lady friend of yours to me?” The attendant chirped. “Maybe if I know her physical features, I can help you choose the perfect gift!”

Akira rested his hands in his pockets. “She has long light pink hair and eyes that are red, kinda like wine. She’s about this tall.” He held his hand out around his chin.

The employee hummed, raising an eyebrow. “And what is she like? Is she nice?”

“Very.” He answered instantly. “She does her best to be there for everyone. She was also the first one in a long while to be kind to me...I want to repay her for that.” He admitted quietly, not really knowing why he was exposing himself to a complete stranger.

She blinked, slightly overwhelmed by all the information her customer provided, but gave him a warm smile. “She must be really special to you then.” She winked, before moving behind the counter.

He adjusted his glasses, a slight red hue coloring his cheeks in embarrassment. “I’ve only known her for a week…” He argued weakly. And what a hell of a week it was.

She looked at him knowingly. “Don’t worry, I think I have the perfect gift for her then.” The employee declared, unlocking the drawer and taking out a hair barrette.

His breath hitched. The hair barrette had a looping silver base, resembling branches. Porcelain flowers embellished the clip, giving off a mature but sweet image. It fit his impression of Airi perfectly and he found himself reaching for his wallet. “I’ll buy it.” He declared without a second thought. “How much?”

The salesperson watched him for several moments, her face unreadable. “The original price is ¥18,000.” She announced evenly.

He winced. That was almost his entire wallet, leaving him with only a couple of yen. Pursing his lips, he relented, taking out the exact amount. It would be worth it to pay the class president back for her kindness.

She held up her hand, palm outward, stopping him.

He blinked, looking at her in confusion.

She gave him an understanding smile. “For you, sir,” She began. “I’ll give you a discount. Your total will be ¥10,000.”

Akira stared at her with wide eyes. That was almost 50%! “A-Are you sure?” He stammered. “I
have the money...” He argued quietly, furrowing his brows warily, wondering if this was a joke. No one was this nice.

The employee shook her head amusedly. “I can’t in good conscience charge you so much when I can see how much you care about this.” She gave him an understanding look. “I also had someone I cared about, but I left him to fend for himself...” She glanced away for a second. "Plus, it’s been sitting in the store for months. Go on,” She gestured to the barrette. “It’s now ¥10,000. Would you like to buy it?”

Scrutinizing her, he slowly nodded and took out ¥10,000 from his wallet.

She then placed the item into a black velvet box, wrapping it in purple tissue paper, and placing it gently into a white paper bag. She gave him the receipt and handed the gift bag with a warm smile.

Akira smiled back gratefully. It was really nice of her to do that. "Thank you." Grabbing the bag, he turned and left the store.

"Wow..." Morgana mewled on his shoulder. "You spent a lot on your present for Lady Airi."

He tilted his head. "Are you getting anything for her? I'll buy it for you." Though he didn't have much left.

The feline shook its head, ears slumping against its scalp. "It's OK, I don't want my gift to have come from you. I'll figure something out..."

Walking back to the entrance of the mall, he spotted Ryuji already waiting for him, a large gift bag hung around his wrist while he played on his phone. “I’m finished.” Akira announced, walking up to his friend.

The punk looked up from his phone, giving him a grin. “Hey! You found somethin’?” He asked, looking at the white bag curiously.

He nodded, smiling slightly. “I think she’ll really like it.” He replied earnestly. ‘I hope.’

Ryuji held up his own bag. “I got her somethin’ from the toy store. I saw somethin' in there that would be perfect.” He grinned mischievously. “Plus…” His face fell. “I got Suzui a plush too. It’s small, but…” He shrugged helplessly. “Maybe It’ll help her out a bit, y’know. Cheer her up when she wakes up.”

Akira blinked. With a wince, he realized he had forgotten about the volleyball player, being swamped with infiltrating the Palace and whatnot. She had been the third person to be kind to him at school, so he should probably get her a get well gift too. Maybe flowers..?

Lowering his arm, Ryuji looked at the time on his phone. “It’s gettin' pretty late, I’m gonna head home then.” He stated. “I’ll see you tomorrow after school?”

Akira nodded, adjusting his grip on the bags. They separated again, each heading home.

Arriving back at Leblanc, he was about to open the cafe door when Morgana popped out of his bag. “So this is where you live? In a cafe?” It asked, looking around the store front.

Akira nodded and sweatdropped. ‘How to explain this to Boss…’ The feline sat hidden in his bag.
and he opened the door, bell ringing at his arrival.

Sojiro looked up from the sink. “The store’s still open. Go upstairs.” He stated shortly.

Akira nodded silently, noticing there was a customer in one of the booths.

She looked up with hooded eyes, crossing her legs that were clad in ripped jeans. “Oh, you’re that kid from earlier...Kurusu, right?” Takemi commented, sipping her mostly finished coffee.

He slightly bowed in greeting.

“Hey.” Sojiro called out. “Lay off the customers.” The guardian looked at him with a warning look. “Sorry if he was rude, Doctor.”

Takemi waved the apology away. “...I don’t mind.” She replied, sitting languidly in the booth.

Sojiro gestured with his hands. “Come on, you’re getting in the way. Go upstairs.” He stated, exasperated at his ward.

Akira nodded obediently, walking toward the stairs. It would do him no good to piss off his guardian. Behind him, he heard the doctor get up from her seat. “…Thanks. I’ll see you later.” He heard her say to his guardian.

“Come back again.” Sojiro replied nonchalantly, the bell ringing a moment later, signalling that she left the shop. “Phew, that’s it for today.” He sighed, grabbing a wet rag and moving to clean the booth.

Akira turned around, hands resting in his pockets, waiting patiently for the cafe owner to notice him.

“Hm?” Sojiro looked up from cleaning. “Oh, right. You seemed to know each other.” He raised a brow. "How’d that happen?"

“Airi-chan got hurt today.” He answered evenly, adjusting his glasses with one hand. "We went to Dr. Takemi’s clinic to get her injuries checked out.”

The older man’s head shot up. “What?” He uttered, turning to stare at his ward in disbelief. “You mean Airi got injured? How? Hold up,” He raised a brow. "You call her “Airi-chan” now? Seems too familiar to me.”

Akira held his hands placatingly. “There was an incident and she got her hands and knees scraped. She’s fine now.” He paused. “And...since yesterday, I guess.” He looked away awkwardly. This wasn't something he wanted to talk to his guardian about.

“Hey, are we there yet?” Morgana whispered, muffled by the fabric.

Akira stiffened, tilting himself so that his bag was out of his guardian’s line of sight.

Sojiro eyed him for a moment, not saying anything. “Well,” He began. “I’ve got to get home and start making dinner...” He stated slowly, narrowing his eyes slightly behind his round glasses.

Sweating a bit, Akira nodded and went up the stairs. Walking over to his bed, he placed his bag on top of it and unzipped it

Morgana jumped out, shaking its body, before settling down on his sheets. It observed the dusty and crammed surroundings with wide eyes. “What the?! What is this place?!” It yelped
incredulously. “Is this some kind of abandoned house?!”

Akira gave the cat a flat expression. He opened his mouth to reply but snapped it shut when he heard approaching footsteps. Calmly placing his hands in his pockets, he turned around, Morgana trying to hide by shrinking into itself on the bed.

Sojiro walked up to the two, frowning slightly. “Hey, are you-” He stopped once he caught sight of the cat. He sighed, rubbing the back of his head with aggravation. “I was wondering why I heard meowing. What did you bring it here for?!” He demanded, glaring at the teen.

Lowering his head slightly, Akira looked at the guardian pleadingly. “It was abandoned.” He replied quietly. ‘You owe me, Morgana.’

“That’s…” Sojiro deflated. “That’s a shame.” He sighed heavily, shoulders slumping. “Look, this place is a restaurant. Animals are a no-go...Though I guess you might stay on good behavior if you’ve got a pet to take care of...” The older man crossed his arms and thought for a moment before sighing again. “Fine.” He relented. “But keep it quiet when we’re open for business. And don’t let it roam downstairs, or I’ll toss it out.” He warned. “Oh, and I’m not gonna take care of it. That’s all on you.”

Akira nodded, relieved. It seemed his guardian wasn't as harsh as his words made him out to be. Maybe he wouldn't have too tough of a time here...

The cafe owner turned and left, going back down the stairs.

“Was that the ruler of this place?” Morgana asked quietly, licking a paw.

He nodded again.

It sat down. “He seemed pretty understanding for someone who keeps you cramped up in this dump.” Morgana remarked merrily. “Then again, I suppose to normal people I just sound like a meowing cat.”

Footsteps interrupted their conversation, and they turned to the stairs again.

Sojiro came back up to the attic, holding a plate of boiled chicken. “Seriously,” He sighed, disheartened. “It had to keep calling out in that cute little voice...” He placed the plate down in front of the cat before turning to Akira. “Make sure you wash that dish.” He warned, then paused. “By the way...have you decided on a name?”

Akira nodded, running a hand through his mop of slight curls. “It’s name is Morgana.”

“Sojiro? Huh...I was hoping I’d get to name it...” Sojiro sighed wistfully, hands resting on his waist, before turning away.

As soon as they heard the front door close, Morgana purred. “Looks like the chief likes me better than you.” It stated teasingly, swishing its tail.

Sighing, Akira twisted a strand of hair, exasperated with the whole situation. He was a cute fluffy animal so of course he'd win brownie points. Even Airi was smitten with how adorable he was.

“And to be honest, this place is heaven compared to Kamoshida’s cells.” It continued, taking a few steps closer to the offered meal. Turning to its fellow thief, its ears drooped. “...Remember how you guys asked me before about what I am?” It asked quietly. “To be honest...I don’t remember anything about my birth.” It reluctantly confessed, looking away morosely. “I think the
Metaverse’s distortions made me lose both my memories and my true form.”

Akira looked at his teammate sympathetically. “Is that form a human..?” He asked hesitantly. He still didn't know much about the feline he was now housing.

“It has to be!” Morgana shouted, almost desperately. “I mean, why else would a cat be able to talk like this? There’s no other possible explanation.” Slumping, the feline sat down dejectedly.

“There’s no doubt that the distortions were what caused me to lose my real self. I’m sure that once they’re purged, I’ll finally be able to get that self back.” It explained. "And I have a pretty good idea on how to do it too. That’s why I was in the castle in the first place.”

The bespectacled student pursed his lips and sighed silently. What a complicated situation, but...His eyes landed on the cat and quirked his lips. ‘I owe him that much.’

Morgana sniffed curiously at the boiled chicken. “Come to think of it, I didn’t get hungry over in that world.” It mused, before digging into its meal. After a few minutes, the plate was completely empty of even crumbs, and it licked its paw satisfactorily.

Grooming an ear, it turned to the teen. “Let me make myself clear: Your taking care of me won’t be for nothing. It’ll be give and take.” It proclaimed, giving him a smile. “Due to my knowledgeable and dexterous nature, I have a lot of intel on infiltration tools.”

Fine dark eyebrows shot up. “Really?” Akira asked dubiously. How did a cat make tools with no thumbs?

The feline took a seat, observing him. “I can’t tell you more unless we settle on a deal. In exchange for you keeping me here, I’ll teach you about these tools. How does that sound?” It asked, languidly swishing its tail back and forth.

“Let’s do this.” Akira answered, a slight smirk on his face. This will be useful in the future, as Airi had shown in the Palace. Plus, he was more comfortable knowing he would have knowledge about these things as well, even as a middle classed boy from out in the sticks.

It purred. “I like that answer.” Morgana jumped up cheerfully. “Hehehe...Then it’s a deal.”

He nodded. ‘Morgana seems rather happy...’

“I’ll lecture you about the infiltration tools over time. I assume that Lady Airi can also teach you some basics as well, since she had picked all the locks today.” Morgana paused. “By the way, the power you used in the Palace was seriously amazing. The stronger that power gets, the more reliable it’ll be as a trump card.” It scratched its ears with a hind leg. “All right, I’m gonna stick with you wherever you go from today on!” It announced, not noticing Akira’s slightly crestfallen expression.

‘There goes any privacy.’ He mourned silently. Was he going to follow him into the toilets too? Awkward.

“Personas are the strength born from one’s heart.” Morgana lectured. “Depending on what kind of life experience you gain, I bet it’ll affect that power as well!”

Akira blinked in surprise. His powers depended on his life experience? He glanced away. Then Arsene breaking those chains meant he was finally releasing himself from his past...

“And if you become acquainted with capable people like Lady Airi, you might learn various, useful skills too. This is all part of our deal, got it?” Morgana smiled at him expectantly.
Sweatdropping at the unbalanced terms, he nodded resignedly. It was expecting a lot from him, as if he was the leader or something.

The feline grinned. “I expect great things from you. Don’t let me down, OK?”

He nodded again, taking the dirty dish to wash before doing his nightly schedule.

While doing his homework, Morgana jumped up next to him on the couch. “I’ll accompany you when you go out. Don’t worry, it’s free of charge. Getting around in cat form sounds pretty inconvenient, though...Well, it is what it is.” It stated stubbornly. “I’ll just have to deal with being carried in that bag of yours.”

A phone rang out. Taking it out of his pocket, Akira noticed that it was from Ann and it was directed to both him and Airi.

An: Thanks for everything today.
An: You guys saved me, and I didn’t even thank you properly.
Ak: It’s fine. Don’t worry about it.
An: I can’t not worry about it.
An: What happened today really opened my eyes.
An: I really can’t thank you enough, Airi-chan.
An: For explaining this to me, for guiding me.
An: And especially for trying to save Shiho.
An: Airi-chan?
Ak: Maybe she’s asleep.
An: I hope so...
An: Anyway, I wanted to let you know at least.
An: See you tomorrow.

Closing his phone, Akira frowned softly. It was weird that Airi hadn’t responded at all. ‘Hopefully she’s just asleep and didn’t hear her phone.’

“You guys send messages to each other with that thing, right?” Morgana meowed. “I want in too, so I’m gonna have to ask you to type for me.” It requested, before taking another look around the room. “At any rate...is this really a place for someone to live in?” It cringed, eyeing the spider webs.

“Nope.” Akira replied, popping his lips at the “p”. “I’ll clean it on Sunday.” He sighed, putting his books away. It was the only day he would be free.

“I’m all for teaching you how to make infiltration tools, but you really need to clean your room first...” Morgana sweatdropped. “Let’s just call it a day and go to sleep.”

Now that he wasn’t the only one in the room, he went down into the bathroom to change into his sleepwear before going back up and getting into his bed.

Morgana jumped up on top of his comforter. “Tomorrow’s going to be a busy day. Keep it together, all right?” It laid down to sleep at the corner of the mattress.

Closing the lights, Akira snuggled into his bed, falling asleep.
At some point during the night, Morgana had migrated from the corner of the bed to right on top of him, a heavy weight pinning him down.

Akira struggled in place, still dreaming. ‘I feel a strange weight pressing down on my body…’ He clawed at the blanket, turning his head side to side, unconsciously scrunching up his face. ‘Is this the stress of Kamoshida’s threat weighing on me…?’

He had a restless sleep that night.

Chapter End Notes

Morgana rank 1
Sighing at the loud alarm blaring in her ears, Airi reached over for her phone on the bedside table and turned it off. She sat up and rubbed her eyes, feeling the puffy bags underneath. She had a fitful sleep last night. Images of Shiho crying and her bones cracking from her fall, her matron's cold face, *that man*, Takase giving her a sunny grin, and Rui's kind smile...

Covering her mouth as she yawned, she left the bed to get ready for school. She shouldn't dwell on the past any longer, or else the whole day would be ruined. It wasn't just her who needed a nice day, the whole team did, and they needed her to keep the mood up.

Rinsing her mouth of any toothpaste, she put on her school uniform and went downstairs into the tatami room, phantom strings at her fingertips.

She usually avoided this part of the house, but it wouldn't feel right today of all days. Kneeling down onto the soft straws, she opened a small cabinet, a portrait of her parents smiling back at her.

Her father was a typical salary man with thinning brown hair at the top of his head, a slight pot belly from long nights at the lab, and a jolly expression always present. Her mother was a beautiful light brown, almost blonde, haired woman, standing much shorter than her husband. Her face always had a kind smile ready as she reached out with calloused fingers.

In her arms was a two year old Airi, grinning at the camera in a sundress, one knee bandaged up. The sun shone down on her light pink hair, which baffled her family for years. Her father joked it was due to a genetic mutation from his long days at the lab, though she didn't understand at the time since she was so young. Pink hair was extremely uncommon in this side of the world, but they just took it as a sign for her to be a flower. They wanted to name her "Sakura" but her mother said it was too overrated, and Jasmines were her favorite, hence "Airi."

Her heart ached as she gazed at the portrait. If only they could have stayed. If only they hadn't left her by herself...

But.

She shook her head. It wasn't their faults. She had accepted that long ago. "Hi Kaa-chan, Tou-chan..." She whispered, lighting some incense and placing it in the holder. "Today's my birthday...I'm seventeen now." She smiled slightly. "Time flies, huh...I wish you were here. So badly..." Her lips tightened. "My friend tried to commit suicide yesterday...I'm so glad she's alive and that she didn't join you in the afterlife..." She bit her lip as her eyes clouded with moisture. "I love you..." She sniffed, clapping her hands twice in a prayer motion.

Wiping a tear away, she smiled to herself, finding the action to be more genuine than she expected.
"All right, let's dance."

Grabbing her bag and keys, she put on her oxfords and left the house to Leblanc.

With a gasp, his eyes snapped open. Slowly, he sat up on his elbows, rubbing his shadowed lids. ‘I could barely sleep.’ Akira thought sullenly. He glared tiredly at the reason why.

Morgana breathed softly on top of his abdomen, occasional purrs escaping it. The additional weight had pinned him into the bed, barely letting him move or breathe.

Yawning, he lifted the cat off of him, waking it in the process with a yowl, and flipped back the comforter to get ready for the day. He brushed his teeth, washed his face, and changed into his uniform.

Hearing Sojiro’s movements at the bar, Akira grabbed his bag and placed the present within. ‘I hope she likes it.’ He prayed. This was the first time he was giving someone a present.

Making sure Morgana won’t crush it when it sits inside, he gestured to the feline who was grooming itself awake. “Morning, Akira.” It yawned, jumping into the bag.

Shouldering the bag, he put on his now usual glasses and went downstairs where a plate of fresh curry awaited him at the bar counter. Sitting down, he greeted his guardian with a quiet “good morning”, grabbing a can of cat food on the side for Morgana to eat.

Quickly finishing his food, he clapped his hands and muttered, “gochisousama deshita.” before getting up to wash his dishes. “Thank you for the food.” He expressed to the older man, who grunted in response.

“You better get going or you’ll be late.” Sojiro stated nonchalantly, shaking his newspaper.

Nodding, Akira dried his hands, grabbed his bag, and left the shop.

Just arriving at the cafe was Airi, idly brushing out her bangs with one hand and her school bag in the other. She perked up once she saw her bespectacled classmate. “Good morning, Akira-kun!” She called out, giving him a smile.

Akira smiled back. “Good morning, Airi-chan. Happy Birthday.” He congratulated.

“Happy Birthday, Lady Airi!” Morgana meowed loudly, jumping out of his bag and into her arms.

Airi blushed, hugging the feline. “Thank you, Morgana.” She murmured graciously, giving it a kiss on top of its head.

It purred at the affectionate gesture, before jumping back into Akira's bag.

The two then went on their journey to school, walking to the station. In a rare occurrence, they both got seats on the train. Airi covered her mouth as she yawned, tears clouding her eyes.

“Did you not sleep well?” Akira asked quietly, looking at her from the corner of his eye.

Wiping the moisture away, she shook her head. “Not really. After what happened yesterday, I...couldn’t.” She whispered, looking down morosely.
He stared at her concernedly before placing a hand on her shoulder. “I’m sure Suzui-san will be fine. Takamaki-san had said she was stable.” He reassured. “Maybe you can go visit with her?”

Blushing a little from the close contact, she nodded. “Yeah, I can do that…” She smiled hopefully. “Thank you, Akira-kun. You always know what to say.”

He blushed slightly at the compliment. Did he? He wasn't one to say much. “You didn’t answer your phone last night.” He reminded.

Blinking, she checked her phone and found several unread messages from him and Ann. “Oh! I’m so sorry.” She apologized. “Let me text Ann-chan now.”

While she was engrossed into her phone, Morgana subtly popped its head out of his bag. “Even though it’s so crowded, looks like you can still grab a seat if you’re lucky enough…” It remarked quietly over the roaring sounds of the train tracks. “While we’re riding the train, we’ve got some downtime. I wonder if we could put it to good use…” It mused, shifting back inside.

Akira hummed. Maybe he could read a book? He'd have to dig some out from Leblanc's pile or buy some of his own.

Walking into class, Airi was greeted with several wishes of happy birthday from her classmates. She happily accepted them, along with small gifts of chocolates and snacks, and thanked them for their kindness. With a shy blush, Mishima handed over a gift wrapped book, stammering a “Happy Birthday” to her.

Touched, she drew him into a gentle hug, making sure not to aggravate his injuries. "Thank you very much, Mishima-kun!"

With a feverish face, he bowed shakily. "You-You're welcome, Senpai..." He looked down shyly and went back to his desk, keeping his head down and away from anyone's gaze.

An idea came to her and she took out a new tube of Recov-R Gel, placing it in front of him. He stared at the tube blankly, his lips tightening. "Thank you, Senpai...You're kind." He subtly wiped a tear away. "I'll make sure to use it." He gave her a watery smile, a small glimmer of gratefulness in the bleakness of his eyes.

She smiled back and walked up to the board to prepare it for the first class. She didn't know her classmates very well since it was still close to the start of the new school year, but Mishima had also been in her first year class. He was also being threatened with expulsion, and she couldn't forget that they had to fight for him too.

No matter how many failures piled up, she still had to try.

The door slid open to the classroom and Kawakami-sensei walked up to her to pat her on her
shoulder. “Seventeen now huh...You’re getting closer to not needing me.” She smiled awkwardly, still unsure and reluctant to interact with her. "Are you OK? After yesterday?"

Airi shook her head. “I'm...OK. At least, I will be.” She smiled gratefully. "And no, Sensei, I'll always be grateful for what you did. You saved me."

The teacher snorted. “I only signed my name because of him, I didn’t do anything worthy of your praise…” She shrugged nonchalantly. “But I don’t regret it, OK?” She put her books down on a stand.

The students took their seats and the school day began.

Phones buzzed in the midst of Ushimaru-sensei’s lecture about Japanese law and three students discreetly pulled them out.

R: Hey, we’re meeting up at the hideout after school, right?
An: Don’t text now. We’re in class.
R: Whoa! You mean you’re actually listening to all this crap?
Ai: Yes, please pay attention to class, Ryuji-kun.
Ai: You need to improve your grades.
R: Ugh, you had to say that.
An: Nothing’s really sticking though.
An: I’m too excited for later. I need this break.
R: Hell yeah! Anyways, hideout after school?
R: Or straight to Airi’s house?
Ai: My house.
Ai: I’m sure we’re all hungry now since lunch was about two hours ago.
R: Shit, you’re right.
Ak: Got it.

“Hey, Kurusu!”

Startled, said student’s head shot up with wide eyes, putting his phone away.

Ushimaru sneered. “Pay attention! Is that how you listen to someone who’s talking to you?!”

Akira paled, tensing in his seat. ‘I feel a murderous intent. ’

With a large sweep of his arm, the teacher threw his piece of chalk at the student, hitting him square in the forehead.

Head snapping back at the force, Akira rubbed the spot gingerly and hunched over himself, sweatdropping at his slow reflexes.

Ann covered her mouth incredulously and turned away.

Airi winced; that had to hurt. Discreetly, she took out a small tube of Recov-R gel from her bag and handed it out to the injured student.
He took it, giving her a grateful smile even as the injury began to pulse underneath the now red skin.

“Ooh...That looked like it hurt.”

“He hit him right in the forehead...”

“That’s what you get for daydreaming!” Ushimaru-sensei hmphed, before turning back to the board. “Kids these days have no respect for their elders.” He grumbled, taking out a new piece of chalk and continuing the lesson.

Morgana popped its head out of Akira’s desk and looked at him pityingly. “Good grief...Looks like you need more proficiency to completely dodge that.”

He grimaced in response.

“Man, I am so excited!” Ryuji grinned, rubbing his stomach. The four (five if you count Morgana) walked out of the station and into the backstreets. “Lunch was forever ago! I can’t wait to eat your food, Airi!” He proclaimed, walking backwards with his hands behind his head. "I don't think I've ever tasted your cooking!"

She laughed as they walked past the closed movie theater. “I’ll make sure not to disappoint.”

The group soon arrived at a small but well maintained house, some vines climbing up the side of the building. It was squished by neighboring houses like most property in Tokyo, and it even hosted several similar design choices, such as the small cement fence and the mailbox built in. It was a single family detached residence that was around twenty years old, with the typical white plaster siding and a dark ceramic tiled roof.

“Well...This is my place.” Airi stated awkwardly, unlocking the door. They walked into the entryway and closed the door behind them, the non-residents looking around curiously. The inside was also typical of a Japanese residence, though it was somewhat bare. The dark wooden floors shined impeccably and the eggshell white walls were empty of any decorations, as if she had just recently moved in.

“It’s so nice and clean.” Ann marveled while taking off her shoes and placing them on the shoe rack.

“Hehe, I try.” Airi smiled sheepishly, before leading them to the living room. “Anyway, make yourselves at home! You can watch TV if you’d like, or maybe do your homework...” She suggested, looking at the delinquent specifically. “...Ryuji-kun.”

“Hey!” He pouted indignantly. “We’re not here to torture ourselves, we’re here to celebrate!” He flopped down on one of the chaises, grabbing the remote and turning the TV on.

“In other news, we have yet to figure out what is triggering the mental breakdowns. The cause is still unknown. However, many citizens still take public transportation while citing they are in fear of future incidents. Reporting live from-”

“Boring.” Ryuji groaned, changing the channel.
Akira sat down as well, unzipping his bag for Morgana. The cat jumped out of the bag and landed on the coffee table, looking around curiously. “Wow, Lady Airi. Your place is so nice! Way nicer than Akira’s room.” It purred cheerfully, before jumping down on the floor and exploring the room.

Akira frowned. ”Hey.” He was making due with what he had.

“Yeah, Airi-chan.” Ann sat down on the other chaise. “My house is bigger, but yours has such a nice atmosphere. I’m kind of jealous.” She confessed with a smile.

Airi smiled. “Thanks, guys.” She took off her blazer and draped it on one of the couches. “I’m going to start cooking, OK? I’ll call when food's ready.” With that, she walked down the hall and into the kitchen to begin.

Once she was gone, the four guests huddled together. “All right, did you guys get presents for her?” Ann whispered fervently.

“Hell yeah I did!” Ryuji grinned, giving her a thumbs up.

Morgana took out some lockpicks from its yellow scarf. "I can't buy anything, so I made some lockpicks." It puffed up its chest pridefully. "Now she won't have to let down her hair all the time."

Akira gave him an odd look. "When?"

It purred. "When you were sleeping, of course. It was cold when I was done so I slept on top of you."

He deadpanned. He almost died last night from suffocation. He shook his head. “When should we give them to her?”

Ryuji rubbed his chin pensively. “How about after dinner?”

They nodded in agreement. “Sooo...What did you guys get?” Ann inquired, taking her’s out. “I got her a all day coupon at the spa!” She grinned happily, showing them an envelope.

Ryuji looked at her incredulously. “Are you serious?!” He groaned, leaning back on the chaise. “I just got her a giant plush.” He sighed then perked up. “Oh yeah, I didn’t ask yesterday, but what did you buy?” He turned to Akira.

He shrugged. “You’ll see later.” He replied shortly, a bit nervous. He flexed his hands, heart beating quicker with anticipation. Maybe he was pushing it too far by getting her something so nice. They didn't know each other that well, only for about a week, and he could come off a little creepy.

Off in the distance, they heard the ventilation hood in the kitchen turn on. Curious, the four quietly sneaked over to the dining room, crossing the small hallway to the other side. Beyond the dining table was the kitchen where Airi was currently cooking. She tossed the beef with her spatula and added some sort of cooking alcohol, making the wok explode in flames.

“Whoa!” Ryuji gaped, gawking at the fire show.

The four looked on in amazement as the class president moved from the stove, to the grill, to the fridge, and back to the stove. “She’s amazing.” Morgana purred, eyes shining with awe. "And it smells delicious!"
Taking out several plates and bowls, Airi killed the heat on the stove. Piling rice from the cooker, she set them on the table before bringing over the main courses. She divided the portions for four individuals, placing them on separate plates.

Dowsing the dirty dishes in the sink, she wiped her forehead, sighing in relief. ‘Just gotta make sure the cake is decorated.’ She reminded herself.

Taking the finished cake out of the fridge, Airi shook some icing sugar on top, before going to the mint plant and slicing off several leaves, decorating the top. She placed the cake back into the fridge and took off her apron. “Food is ready!” She called out.

Getting up from their crouched positions behind the doorway, the four walked into the dining room, gazing at the food with admiration. There was finely grilled black perch, korean marinated beef, and spiced legumes. A simple miso soup was served for each seat except for Morgana’s, who had a wide selection of tuna cuts.

Slowly taking their seats, they inhaled the aromas of the freshly cooked meal. “This smells sooo good!” Ryuji sighed in appreciation, mouth watering at the scents.

“I can’t wait to dig in!” Ann grinned, taking a photo of her meal.

Looking at his set, Akira noticed his perch was a bit bigger than the others. He blinked and looked over at Airi questioningly.

Airi smiled mysteriously in response. “I want to thank you guys again for coming over.” She began, giving them all a grateful look. “It’s been a long time since I’ve been able to cook for someone else other than myself.” She laughed sheepishly. "I hope it all tastes OK. Maybe I've gotten too used to my own cooking..."

“Airi-chan…” Ann bit her lip, looking at their host. "...Can I ask where your parents are? It’s just that...I haven’t heard you mention them ever, even in middle school.”

“Yeah, plus you haven’t cooked for someone in a long time? Where are they?” Ryuji piped up, looking around the room, not noticing the class president’s face grimacing.

Akira stared at her with concern, not saying anything. One thing he could pride himself on was his own observational skills. She had never mentioned them before, and the lack of other shoes in the entryway had implied something dark.

Airi took a deep breath. “…They’re gone.” She whispered, not looking up. They fell silent at the news. “They’ve been gone for years, almost a decade now.” She smiled wryly.

Ann covered her mouth in horror. “Oh...Airi-chan...” She whispered, tears clouding her eyes. "I-I'm sorry for asking..."

She sighed. “It’s all right, Ann-chan. It’s old news. I didn't really tell anyone, so...”

Clenching his fists, Ryuji bowed his head. “Sorry, Airi.” He murmured apologetically. "I...didn’t know...”

Gray eyes glanced at her sorrowfully. “Airi-chan…” Akira whispered. So she was responsible and mature because she had to be. She had no one to rely on.
Shaking her head, Airi looked up at them with tearful eyes. “Thank you.” She closed her eyes. “I’m happy that I have such good friends who care so much...” Wiping the moisture from her eyes, she clapped her hands together. “Enough talking about sad stuff, It’s my birthday! The meal’s getting cold and I worked hard on it, so you guys better eat up!”

Swishing its tail back and forth, Morgana gazed at her affectionately. “Thank you, Lady Airi! I’ll be sure to savor this!”

“Itadakimasu!” The group dug into their meals. “Oh man, this is sooo good!” Ryuji moaned in appreciation, chewing on the korean beef. “It’s so sweet and juicy!”

Ann chewed happily. “The fish is so soft, it's falling off my chopsticks! You have to teach me how to cook.” She proclaimed, pointing her utensils at Airi.

Morgana devoured the sashimi on its plate. “Meeooow!” It sang blissfully. "Real fooood!"

Savoring the meal, Akira closed his eyes contently. He hadn’t had a real meal like this since he left home, and even then, his mother's cooking couldn't compare. All he had lately was curry and ramen.

‘I could get used to this.’ He thought blissfully. Taking another bite of the black perch, he blinked, tasting a new flavor. He looked closer at the fish, and saw it had garlic and mushrooms stuffed inside. He quirked his lips. ‘Something she enjoys a lot, huh.’ He thought fondly to himself. Even though they didn't know each other very well, he was learning bit by bit about her.

Finishing their meals in a matter of minutes, the teenagers and one cat sighed in bliss. “That,” Ryuji began, pointing at his empty dishes. “Was the best meal of my life.” He declared dramatically, leaning back in his seat. "My Ma ain't ever cook this good."

“Agreed!” Ann stretched in her chair languidly with a smile. "I haven't had a good home cooked meal in ages!"

Morgana was laid on its back, stomach distended from all the food. "Meow..." It purred quietly, already half asleep.

Wiping his mouth with a napkin, Akira muttered a “gochisousama deshita,” before getting up from his seat and gathering the dirty dishes.

“Oh, you don’t have to do that, Akira-kun!” Airi piped, hurriedly getting up from her seat to help.

He shook his head. “You did all the work, this is the least I can do.”

Deflating, she smiled and acquiesced, heading into the kitchen. “You can just leave them in the sink, I’ll do them later.” She ordered, opening the fridge. “I hope you guys aren’t too full because I also made cake.” She pulled it out and laid it on the dining table.

It was a light matcha cheesecake, sprinkled with icing sugar and topped with a few buds of mint. She also grabbed a carton of vanilla ice cream from the freezer. “Shall we eat?” Airi asked, brandishing a knife.

“Wait!” Ryuji stopped, holding a hand out. “You gotta make a wish! It’s your birthday!”

“Oh, right right!” Airi laughed sheepishly, sweatdropping at her forgetfulness. It had been a long time since she really bothered with tradition.
Taking a few old candles out from a drawer, she inserted them into the cake and lit them with a match. Closing her eyes, she clasped her hands together. Several moments later, she blew the candles, extinguishing the flames.

“Happy Birthday, Airi!” The guests cheered, clapping their hands in celebration. “Alright, cake time!” Ann cheered, jumping in place happily.

Cutting the cake into several pieces, Airi handed them out on new plates and topped them with a scoop of vanilla ice cream.

They dug into the dessert with relish. “Oh my god, this is amazing!” Ann marveled, eyes sparkling at the cake in front of her.

“Thank you, Ann-chan!” Airi smiled, blushing at the religious mention. "I wasn't sure since I'm the only one who usually eats my cooking. You're big on sweets, right?..."

After the meal by the birthday girl, they relocated back to the living room. Airi had gone and prepared tea for everyone, and now they sat in peaceful silence, nursing a steaming cup.

“So...” Ryuji began, the others looking at him curiously. “Present time?” He suggested to his fellow guests, wiggling his eyebrows. They nodded and reached into their bags.

“Wait- presents?” Airi repeated. “You guys didn’t have to! I only told you yesterday...” She blubbered flusteredly, waving her hands in front of her.

“Of course we had to!” Ann argued, sitting across. “You’ve done a lot for us, for me especially.” She looked down at her lap. “You told me earlier in our texts that you’re sorry for not being able to save Shiho, and you’ve kept on saying that. But,” She looked up resolutely. “...You tried. That’s more than anyone else had done, more than...” Her hands clenched. "What I had done. So thank you, Airi-chan.” She smiled gently. “She's probably alive right now because you went up there, so stop blaming yourself! We'll go visit her tomorrow and tell her we're going to avenge her.”

Airi stared at her with wide eyes before looking down at her lap, her bangs shadowing her face. Tiny droplets hit the back of her clenched hands. “...Every time I close my eyes,” She began quietly. “All I see is Shiho-chan’s face. When I went to bed last night, I...kept hearing her body hit the ground.” She covered her face with her hands. “I know, I did all I could...but it wasn’t enough, though, was it? I didn’t make any difference...” She sobbed quietly. “I had her! If I was stronger, I could have pulled her up...”

Akira scooted closer and put an arm around her shoulders. She tensed but slowly relaxed, already becoming familiar with his silent support.

Ann flinched at the description and reached out, placing a comforting hand on her leg, Ryuji reaching over Akira’s arm to also half hug her. Morgana jumped and curled up on her lap. They comforted the crying girl for however long she needed, knowing that yesterday had scarred them in ways that they couldn't explain.

Sniffing, Airi wiped the tears from her face, embarrassed from crying so much over these past two days. “Sorry...” She bit her lip. “I keep ruining the mood with all my crying...”

“Don’t apologize, Lady Airi.” Mona shook its head, ears twitching. “It’s OK to cry.” It gave her an understanding smile, jumping onto the table.
She gave a watery smile back. She was so fortunate to have such good friends, even if she didn't deserve them.

“Alright, enough with the crying!” Ryuji persuaded, taking out his shoddily wrapped present. “We gotta think on the bright side! It’s your birthday, we’re gonna bag Kamoshida’s Treasure, Suzui’s stable!” He listed off, grinning excitedly, doing his best to lift the mood. "We got this!"

“Yeah!” Ann chimed in, pumping a fist. “Everything’s going to be fine! We’ll make it better!” She took her gift out and shoved it into Airi’s hands. "You have to open our presents now!"

Startled, she looked down curiously. She slowly unwrapped the envelope, the paper giving way to an all expenses paid coupon at the local spa. She laughed delightedly. “Thank you, Ann-chan! I need this so bad after this week.” She smiled gratefully. “Maybe we can go together sometime?”

Ann nodded gleefully. "Definitely!"

Ryuji shoved his large wrapped package at her as well. “Open mine next!” He demanded, bouncing excitedly in his seat.

With a laugh, she did as she was told, unwrapping all the newspaper covering the object. “Oh!” She blinked, taking out a large plush of a cat. It was mostly black with white tips, easily resembling a certain dexterous feline that was in front of her.

“Is that supposed to be me?!” Morgana yelled incredulously, glaring at the punk.

Ryuji glared back. “It’s way better than you!”

Airi burst into laughter and hugged the plush close to her. “It's so cute!” She brightened up. “I'm gonna call it Mona!”

Morgana turned and gave her a look of betrayal. “Lady Airi...” It teared up. “Aren’t I good enough?!”

Airi gave the feline a gentle smile and rubbed its ears. “Of course you are, Morgana.” She reassured softly. “But you’re always going to be with Akira-kun. I just get my own Mona to hug and snuggle with.”

Morgana stopped mid-purr. "Snuggle with...?" It breathed, blushing heavily at the thought, before shaking itself. “OK, fine.” It relented, trying to sound nonchalant, but the blush still present on its face gave it away. "Here's my present." It handed a couple of lockpicks with its mouth. "I can't really wrap them..."

She accepted the gift, placing it next to her on the couch. "Thank you! Now I won't have to use my bobby pin each time."

Akira smiled at the feline’s dramatic actions before resigning himself. ‘My turn.’ He thought with trepidation. He pulled the still wrapped box out of his bag and silently handed it over.

Airi blinked, before accepting the bundle of tissue paper. She slowly unwrapped it layer by layer, unveiling a black velvet box. Her eyes widened, and looked at him in astonishment. “Did you...get me jewelry?” She breathed, her fingers slightly caressing the box. Was she dreaming?

He smiled a tad nervously. “Open it.” He instructed quietly. He glanced away for a moment, and met wide light blue eyes.
Ann stared at him in disbelief, before smirking knowingly at him.

He gave her a confused frown, not understanding why she was giving him that look.

Airi slowly opened the velvet box, gasping at what was inside. She gently took out the silver barrette, the delicate flower petals gleaming in the light, and placed it in her palm to admire it. “Akira-kun.” She breathed. “This must have been expensive. You didn’t have to.” She objected quietly, frowning guiltily at the gift. This must've cost at least ¥12,000.

He shook his head. “I wanted to.” He corrected, smiling softly.

She looked at him, searching his face, before acquiescing with a shy curl of her lips. She untied her braid, letting her peachy locks fall freely. Braiding the tendrils in a different pattern, she pulled it up into a bun and clipped her new gift in. She pulled out her phone and used the front camera as a mirror, appreciating how the flowers complimented her hair.

Airi turned back to Akira, who watched her with his mouth slightly open just like when they had met. “Thank you, Akira-kun. This is wonderful!” She smiled warmly. She had never gotten such a lavish gift, aside from her parents. How highly did he think of her to spend so much on this?

He swallowed, wetting his dry throat. His eyes rested on the visage in front of him, not wanting to blink or look away. She looked...really beautiful with his gift.

Unconsciously wetting his lips, he looked away, feeling his face heat up. “You’re welcome. You deserve it.” He replied shortly, not trusting himself to not stutter with how fast his heart was beating. ‘Calm down.’ He scolded himself silently. ‘But...I can feel her appreciation…’

Whistling, Ryuji admired the barrette in her hair. “Damn, bro. How much did you spend?”

Akira pursed his lips. “I’m not telling.” He dramatically coiffed his hair.

They burst into laughter at the display, seeing the usually quiet teenager try to act suave. “Thank you all for the gifts.” Airi spoke, a shy smile decorating her lips. “It means so much to me coming from you guys.” She hugged the Mona plush close to her, holding the spa coupon in one hand. She wasn't alone anymore.

“Well,” Morgana began, jumping onto the coffee table. “Since we’re done with celebrations, we should hold our meeting about the calling card.” It suggested, laying down and tucking its legs underneath itself.

Akira nodded. “Right. Let’s begin then.” The five huddled together above the coffee table. “Since we’ve got an infiltration route, we can send a calling card, right?” He asked the cat, who nodded in response.

“Why couldn’t we send it in the first place...?” Ryuji asked curiously.

“It’s not that easy.” Morgana frowned. “A Treasure won’t stay materialized forever. Once the impression is gone, the Treasure will disappear. I think it’ll last around a day, at most.”

He groaned, ruffling his hair. “The hell..? That’s like no time at all...”

“When should we send it?” Akira asked the group.

“As soon as possible. We’ve waited too long.” Ann replied instantly, frowning deeply. “We’re going to pull this off, no matter what!” She clenched her fists.
Airi nodded firmly. “He needs to pay for what he did. I’ll never forgive him.” She stated coldly.

“I’m with ya.” Ryuji frowned, sitting forward. “Plus, we don’t wanna get expelled. The earlier the better.”

“Alright then, Monday it is.” Akira declared.

Everyone nodded in agreement. “Once we send the card, we have to infiltrate the Palace immediately for the Treasure.” Morgana advised, ears twitching in anticipation.

“So we send the calling card in the morning...and carry out the plan by the end of the day, right?” Ann inquired.

“We’ll have to do this quickly then.” Airi mediated. "As soon as classes end."

Akira nodded in understanding. “So, who’s going to write the card?” He crossed his arms, leaning back on the chaise.

“Oh! Oh!” Ryuji perked up. “Leave it to me!”


“Why...? Why wouldn’t it be me?!” He asked, offended by her tone.

The model tutted. “This is important. Are you sure you can handle the pressure?” She pressed, furrowing her brows at him.

“I must agree.” Morgana added, scratching an ear.

“I really wanna get him good!” Ryuji exclaimed, holding up a fist. “Lemme write it...C’mon, please?” He pleaded at their leader.

Pursing his lips, Akira nodded. “All right.” He relented.

He pumped a fist. “Yeah, I got this!” Ryuji grinned.

Ann cringed. “Hey, are you sure about this..? If they find out our identities, all this work will be for nothing..."

“I know, I know!” Ryuji waved away her concerns.

Airi smiled sheepishly. "I'm sure it'll be fine. As long as it works, right?"

Morgana stood up. “All right! Monday it is! You’d better not slack off on this.”

Yawning, Ryuji stretched his arms and got up. “It’s gettin’ late. We should go.” He noted, looking at the clock on the wall which read “7 P.M.”

Ann got up as well, straightening her skirt. “Yeah, same here. Gotta get up early to visit Shiho tomorrow. Want to meet me at Shibuya station, Airi-chan?” She asked the birthday girl.

Said girl nodded. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” She replied with a calm smile.

“I’ll walk wit’ ya.” Ryuji offered the model, grabbing their bags and heading toward the front door. “Thanks so much for the food, Airi! It was awesome!”
“Happy Birthday!” Ann congratulated once more, putting on her boots.

“Thanks for coming over! You’ll always be welcome.” Airi grinned at the two blonds. “Get home safely!”

With a wave, the two left, leaving Airi, Akira, and Morgana in the house.

Airi turned to her classmate. “You can stay as long as you’d like, Akira-kun, Morgana. You live around the corner anyway.”

He inclined his head. “If you don’t mind. Maybe we can do our homework together?” He suggested, lips quirking.

She agreed, and they moved their bags into the tatami room to study. He blinked, noticing the small shrine in the corner, incense lit in front of a family portrait.

Coming back into the room with two cups of hot tea, Airi stilled, noticing Akira bowing his head in front of her parents' shrine, his hands clapped together in a prayer motion. She quietly placed the cups on the table and sat down, waiting for him to finish. With an exhale, he opened his eyes, letting his arms fall to his lap.

"Thank you." She said quietly, smiling softly at him. She was so touched that he bothered to give her parents a prayer, especially since he had never known them. He was a really thoughtful guy.

He shook his head. "It's the least I could do. I'm sure they were amazing people." He smiled, moving back to the table. They spent a quiet evening together, mostly her correcting his answers, while Morgana napped under the kotatsu.

Two hours later, Airi waved farewell to the two Persona users as they left for Cafe Leblanc. Closing the door, she went about cleaning the mess left behind from the party, humming happily.

Today had been a good day. Better than good, it was great. Her friends enjoyed her cooking, her classmates wished her happy birthday, and she even got presents. Not that she didn't appreciate the chocolates and snacks, but they didn't really mean anything. Her team of thieves had thought out their presents, and she was going to cherish them.

After her bath, she unclasped her new barrette and admired it. ‘I can’t believe Akira-kun really bought me something so beautiful and expensive.’ She thought, still in disbelief at the gorgeous clip. They had only known each other for a week, less than a week actually. Did he really think of her so kindly to buy her something like this?

She placed it gently on her vanity, swearing to wear it only on special occasions, before getting up. Going to her school bag, she took out all the gifts she received from her fellow classmates, including the book from Mishima.

Unwrapping it, she blinked. It was a book on Psychology. ‘How thoughtful of him, and just what I need too.’ She smiled fondly. Could this come in handy at dealing with the Palace? How did he know to give this to her?

Shaking her head, she placed it down on the table. She'd just have to ask, after this mess was all over and everyone was safe.

Turning around, her eyes caught the one thing in this room she avoided and she gazed at the dusty
instrument with trepidation. She was at war with herself. On one hand, the cello only reminded her of that time.

“Stupid child! This is what you deserve!”

Her eyes darkened at the memories. She could still hear the wood creaking in her ears. But...on the other hand, it also contained happy memories with her mother and father, and the itch to play was getting unbearable. Her hands would twitch every so often, steel strings under her fingertips.

“Aw, honey you look so cute and tiny next to it!”

“You play really nicely, Ai-chan!”

“Let’s get you a cello so you can play for your big bro!”

Clenching her now uninjured hands, she nodded to herself, coming to a decision. Reaching out with a trembling hand, her heart pounding in her ears, she dusted off the instrument.

"I wish...for my parents to be in peace, watching over me. I wish they could tell me they were proud of me, that they love me. I wish Takase and Rui were here, smiling happily at my side. I wish I can help more people. I wish that our team would stay together even after we take Kamoshida's Treasure. I wish..."

Chapter End Notes

-a shrine for dead relatives is usually kept in an open cabinet or little shrine.
-shinto tradition is to clap twice when praying.
-itadakimasu is a japanese phrase used at the start of a meal, traditionally to thank the gods for the food.
-gochisosama deshita is a japanese phrase used at the end of the meal, saying thank you to the cook and gods.
-matcha is high quality green tea leaves grounded into a fine powder. It's used heavily in a lot of Japanese desserts.
Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

Sad stuff galore.
Warning: Hospitals

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-----4/17, SUNDAY, MORNING, Yongenjaya Backstreets

Picking out a long sleeve lavender colored blouse and a short black skirt with sheer gray tights, Airi got changed and readied her bag. She placed a stack of colorful paper inside along with her keys and put on a pair of black heels, setting off for the train. She didn't want to be late today of all days. Her phone rang and she stopped, taking it out.

Ak: You're going to the hospital today, right?
Ak: Can you meet me at Leblanc for a second?
Ai: Sure.

She turned the corner instead, seeing Akira stand in front of the cafe. He was dressed in a black sports jacket, white shirt, and blue jeans, holding a small bouquet in his hand.

She blinked. Those were daisies. Was he..? "Hey." She greeted quietly, walking up to him.

He turned to her with a small smile. "Hey. Sorry for calling you out here so suddenly." He held up the bouquet up to her. "I wanted to ask if you were willing to give these to Suzui-san for me."

Her eyes widened. She was right. Daisies were gifted to wish a person to get well, after all. "Eh..? Why don't you give them yourself?" She tilted her head. "I think she'd be happy to know you cared enough to give flowers."

He shook his head. "I don't really know her, so it wouldn't be appropriate for me to visit...But," He paused, looking away. "She talked to me once a couple days ago, telling me not to worry about the rumors....I want to thank her for that, at the very least."

Smiling softly, she accepted the bouquet. "Got it...Shiho-chan sure is a nice girl, isn't she?"

He nodded. "She didn't even know me but she supported me anyway. I guess it's because Takamaki-san goes through the same thing with rumors..." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Anyway, thanks for doing this for me. I'll...see you tomorrow?"

Airi smiled. "Of course. See ya." She waved as she walked past him to the station.

She traveled to Shibuya in silence, gazing ahead somberly, gripping the bouquet carefully in her hands. It was really kind of Akira to get a gift for Shiho, even though he didn't really know her. A passing comment like that had impacted him enough to wish her a speedy recovery.
Her eyes darkened. What had she herself done? Nothing. It all only ended in failure with her. She probably didn't even deserve to be visiting her in the hospital like this.

"This is Shibuya. I repeat, this is Shibuya. The time is now 11:12AM, the next stop is..."

Getting out of the station, she took out her phone and called Ann. After a couple of rings, the call went through. “Ann-chan? It’s Airi. I’m here in the station square. Where are you?”

“Here!” She heard from behind her.

Turning around, she saw the model walk up to her. She was wearing a red and white sports jacket on top of a lavender button up and a white skirt. Her long legs were clad in black tights, ending with red converses. She had a small plastic bag around her wrist, holding something round inside. “Ready to go?” Ann asked quietly, a depressed expression painting her features.

Airi nodded, putting her phone away, and the two walked in silence through the bustling crowds of Tokyo. The city was loud and its people were noisy and full of life, yet for the two of them, it was all muted by the grim situation they found themselves in.

A few minutes later, they arrived at Ito Hospital. Walking through the automatic doors, the smell of antiseptic burned their noses. “Welcome to Ito Hospital. How may I help you?” The receptionist asked monotonously, looking at the two through her round glasses with blank eyes.

“We’re here for Suzui Shiho.” Ann answered quietly, looking uncomfortably around at the waiting room filled with sick patients. Nurses walked around mechanically, writing on their clipboards and hooking some on IVs. Not a single person other than the receptionist spoke in the large entrance way.

Typing on her computer, the receptionist nodded. “She is in room 203. Visiting hours end at 8 P.M.” She droned, directing them to the nearby elevators lethargically.

“Thank you.” Airi nodded politely, and the two students rode the elevator up to the second floor.

Slowly walking out into the somewhat bare hallways, she felt the dread creeping up her back. She didn’t want to see the results of her failure. To see with her own eyes that she couldn’t save her. She might as well have pushed Shiho off herself...

They stopped in front of the door of 203. Taking a deep breath, Ann turned to her companion. “Are you ready?” She asked quietly.

Airi tightened her grip around the strap of her bag. Was she ready? No. She would never be ready to see the broken body of another friend. “Yes.” She lied, sliding the door open.

The sunlight shone through the open window, white curtains fluttering from the cool breeze. A slow consistent beep echoed throughout the room, emanating from the ECG monitor. A faint hiss could be heard from the ventilator, hooked up through a series of tubes connected to the patient tucked in the bed. Silently, they walked up to the cot where Suzui Shiho laid, unable to wake up.

Biting her lip, Ann grasped a limp hand, the only appendage that wasn’t bandaged, and sat next to the comatose girl. Airi stayed near the foot of the bed, refusing to gaze further than the report on the bed frame. She placed Akira's flowers in a nearby vase, already filled with water.

“Hi, Shiho.” Ann breathed, voice shaky.

The patient remained silent, the only sound she made came from her faint breaths, her chest rising
up and down slowly. Most of her face was wrapped in white gauze, some having splotches of red.

Gulping, Ann trembled as she drank in the array of bruises and bandages. A drop fell, then another, as tears streamed down her face, hitting the back of her hand. She cried silently, never letting go of her grip on her friend, afraid that if she did, she would slip away.

Her heart wrenched at the sobs emitted from her friend and Airi closed her eyes, trying to keep her own tears at bay. Tightening her grip on the clipboard, crinkling the paper, she inhaled shakily.

Opening her eyes, she blinked away the moisture, and reread the report again. Broken femur, fractured ulna, and three cracked ribs. Her left shoulder had dislocated, however the hospital already took care of it. Her spine was a little more worrying. The report said two discs had been pushed out of alignment, and was fixed in surgery. All injuries had been set and bandaged, and the only thing left was to wait.

“Is she going to be OK..?” Ann asked hesitantly, turning her tear filled eyes at her.

Airi sighed heavily. “Physically, someday. Mentally...I don’t know.” She shook her head, guilt marring her features. No one can tell when a coma patient would wake up, if they ever would wake...

Ann let out a shaky sigh, closing her eyes in anguish. “Why won’t she wake up...?” She whispered, a scowl growing on her lips. “Why didn’t she tell me?!” She shouted, a fresh wave of tears dripping onto the linoleum floor. “Shiho, you idiot!” She spat venomously. “You didn’t have to take your life over that asshole! You selfish bitch! You...” She choked, shoulders trembling. “...Don’t leave me.” Her voice hitched, face twisted in agony.

Taking a shaky breath, Airi turned to look and her heart broke. She mourned for the unresponsive person who laid brokenly in bed, she mourned for the sound mind of a beautiful girl, she mourned for the shattered soul who continued to stay silent. She mourned for another friend.

Her strength left her, and she collapsed on her knees. Clenching the cold sheets with her hands, she buried her face in them to hide her sobs. ‘She’s still alive she’s still alive she’s still alive...’ She repeated to herself. The two girls cried, praying for their friend’s health, and more importantly, her regaining consciousness.

Sighing heavily, Airi collapsed on a chaise, an arm shielding her eyes from the lights.

Today had been a long day. Too long.

After crying their hearts out, Ann had taken out a small duck plush from the plastic bag. She told her that it was from Ryuji who gave it to her last night when they went home. That he hoped it would brighten Shiho’s day when she would wake up. Placing it on the night stand, she clapped her hands twice.

She then spoke of how this all started last year, when Shiho got onto the volleyball team. She was so happy that Ann would go and watch her play. That was how Kamoshida had noticed her.

Airi had told the model about what had happened up on the rooftop, and the reasoning for it. She told her how Shiho had broke down, confessing that the teacher had been touching her, beating her, and finally raped her. How Shiho endured all that for Ann, until that last act finally broke her.
Ann had been so angry that a nurse had come in to warn them about the noise level, or else they’d be kicked out. Quieting down after being reprimanded by the staff, Airi silently pulled out a stack of colorful paper, and began to fold. Seeing what she was doing, Ann joined in, and the two folded paper cranes together for several hours, keeping Shiho company.

They hoped to finish a thousand of them soon.

They finally parted an hour later, unable to stand being in the room, and Airi went straight to work. Her boss noticed her bloodshot eyes, but didn’t say anything, only handing over a bouquet of daisies and peonies with an understanding smile at the end of the shift.

Tearing up from the gesture, she thanked her boss profusely, quickly walking back to the hospital to put them by Shiho’s bedside. Her boss had given her a way to apologize, even if it was such a small gesture.

Her mother was there when she entered the room, and Airi was overcome with shame and guilt. This woman in front of her had almost lost her daughter because of her. Placing the flowers into the vase, she got on her knees and prostrated on the floor, asking for forgiveness for not being able to save her daughter.

More tears dripped as she explained how she had Shiho in her hands and she was too weak to pull her up, too weak to handle the scratches her daughter put on her wrists and palms. If she was stronger, her daughter wouldn’t be here right now, unresponsive.

Suzui-san looked at her silently, her face unreadable, before she got on her hands and knees as well. She asked for forgiveness, for not saying anything when her daughter became more depressed, for when she saw the bruises but didn’t ask, thinking it was just volleyball practice, and when she saw the light extinguish in her eyes. The older woman broke down, saying she may as well have killed her daughter herself. She didn't deserve to be called a mother when she couldn't even help her baby.

Airi had looked at her in shock. It was the exact same thing she accused herself of. She realized that everyone that had looked on at Shiho’s deterioration without doing anything, had really thought of themselves as the noose around her neck. Her lips trembled, and she hugged the sobbing woman.

In the end, she comforted the mother with her reasoning, and that instead crying about it, they should instead do their best to make sure Shiho was comfortable, healthy, and happy, even if the black haired girl herself might never reach the latter.

They owed her that much.

With one final bow, the class president left the mother and daughter, and headed home. Though many people had looked on curiously at her red puffy eyes, no one cared enough to ask. She made it home alone.

Crying so much in a span of a few hours had thrown her emotions on a roller coaster, going up and down over and over again.

She sighed tiredly, her head throbbing from the excess hormones, eyes burning from all the tears shed earlier. ‘School’s tomorrow, as well as Kamoshida’s Treasure.’ She reminded herself, groaning.

Reluctantly, she got up to take a bath, her muscles screaming at her. Turning off the faucet, she
submerged herself in the hot water, sighing in relief as her migraine dissipated.

After her bath, she put on her pajamas, and with a hesitant hand, picked up the dark cherry wood cello. Taking a deep breath, she slid the bow against the strings shakily, her fingers now unused to the grips.

“You used to play? Why don’t you play now?”

“Why would they do that?! They’re so mean to you, Ai-chan...”

She softly played G. Faure’s Elegie, releasing her anger and sorrow through the deep melody, one shaky note at a time.

It was all she could do to not break down again.
-Ito Hospital is a real place in Shibuya.
-Folding paper cranes is a popular legend in Japan. If you fold 1000 of them, your wish will come true. It was popularized by the story of "Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes" where a girl with leukemia after WW2 tried to cure herself with a wish. It's usually used for wishing a person a speedy recovery from deadly illnesses and such.
-Prostrating on the floor is a Japanese gesture for begging for forgiveness. It's used only in the most extreme circumstances.

Announcement: I'll be starting an internship for the next two weeks and I won't have as much time to update the fic =( So updates will come every other day or every couple of days, until June 24th. I'm really sorry guys!
Getting back home after his first shift at the convenience store, Akira entered Cafe Leblanc. There was only one customer, an older brown haired male sitting in one of the booths, talking to the cafe owner.

“Boss, did you hear?” The haughty regular asked. “Apparently that subway driver from the accident was acting really odd during his testimony hearing.” He gossiped smugly, taking a sip from his cup, one pinky sticking out.

Akira looked on silently from the entrance, interested at the information. Were they talking about what happened earlier this week? He remembered those two school girls gossiping about it.

Sojiro crossed his arms. “You talking about that psychotic whatever thing people’re going on about?” He asked reluctantly.

“Yeah, I heard it completely alters your personality.” The customer prattled on. “The news is saying the driver couldn’t even speak when they tried asking him questions.”

He sighed exasperatedly. “There’s no way a preposterous story like that could be true.” He commented shortly. “Oh, and sorry, but we’re closing soon.”

Offended, the haughty regular cleared his throat. “Hmph, how rude. This must be why you don’t get many customers.” He remarked, looking down at his cup. “Your coffee’s actually not half bad. The beans must be lamenting the sorry state of this store...”

Glaring at the customer now, Sojiro gestured to the door. “Thanks for stopping in.” He said through clenched teeth. "Please come again.”

The man pursed his lips “Hmph. I only say this out of politeness, but...thanks for the coffee.” Leaving some bills on the table, he walked out of the store.

Akira looked on uncomfortably at the blatant rudeness of the customer. Was that a coffee snob?

Sojiro rubbed the back of his head. “Sheesh, what a pain...” He groaned, going over to pick up the dirty dish and cash. He looked up at his charge. “Oh...What do you want? If you’re bored, go wash some dishes or something.”

Akira blinked. “How’s business?” He asked lightly, not wanting to set the other man off.

“Doesn’t concern you.” Sojiro replied curtly before sighing. “It’s all good as long as the shop doesn’t fail. I’m not gonna go wearing a fake smile.” He explained, his tone a bit softer than before.

“But what if it does fail?” Akira asked, furrowing his brows slightly in concern.

He shrugged. “As long as I’m here, the world leaves me be. No annoyances or troublesome people to deal with. It’s like my own personal hideaway. I’d be kinda screwed if I lost it, but I guess you would be too.” He stated nonchalantly. “So, you better at least try and be useful around here.” He sighed, taking off his apron. “Anyway, I’m leaving now. Don’t cause any trouble.” He warned
halfheartedly before eyeing the student. “You seem different...Have you always had a scowl on your face? Nothing goes your way in life. You’ll end up failing if you tense up like that.”

Akira nodded, and walked up the stairs to his room. Putting his bag down, Morgana jumped out and began grooming itself. Sitting down on the couch, his phone rang.

An: So, I went to see Shiho today at the hospital with Airi…
Ak: How was she?
An: Her condition is still stable.
An: They don’t know when she’ll regain consciousness though…
Ak: I’m sure she’ll be OK.
An: Yeah.
An: Airi and I began making paper cranes for her.
Ak: That’s really thoughtful.
An: She’ll get better, I know it.
An: We just need to believe in her.
An: But...I’ll never forgive Kamoshida. He’s going to pay for what he did, no matter what.

He put his phone away and sighed. So much had happened, and he’d barely been here a week.

Morgana jumped up next to him, sitting down on the couch. “We’re going into the Palace tomorrow.” It stated firmly. “We should assemble some infiltration tools. Clean off that desk back there so we can use it.” It gestured to the covered work desk, languidly waving its tail.

Nodding, Akira got up, putting on a face mask, and began cleaning. An explosion of dust flew in the air as he took off the transparent sheet, and cleared the stacks of books covering the counter.

With a final wipe of the rag, he took off his mask with a sigh.

“Great! Now you can make things whenever you want!” Morgana cheered, sneezing a bit from all the dust particles.

Exhaling softly, he looked around the rest of the dirty room. Pursing his lips at the conditions, he put his mask back on and cleaned the rest, dusting off the cramped bookcase and moving the bicycle and bags behind the stairs, leaving the barely alive plant next to the case. Walking back into his room, he smacked his hands satisfactorily.

“OK, let’s make something!” Morgana suggested, jumping onto the desk and relaxing on its back.

Akira went over and sat down, looking to the cat for guidance.

“I’ll provide the materials this time. Shadows in the Metaverse usually drop them when you kill them. Try making a lockpick.” The feline dropped a tin clasp and some silk yarn in front of the bespectacled student.

He looked down at the materials blankly. ‘How do I even…?’ He furrowed his brows in confusion.

“Don’t think too hard on it. You’ll get the hang of it.” Morgana reassured, grooming a paw. “Everyone starts off a little clumsy. Don’t be sad if it doesn’t turn out well, OK?”

Akira glanced at the cat incredulously behind his glasses, hesitantly grabbing the metal and pliers. A couple minutes of fumbling and silent cursing at the new cuts on his fingers, he held up one lockpick victoriously.
“Did you finish?” The feline looked curiously at the finished product in the teenager’s hand.

He held out the newly created object closer to the cat.

Morgana hummed, scrutinizing the lockpick. “Great! We should be able to use this.” It complimented, giving the boy an impressed look.

“All right!” He pumped his fist with a smirk, feeling confident. Taking some materials from his own pocket, he made two more, clumsily shaping the metal. By the end of it, his hands were covered in small scratches and cuts, the injuries mild but annoying.

Morgana stood up on its paws and looked at him sternly. “We’re heading into the Palace tomorrow. Let’s get some sleep.” It jumped dexterously to the bed.

Changing into his sleepwear in the bathroom, Akira snuggled into his bed, this time making sure Morgana would stay on the edge instead of on top of him. He breathed out, staring intently at the wooden beams that were lit with the midnight moon.

‘Tomorrow’s the day.’ He thought pensively. He was going to steal someone's heart. If they were caught, there was no doubt that he would be taken away, and his friends would be with him. They would be stuck in juvenile hall before being transferred to prison, and they wouldn't be able to get out. They would be released after a while, but him? With his existing record? Freedom would be snatched away from his fingertips.

His phone rang. Groaning softly, he reached over for his mobile.

R: Man, there’s so much I wanna write on the calling card. It’s kinda tough figuring out what to say.
An: Are you sure you’re really capable of this?!
R: Don’t worry, I got it. I even made a logo for us.
An: ...A logo?
R: Yep, you’ll get to see it tomorrow.
An: Well that’s worrying...
R: Anyway, you guys should rest up.
R: If we screw up tomorrow, we’re totally done for.
Ai: You should get some rest too, Ryuji-kun.
Ai: We need to be in tip top shape.
Ai: Let’s go in right after school?
Ak: Sounds good.
Ak: I’m counting on you guys.
An: Yep. I’m sure we can do this.
R: Just remember, we can’t trust any shitty adults.
R: That’s why we gotta do this ourselves.
R: Anyways, let’s pull this off and surprise everyone!

-----4/18, MONDAY, EARLY MORNING, SHUJIN ACADEMY

“Good morning!” Kamoshida greeted, standing in front of the school gates, grinning at the
students. “C’mon, hurry up and get to class!” He laughed lightheartedly.

Slowly walking up to the entrance, Akira and Airi glanced at each other in apprehension. He seemed more and more enthusiastic the closer it got to the board meeting. No doubt he was looking forward to expelling both outcasts from the school as well as the "liability" on his precious volleyball team.

The gym teacher then turned and smiled at the class president. “Good morning, Kimisawa! You better get your cute self going or you’ll be late!” He winked.

Airi gave him a polite bow in return, not saying anything at the inappropriate comment, and walked past.

Watching her back side with a lazy smile, he turned to the bespectacled student, face smoothing out into a blank canvas. “Good morning.” Kamoshida greeted flatly, looking at Akira with barely concealed contempt.

Composed gray eyes stared back evenly. “Good morning.” He replied smoothly, not a hint of emotion seeping through. He moved to walk past the taller man, but stopped when he spoke again.

“...That admirable behavior won’t do you any good once you’re expelled.” Kamoshida rested his hands on his hips, peering at the student derisively. "Make sure you stay away from Kimisawa in your last days here. She doesn't need you to drag her reputation down.”

Akira turned his head slightly, glancing at the gym teacher from the corner of his eye, before his gaze slid away and he continued walking into the school, hands in his pockets. He’d do whatever he wanted.

Entering the building, he spotted Airi next to the trophy cases with her back turned in his direction, talking to a couple of their classmates. Their worried expressions turned into one of fear as they saw him walk up behind her, and they hurried away with a bow.

He blinked. “What was that about?”

Startled, she turned around with wide eyes. “Oh! Akira-kun.” She sighed in relief, relaxing her shoulders. “It was nothing. They’ve seen us talk everyday and they were worried.”

“Yeah?” He commented, lips quirking into a bitter smile. Of course others would try to warn the kind class president about him. “And what did you say?”

“I told them there’s nothing to be afraid of. You’re like a harmless kitten.” She cracked a grin, before breaking out into laughter, smothering it with one hand.

He gave her a flat expression, but the twitching of his lips gave him away. “Yep. I’m the very picture of innocence.” He smirked, casually combing his hair with a hand.

Airi giggled at the action. “But to be serious, I did tell them they didn’t have to worry. I’m perfectly safe with you.” She smiled gently. “Hopefully, they’ll stop feeding the rumors about you to the rest of the school.”

Taken aback by the casual statement, Akira looked away. He swallowed, wetting his dry lips, as he felt the heat rise up in his face.
He made her feel safe? When had anyone felt safe near him? For so long, people had treated him as someone dangerous, and before that, a nuisance. His classmates avoided him, the school avoided him, his parents...

After so many insults and derogatory remarks thrown at him... he started to believe it. He accepted that no one should come near him, or else he’d hurt them just like he had hurt that man. His eyes hardened at the hazy memory. Now that he had the power of Personas, he really was dangerous. But...

His eyes slid back to his class president. Not to his teammates. Not to his friends. Not to her.

Turning back to her, his lips quirked, before transforming into a full blown grin. “Yeah.” Akira whispered, his grin softening to a tender smile. “I’ll make sure you never think otherwise.” He promised softly. ‘I can feel her trust in me…’

Ruby eyes widened at the heartfelt grin directed at her, and she felt her cheeks flush. Airi had never seen him smile fully before. Every one of his expressions in the past week had been mild at best. He really was very handsome when he let his guard down. ‘Not that he wasn’t handsome before…’ She thought distractedly, before realizing what she thought and shook her head.

“A-Anyway, we should head to class.” She stammered, looking away shyly.

The two walked in further past the trophy cases when they saw a crowd of students surrounding the announcement boards. Curious, they stopped a little a ways near the practice building entrance to listen in. Ryuji was already there, gesturing them over with a grin. They walked over, observing the spectacle just as Ann walked into the school. The boards were covered in red cards, stating “The Phantom Thieves Of Hearts.” A bunch of students were standing near, reading the cards and whispering to each other.

“A calling card..?” A student muttered.

“I heard it was already posted by the time everyone got here this morning.” Another student gossiped excitedly.

Walking up to the board, Ann examined a card. “Sir Kamoshida Suguru, the utter bastard of lust.” She read, furrowing her brows. “We know how shitty you are, and that you put your twisted desires on students that can’t fight back. That’s why we have decided to steal away those desires and make you confess your sins. This will be done tomorrow, so we hope you will be ready. From, the Phantom Thieves of Hearts...” She trailed off, squinting at it incredulously. “...Wow.” She turned around to leave, but noticed the gang of Persona users standing a couple feet away.

She joined them in the corner. Ryuji grinned at her. “Not bad, eh?” He nudged eagerly. “I looked up a bunch of similar stuff online for reference.” He stated proudly, leaning against a discarded desk.

Airi smiled sheepishly, sweatdropping. The message sounded rather... unrefined.

“Um...Yeah...” Ann glanced away awkwardly. “I know what you wanted to say, but it sounded like an idiot trying to be an adult.” She confessed flatly.

Sneaking its head out, Morgana agreed. “Your logo’s a little lacking, too.” It added disappointedly, glancing over at the swamped hallway.

Taken aback by the criticism, Ryuji’s brown eyes darted around uncomfortably. “OK, y’know what? Th-That ain’t true!” He argued weakly.
Nodding slightly, Airi joined in. “It’s fine as long as it does its job, right?”

The group quieted down when a couple of students passed by. “Did Kamoshida-sensei do something wrong...?” A shy girl whispered.

Her friend gasped. “Does this mean the rumors are true?!”

Scrutinizing the board, a junior turned to his classmate. “Wait a sec...Is someone gonna take something from Kamoshida-sensei...?” He asked apprehensively.

“What’s with this weird logo?” Another student commented, looking at the cards with an unimpressed face. “And who’re these Phantom Thieves of Hearts people...?”

Tapping a foot, Ryuji fidgeted at the comments. “...It got everyone excited, so it’s all good, yeah?” He said timidly, looking up at the bespectacled student with hopeful eyes.

Akira nodded, giving him a reassuring look.

The group turned when they noticed Kamoshida stomping angrily toward the announcement boards. The students crowding around backed away slowly from the gym teacher. “Who’s responsible for this...?!” Kamoshida gritted, glaring at the messages.

Morgana purred in delight, watching the medalist snap. “...Look at that. A predictable reaction for someone who knows what we mean by distorted desires.”

“I think it’s hittin’ him pretty hard.” Ryuji commented, grinning viciously.

Airi exhaled sharply. “Let’s see if it works.”

A couple of feet away from them, Kamoshida turned sharply at a nearby student. “Did you do this?! Or was it you?!” He yelled, turning to another student. The crowd of students quickly dispersed, running away in fear.

Turning around, the older man’s eyes landed on the group, specifically the two guys. “...Was it you two?!” He gritted, marching up to them threateningly. The girls looked away, not acknowledging the towering figure. Subtly, the Ryuji and Akira moved to cover them, staring at the teacher with challenging frowns.

Akira rested his hands in his pockets. “What’re you talking about?” He blinked his eyes innocently.

Dark eyes narrowed at the question. “So, you’re playing dumb..?” Kamoshida whispered threateningly before he relaxed and snorted. “Eh, it’s not a problem. You’ll soon be expelled soon enough anyway.”

The air fizzed, flashing purple. The students snapped their heads in his direction. Where Kamoshida was now stood the Shadow version from the Metaverse. “Come...Steal it, if you can!” The corrupt king goaded, yellow eyes glowing madly. The Shadow turned back to the real Kamoshida, who pivoted and walked away.

“This is it.” Airi whispered firmly. “Once classes end, we’re going straight to the top.” She looked at her companions, determination burning in her eyes.

The group of thieves nodded, before going about their classes.

Getting through the periods were stressful, all five of them waiting anxiously for the last bell to
ring. Fidgeting in her chair, Ann glared at the clock, mentally shouting for time to pass faster. During lunch, the group congregated in their class, Ryuji joining them, and they discussed quietly about what their plan of attack was, and what they should do if Plan A failed.

The bell rang, signalling the end of the day. At this point, they were so tense that they were relaxed, calmly walking out of class and up to the rooftop.

Standing ready, Akira swiped his phone and activated the app, transporting them to the Metaverse.

Holding it in his hand, Joker walked forward, his company of thieves following him steadfastly.

Chapter End Notes

The Palace is next!!!
I had a really hard time at my first day of work. I pulled my left shoulder so hard that my neck and scalp hurts every time I breathe lol
Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

Long chapter to make up for the absence! Thank you guys so much for 240 kudos!!

1/1/18: Was told Kamoshida will not let female characters go for the crown, so this chapter has been edited. I wasn't aware of this because I always go straight for Mona, as well as any playthrough I watched.

The air pulsed red around them, as if the very Palace itself was boiling over with anger. The castle loomed before them, the wooden drawbridge still lowered as if abandoned. The sky stayed its dark red, though the moon seemed to shine even more threateningly in this twisted world. Though they couldn't hear any Shadows or the familiar clanking of armored guards, they could hear blood pulsing strongly.

“Let’s go! Don’t let your guards down!” Mona advised, readying its scimitar.

Joker accessed the app and teleported them to the throne hall’s Safe Room. They exited and headed down the corridor, looking around cautiously for any adversaries that could stop them. Arriving back at the throne room, the tall double doors wide open, they noticed it was bare of any life. Not a single soldier was around, nor was Kamoshida’s Shadow.

“What the hell’s goin’ on here?” Skull muttered, looking around suspiciously. “The door’s just sittin’ open, and there aren’t any soldiers around…”

They walked in cautiously. “This place is probably undemanned now that they all got assigned elsewhere.” Mona explained, purring happily. “Either way, we win as long as we can steal the Treasure! Let’s keep going!”

Carefully, they crossed the long hall, swatting away the raining rose petals. Their footsteps thudded soundlessly on the plush carpet, camouflaging any loud noises from their shoes. Going through the double doors behind the throne and up the stairs, they opened the treasure room. What used to be a wavering ball of light was now a comically large gem encrusted crown, gleaming in its own golden sheen above the pile of treasure.

They stopped in front of it, looking at Treasure with wide eyes. “Aww yeeeeeaaaah!” Mona cheered, jumping gleefully. “The Treasure has appeared!” Its eyes shined, reflecting the crown in its eyes.

“Man, it’s huge!” Skull yelped, staring at it incredulously.

“What do you think?! It’s just as I said! Now we can steal it!” The feline stated smugly.

“How...do we move it?” Elegant asked hesitantly, holding her arm. "It's rather big..."

“Ahh...this shine brings tears to my eyes…” The cat breathed dreamily, not hearing the question. Crossing her arms, Panther frowned. “...It kinda pisses me off.” She spoke shortly. “Why’s it so
pretty..? Isn’t this Kamoshida’s desires?”


The humans looked down at the feline with odd looks. “Uh, the cat’s actin’ awfully excited.” Skull remarked uneasily, scratching his head.

Panther tilted her head, observing their non-human teammate. “What’s wrong? Is something-?”

She was cut off when the black and white cat jumped high in the air, and landed on the giant crown, nuzzling it. “Meeeeeooooow!” It purred ecstatically, oblivious to the others.

Covering her cheeks, Elegant blushed at the sight. ‘So cute!’ She squealed internally.

“Mrrrrrowooooow!” Mona rumbled, the purring kicking up a notch.

The other three looked at each other awkwardly. “That’s not catnip…” Joker sweatdropped.

It turned to look at its leader, eyes still glazed with infatuation. “...Meow, meow! Mewwww!” It replied, mewling animatedly.

Rubbing his head, Skull snapped. “Alright, that’s enough, you stupid cat!”

It froze, quickly detaching itself and walking back to the group with its head down. “Oh, um, yeah…” Mona started, rubbing its arm sheepishly. “Forgive me for displaying such an insolent sight in front of the ladies…” It mumbled apologetically, looking to the side.

“You were completely out of character too. What was that about?” Panther asked, looking at it curiously.

Mona cringed and shook its head. “I couldn’t stop it either...To think I’d be drawn to human desires this much…” It frowned, but then perked up. “ Doesn’t that prove that I’m human?!”

Skull looked at it disbelievingly. “How should we know?!”

Elegant held up her hands in a placating manner. “Guys, c’mon.” She began, a little peeved with them just standing around arguing. Who knows when the Shadows would emerge. “We should grab it and get moving before we get caught.”

Mona quickly nodded, agreeing with her. “A-Anyway, you guys need to carry it!” It stammered, looking at the four expectantly.

Rolling his eyes, Skull moved to grasp the Treasure. “All you do is bark orders...” He muttered, then grinned lightheartedly. “Still, that was easier than I thought! I thought for sure there’d be some insane trap or something.”

“Don’t jinx it.” Joker replied exasperatedly, walking up beside him.

Panther walked closer as well. “His Palace will disappear if we take this back, right?” She asked. "And Kamoshida will change too…”

“That should be the case…” Mona replied, oval eyes darting around unsurely.

Skull rolled his shoulders. “Good. Now’s our chance then.”

The four student-turned-thieves reached out to grasp the edge of the crown. Once their fingers
touched the cool metal, it fell into their grasps, weighing down their arms. They grunted, muscles straining under its weight, and slowly crab walked out through the doors, one step at a time.

“It’s heavy…!” Panther winced.

“We gotta keep moving.” Elegant groaned, inhaling sharply.

Mona looked at the group with pride, watching as they slowly left the Treasure room. “To think it’d go so well...I’ve even found four Persona users in the process...” It whispered gleefully, jumping in place. “My judgement was correct. I made the right choice in making a deal with you!” It announced enthusiastically toward Joker.

Grimacing, he gestured with his head for the cat to move. "Go open the Safe Room for us."

“Nyahaha!” It laughed triumphantly, opening the door for them. Making sweeping motions with its stubby arms, It directed them on where to keep going. Slowly, they made their way down the steps, and halfway through the throne room.

“Go, go! Let’s go! Ka-mo-shida!”

They craned their necks to see who had said that, trying to see over the blindingly bright Treasure.

“Nngh!” With a grunt, the corrupted king appeared and jumped, spiking a volleyball at the crown. It knocked it out of their hands and tumbled noisily onto the carpet with a clang.

“Uwa-!” Skull yelped, moving back.

Majestically sailing through the air above them, Kamoshida landed smoothly in front of his throne. Straightening up from his crouch, he stretched out one hand, palm facing outward. The large crown on the floor slowly began to roll in his direction, before flying into his palm, now much smaller than it was originally.

Not-Ann in her purple leopard print bikini ran up and hugged him enthusiastically, rubbing her barely covered breasts on his arm as she smirked lazily at them.

“I won’t let anyone take this!” Kamoshida declared, casually tossing the crown in his hand, glaring down at the thieves. He held the Treasure out toward the Persona users. “This proves that I am the king of this castle; it is the core of this world!”

Clenching her gloved hands, Panther glared at him darkly. “That rat bastard...” She whispered, her eyes sliding from the king to his princess. “That’s how he sees me, isn’t it?!”

Elegant glared coldly. “That’s how he sees all us girls.”

Skull took a step forward menacingly. “Yo, pervert.” He greeted. “Were you waitin’ to ambush us?”

“As if our king would need to. You fools fell into our trap.”

They turned their heads to where the voice came from. Slowly walking down the steps in high heels, was Airi.

Elegant gasped. “Huh?!!

The group stared with wide eyes as Not-Airi descended to the throne. Adorning a curly messy bun was a diadem, draped over the top of her head. Hugging her curvaceous figure was a peach and
lavender ruffle corset, laced so tightly that the boning pushed the tops of her breasts out in full view. Her long slim legs were left bare, showing off the lacy underwear. Icy eyes stared at them impassively, latching onto Kamoshida’s other arm.

Not-Ann purred seductively, reaching out a clawed hand to stroke the other princess' arm. Together, they created the perfect perverted fantasy as they pressed their breasts against their king’s arms, his hands kneading the soft flesh of their scantily clad rears.

“...Daaamnnn.” Skull whistled, eyes roaming up and down the fake’s body. “...Y’know, I was kinda wonderin’ if there was a fake Elegant too, since that bastard up there’s been pervin’ on her lately, but...wow.”

Panther smacked him on the back of the head, huffing at his chauvinism. "Don't be a pervert!"

Opening her mouth, then closing it, Elegant pursed her lips. “...I don’t even know what to say.” She stated flatly, glaring darkly at her copy that stared back with a doll-like expression. This was how Kamoshida saw her. Anger coursing through her veins, she clenched her hand around her scythe. ‘Another disgusting man...’

Gray eyes stared unblinkingly at the new addition of the room. He drank in the figure, eyes roaming up and down as he digested the lingerie, the exposed top of her breasts, the panties. ‘Damn, indeed.’ Joker thought distractedly, feeling his face heat up. Clearing his throat awkwardly, he tore his eyes away, trying to dispel those thoughts about his teammate.

His eyes met Skull’s who grinned at him, raising his eyebrows up and down behind his mask. Joker gave him an incredulous look. Now was not the time to be perverts!

Huffing, Kamoshida wrapped an arm around each girl’s shoulders with a smirk. “Meet my newest princess. She’s a little more uppity than my Ann here. I haven’t had the chance to taste her yet...” He licked his lips salaciously, Not-Airi leaning into his embrace.

"Whenever you like, my king.” She murmured, resting her head on his shoulder. "I was so blind to not notice your growing affections for me. I thought you only had eyes for Ann..." She pouted shyly. "I'm so glad you chose me, too."

Not-Ann giggled. “You’re such a perv!” She said playfully, lightly tracing her finger on his abdomen. "Don't worry, Ai-Ai. We'll have lots of fun..."

Elegant recoiled at the dialogue, glaring at the teacher in disgust. A shiver crawled up her spine, seeing her double just submit to that. That could have really been her if Joker had never transferred to their school. This man would've had his pick of the students, and no one would've said anything...

“You idiots came running for my crown, just as I thought you would. I’ll dispose of you myself, right here, right now.” He declared flippantly, his hands stroking his dolls' hips.

“That’s our line, you sexually-harassin’ douche bag!” Skull retorted angrily, stomping a foot. "You're so fuckin' gross!"

Shaking his head in amusement, Kamoshida stared down at them pityingly. “What a selfish misunderstanding.”

Glaring at him, Panther stepped forward. “How is it a misunderstanding?! You were doing things that you kept in secret from others!”
Tossing his crown again, he smirked. “The people around me were the ones who kept it secret.” Kamoshida corrected. “Adults who want to share in my accomplishments, students who have the drive to become winners...They willingly protect me so that we all may profit from it.”

Taken back, Skull looked at his teammates. “Profit?!” He yelped, uncertain at what he meant.

“That’s not true at all! All you’ve done with your “success” is abuse people who trusted you!” Elegant argued, staring at him coldly. “No one asked to be hit. No one asked to be sexually harassed...” Her eyes narrowed. “And no one asked to be raped!”

The corrupt ruler sneered. “There are too many imbeciles who don’t understand! Including naive brats like you and that girl who tried to kill herself!”

Letting her arms fall limp, Panther bowed her head. “True, she’s a total idiot...” She began quietly. “Letting you manipulate her, trying to commit suicide..”

Elegant stared at her in shock. What was she saying?

The dominatrix clenched her hands and glared up at the king. “And I’m even more of a dumbass for not realizing that...!” She crouched, readying her whip with a flick of her wrist. “But no matter what kind of fool someone might be...They don’t need your permission to live their lives!” She declared firmly.

“Drop the attitude, you mediocre peasant! There’s no wrong in using my gifts for my gain!” Kamoshida scowled, looking down at them condescendingly. “I’m a cut above all other humans!”

Panther glared. “Above..?!” She whispered, her voice raising in volume with each word. “You mean beneath. You’re a goddamn demon obsessed with your sick desires!”

Chuckling, he lowered his head, the fake girls moving to the side. A red aura began to envelop him, and he swept his arms wide open with a large grin on his square jaw. “That’s right. I’m not like you...” Kamoshida grabbed the girls under his arms, staring at his crown lustfully. “I am a demon who rules this world!”

Black ooze swallowed the three up, merging them together into one large being. Large drops of saliva fell from his gaping mouth, a permanent demented grin on his maw.

The group took a step back, Mona stumbling. “Wh-What the hell..?!” Skull sputtered, staring wide eyed at the transformation.

What used to be Kamoshida was now a looming demonic being with four arms, holding onto a wine glass, a knife, a crop whip, and a fork. He barely avoided skimming his head onto the high ceiling with his size. His purple tongue hung out grotesquely, saliva dripping from the appendage. His yellow eyes rolled around their sockets aimlessly, not focusing on any one subject. Sitting in front of the fuchsia skinned demon was a chalice, filled with the naked lower bodies of young females. In the wine glass, they spotted both Not-Ann and Not-Airi swimming motionlessly in the liquid like two dolls.

“Gahahahaha!” Kamoshida laughed, his voice distorted in its new form. “I’m allowed to do whatever the hell I want!” He declared, swiping his drenched tongue at them.

Gray eyes glared behind a white mask. “You’re wrong.” Joker stated, pointing a red finger at it rebelliously, signalling his team. “We’re not gonna let you do this any longer. For us, for the students you abused, and for Suzui-san.” He twirled his dagger in his hand. "Let's finish this."
The demon roared, spitting globs of saliva around them. “You goddamn, no-good, shitty brats! Haven’t you been taught not to point at people?! Huh?!”

Jumping behind the four, Mona pointed a paw out. “Look! The Treasure’s over there on his head!” It gestured to the crown on top of the demon’s head. “We should catch him off guard and steal it! Let’s attack him and wait for that opportunity!”

Gla...
his shotgun.

Elegant knelt with her rifle. “There’s a reason why democracy exists and monarchies fell.”

“We came all this way to steal that!” Panther gestured at the crown with her TMP. “Will you just give it up and hand it over?!”

“Silence!” The demon flailed, the items held in his arms coming close to their persons. “I won’t let the likes of you have this!”

“You still have the energy to say things like that?!” Mona yelled exasperatedly, standing behind the team on a partition. “Then we’re going to up our game as well! Go!”

The four teenagers jumped back and launched their all out attack, using the surrounding pillars as footholds to jump back and forth around the large demon. Each weapon left their mark upon his skin, black blood oozing from his many wounds.

Flinching back, the demon stared at them, unable to comprehend their reasoning. “I’m the king...! If I’m not, then who is?!”

Mona hummed and rushed up behind the de-facto leader, scrutinizing their surroundings. “We won’t get anywhere with brute force...” It whispered.

Joker glanced up, the shine of the crown drawing his eye, and an idea came to his mind. “Let’s go for the crown.”

The cat looked at him in surprise. “I see...In that case, time for Plan B!” Mona declared. “Look over at that terrace!” It gestured to the second floor landing to their left and right. “While the others are drawing Kamoshida’s attention, have someone go there! Let’s steal the Treasure without him noticing!”

Swirling his cup, the demon drank the wine, letting the fake girls hit his tongue. Salivating, he violated the dolls with the appendage before spitting them back out into the glass. His chest puffed up as if he was renewed with energy from the carnal act.

“Ugh.” Elegant cringed, the disgust and anger at being treated like that building up within her. Even if it wasn’t exactly her, it was her image that was being defiled. That man's face peered down at her, lips spread in a grin. Clenching her teeth, she took up her rifle again and shot a bullet.

Flying through the air, it broke the champagne glass and shattered it into a million pieces. The shards rained down onto the carpet and the wine spilled over the volleyball slaves in a fountain of red. Falling to the ground, the dolls laid there motionlessly, their usefulness ruined.

The demon roared in anger, swiping at them with his sword. "My princesses...!"

Dodging the swing, Panther ran up to the dolls and in a fit of righteous fury, smashed the point of her heel into them. "Die, dammit!" Straightening her whip, she flogged the fakes until they dissipated into nothing. Jumping back near her teammates, she dusted off her outfit with a satisfied exhale. "I wanted to do that since I saw them."

Elegant smirked, cold pleasure in her eyes. "Ditto. Thanks, Panther."

Looking at each teammate speculatively, gray eyes zeroed in on their smallest teammate. “Mona, go steal the crown.” Joker ordered, spinning the knife in his hand idly as he went in for another attack, jumping away from the giant red hand that reached out to grab him.
Mona nodded. “Roger that!” He dodged back behind its team, and moved toward a nearby pillar.

Kamoshida, not noticing that he had one less enemy now in the midst of his rage, launched another volleyball assault at Skull.

While the team launched their attacks, distracting their enemy, Mona dexterously climbed the pillar with its paws and swung itself over the railing. Running down the terrace, it stood up on one of the platforms, ready to jump at the signal.

“Now listen up.” Kamoshida began, voice booming throughout the large hall. “This school exists because I’m around. You’re the only ones who don’t respect me, you know!” He scowled his jagged oral cavity at them. “You’re misunderstanding it all! I haven’t sexually harassed anyone! They came on to me because they wanted to get on my good side!”

Glaring coldly at the eye that circled on her, the other locked onto Panther and her voluptuous form, Elegant jumped forward and using the tips of her boots, spun around the large hands that tried to grab her, and left several cuts on the Shadow’s form with her scythe before jumping back.

A small black blur jumped up and curling into a ball, knocked off the large golden crown on his head. Uncurling its body, Mona dashed back to his team and brandished its scimitar. "Mission accomplished!"

The distorted Shadow flailed his arms, desperately reaching for his now missing crown and items dropping from his open palms. “Nooo! My...my precious...!” He wailed. Slumping at the loss, his posture was now nowhere as confident.

Mona grinned. “Good, Kamoshida’s shaken up!”

Pointing her TMP at the demon, Panther smiled hopefully. “I think we can do this...!”

With renewed confidence, they rushed up, slashing and attacking him several times, knowing the battle would be over soon. The demon tried to defend himself, but without his most precious possession, his actions were halfhearted at best.

With one last incision, Elegant twirled and mockingly blew him a kiss, two fingers outstretched. “Rest in peace.” She murmured with a serene smile. 'You piece of shit.'

With a cry, Kamoshida toppled over to the ground, changing back into his human form. He dropped ¥8000 in the process, which Joker picked up with a satisfied smirk. Now that the battle was over, Skull made his way to pick up the Treasure that had rolled away into its smaller form, when the defeated king launched himself at it, somersaulting across the carpet and running away down across the hall.

“Hey!” The pirate yelled, the group chasing after him. Taking out her sniper rifle, Elegant knelt on the carpet and aimed. The shot rang out and hit the pillar next to him, causing him to stumble back toward the open balcony.

“Nngh...” He gulped, frantically trying to find another escape route. All that was behind him was a bottomless drop, the darkness seemingly inviting him forward.

“What’s wrong? Not running away?” Panther asked mockingly, fingering her whip. “Why don’t you run? Aren’t you a great athlete?”

Shaking, he glared. “It’s always been like this...” He began, teeth chattering under the nerves. “All those goddamn hyenas forcing their expectations on me...! I’m doing this all for them! What’s
wrong about demanding a reward for that?!” He shouted hysterically, his hands clenching the crown protectively.

Scrunching his face in disgust, Skull shook his head. “Now you’re makin’ excuses..?” He scoffed. “We’ll do something about that distorted heart of yours.”

Elegant stepped forward, a stony expression set on her features. “Even if you think your actions were justified, that doesn’t mean it was for everyone that you had hurt.” She stated matter a factly. “Instead of doing what was right, you went and forced your expectations on others.” She glared darkly. “...You’re disgusting.”

Rooted in his spot, the gym teacher grunted in frustration.

“Scared?” Panther asked flippantly, brushing a ponytail. “Right now, you’re seeing the same view that Shiho did.” She slowly stepped closer. “I’m sure she was scared too...except she had no choice but to jump...” She continued quietly as she advanced threateningly on the volleyball medalist, who grew more panicked by the moment.

She stopped, a couple feet away from the sweating man. “What will you do?” She whispered, her hardened gaze drilling into the pathetic sight in front of her. “Will you jump?...Or would you rather die here?” She took off her mask, Carmen hovering behind her with fireballs in her hands.

Kamoshida took a step back, hugging his crown closely, watching them with fear.

Elegant reloaded her rifle, handling it as casually as schoolwork. “...I wonder if you even have the courage to take your life to salvage your non-existent honor.” She whispered ominously. "Shiho-chan felt that she had to...after you had violated her body and her mind." Her eyes slid to him. "...Maybe I should shoot it off before the next bullet enters your head."

Behind them, their teammates winced at the threat. Slightly adjusting their stances, Skull and Joker instinctively moved their hands to shield the front of their crotches.

Sweating profusely, the defeated king begged. “No, please wait! I beg you...Just forgive mee!”

“Shut up.” Ann whispered, glaring at the man hatefully. “I bet everyone told you the same. But you...” She clenched her eyes painfully, before snapping them open. “You took everything from them!” She exclaimed, sending a fireball in his direction. "You took everything from her!...From me! I'll never forgive you!"

He shrieked and cowered, covering himself. The fire hit the awning next to him, charring the stone. Trembling, he got on his knees. “I accept defeat...You want this? Take it.” He bowed his head in defeat and threw the crown.

Joker reached out and caught it with one hand, examining it with a cool expression. This wasn't how they thought the outcome would turn out, but as long as they got their goal in one piece, he was fine with it.

“Go ahead and finish me off...” Kamoshida whispered and closed his eyes, a tear rolling down a cheek. “You do that...and my real self will go down too...” He bowed his head.

Skull rubbed the back of his head uncomfortably, while Joker looked on silently. Mona crossed its arms, staring pensively at the defeated Ruler. They didn't have as much of a say as the ladies in front of them.

Pursing her lips, Elegant took a step behind Ann, silently supporting her decision. It wasn't her that
he wronged the most.

“You have that right since you’ve won…” The king whispered.

Exhaling sharply, Ann clenched her hands, glaring at him murderously. Arching a hand, she sent a large ball of fire at the man. Startled, the others cried out in surprise. It exploded next to the kneeling man, blowing back his cape. He looked up at her slowly, eyes wide, surprised that he was still alive and in one piece.

With a flash of blue, her feline mask appeared, concealing her face once again. “If his mind shuts down, he can’t admit his crimes.” Panther stated resolutely.

Sighing, Elegant smiled at her back, pride shining in her eyes. Death was never a good solution, after all. It was too easy of an escape.

“You’re kind, Lady Ann…” Mona smirked, scratching its cheek.

Kamoshida bent his neck. “I’ve lost.” He shook his head. “You’re through when you lose…” He despaired. “What am I - What am I supposed to do now..?” He asked hesitantly, tears streaming down his face.


After a moment, the king nodded. “All right…” He whispered, looking up at them with a hopeful smile. “I will leave now and return to my real self…” His body began to glow in a white light. “I’ll make certain that I-” With a flash, he disappeared.

They felt their shoulders slump once he left, feeling the stress of the week leave them. The Palace felt calmer now, as if it had been emptied of any negative emotions. They did it. They actually did it!

As soon as the Ruler left though, the castle began to rumble. The teenagers looked around, alarmed at the sudden movement.

“Hey, just so you know, we don’t have time to waste.” Mona warned idly. “This place is about to collapse!” It sat on the floor, languidly grooming a paw.

The ceiling began to crumble, stone smashing against the carpet. With a start, the thieves began their escape. They desperately ran through the hallways, dodging the falling debris that dogged their trail. They would've tried to head into a Safe Room, but the passage was blocked off as the ceiling collapsed.

“We’re gonna die! We’re so gonna die!” Panther cried, looking behind her as the hall collapsed behind them.

“Don’t look back!” Elegant shouted, a piece of rubble cutting her cheek as she ran.

Mona, now in its real cat form, jumped up onto Panther’s head. “Hey, what the-?!” She started, as it then jumped onto Skull’s head, then finally onto Joker’s shoulder.

“No fair, you jerk!” Skull grunted, trying to keep up the grueling pace as they dashed down the hall.

“Mroowww!” Mona replied, looking back at them innocently.
Elegant stared. Mona changed back?

With a wince, Skull gripped his thigh, before tripping onto the floor. “Gah!” He flinched, holding his knee as jolts of pain laced up his leg.

The others stopped and turned at his shout. “Ryuji!” Panther cried out worriedly.

He waved her away. “Heh...It’s been a while, so I just tripped, is all!” He grinned reassuringly, eye twitching even as his leg spasmed.

Elegant ran back to him and pulled on his arm. “Get up or we’ll get crushed!” She cried, eyes darting back to the crumbling infrastructure that was quickly catching up to them.

"Ryuji!" Joker urged, furrowing his brow at their situation.

The ceiling began to collapse above them, and they scrambled to keep moving. They ran and ran until they made it to the end, automatically transporting back to the school.

Chapter End Notes

Airi's end card appears!
As described, she lands from the all-out, twirls once, blows a kiss with two fingers and says "Rest In Peace." while smiling serenely and her scarf flying behind her. The backgrounds don't matter since they don't actually show up in real life, but if it did, it would have been purple drapes and white music notes and music staves. I might draw that out, but honestly I'm lazy and it doesn't actually matter to the story lol
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They panted in exhaustion. They were back in the alley, facing the open gates of the school. The sun set against the buildings, casting an orange flame upon the cement and concrete. It was late enough that there weren't any other students walking around, fortunately leaving them alone on the tiny street.

“That sucked...” Ann winced, taking a deep breath.

Resting his hands on his hips, Akira nodded in agreement, getting his breath back.

Exhaling softly, Airi straightened up and stretched, wincing at her sore muscles. Her face stung for some reason, but it didn't really matter in the long run.

“Look at the Nav!” Ryuji shouted, staring at his phone.

They all pulled out their phones. On the screen was the MetaNav, the red map no longer showing the marker for the Palace. “*The destination has been deleted.*”

“...It’s true. We can’t go there anymore.” Ann whispered, staring wide eyed at the screen.

“So we succeeded..?” Airi asked hesitantly, looking at the others.

“What about the Treasure?!” Morgana yowled, dodging between their legs in anticipation.

Akira pulled it out of his pocket, showing it to the group.

They looked at it curiously. It was an Olympic gold medal, the date listed it from almost a decade ago. The shine reflecting off of the metal showed that it was well cared for, and the lanyard was in pristine condition. “What the..?” Ryuji scratched the back of his head.

Ann crossed her arms, tapping her chin. “..A medal? Wait, where’d that crown go?”

“What is goin’ on..?” Ryuji asked quietly.

“It means, that was the source of Kamoshida’s desires.” Morgana explained, looking at the medal pensively. “To him, this medal is worth as much as that crown we saw in the Palace.”

Ryuji moved closer, scrutinizing the object in the transfer student’s hand. “An Olympic medal...” He whispered, grimacing. “So that perv kept clingin’ to his past glory and couldn’t let it go…”

Airi tightened her lips. "So he wanted to feel important and loved again by asserting himself..." She frowned and shook her head, disillusioned by the thought. "How the mighty have fallen..."

The group looked at each other uncomfortably. “But...this means that Kamoshida’s heart might have changed, right?” Ann questioned hesitantly.

Shaking its fur, Morgana stood up on its four legs. “...Probably.” It shrugged.

Ryuji looked at it incredulously. “Our expulsion’s on the line here!”

“This is the first successful example for me too.” The feline argued weakly, looking away. “However, there’s no doubt that this has affected Kamoshida’s personality quite a lot. The entire Palace disappeared, after all.”
He rubbed his hair furiously. “Ugh, I feel all antsy! Ain’t there a way to check now?”

Putting the medal back, Akira rested his hands in his pockets. “We’ll know soon enough.” He shrugged, an uncomfortable frown on his face.

“Right…” Ann whispered, fidgeting with her hair.

Sighing, Airi shouldered her bag. “We’ll know by tomorrow at the earliest.” She added, nervously fiddling with the hem of her skirt.

Looking back and forth between the humans, Morgana snapped. “Come on, why the gloomy faces? Be happy! We completed this with great success, you know.” It proclaimed, trying to reassure the students.

Ryuji slumped. “We just don’t know if everything’s OK yet…”

Stretching its body out, It sighed. “I’m pretty sure it’ll be fine.” It smiled. “Remember how Kamoshida’s Shadow said that he’s returning to his self in reality?” It reminded, sitting down. “Kamoshida Suguru was scum.” It waved its tail. “Still…He did seem to regain his conscience somewhat at the end.”

“It seemed so…” Akira remarked, adjusting his glasses. "Maybe he'll apologize."

Morgana purred. “There are definitely those who have been saved thanks to what you’ve done.”

Ann nodded, a smile growing on her lips. “Yeah…”

Airi looked away. But it didn't solve that people were already traumatized. Everyone on the volleyball team, Mishima, Shiho…

Crossing his arms, Ryuji leaned against the brick wall. “Anyways, I guess we gotta wait. It all boils down to what’s gonna happen to Kamoshida…” He frowned awkwardly. "Or if we’re gettin’ expelled for real…”

“Let’s just go home for now.” Akira suggested, picking up his bag. “We’ll have to be patient…”

Huffing, the punk slumped his shoulders. “..Right. C’mon, let’s go home.” Ryuji relented.

The teens and one cat traveled to Shibuya, where they went their separate ways. Covering her mouth as she yawned, Airi leaned back in her seat on the train, rubbing her eyelids. It sped down the dark tunnel toward its destinations, and their stop at Yongenjaya was still far off.

Akira glanced over at her. “Is everything all right?” He asked quietly, the roaring of the train tracks muffling him to other passengers. His eyes narrowed slightly at the red line marring her cheek. He reached out, stopping just before his fingers touched her skin. “You have a cut.” He stated concernedly.

Reaching up to prod the injury, Airi tried to give him a reassuring smile. “I’m OK…Just...really tired…” She blinked slowly, trying to stay awake.

Furrowing his brows, he contemplated with himself before hesitantly reaching out and tugging her into his chest. “Sleep. It’ll be a while until we’re h-home.” He stated clumsily, feeling his face flush against the cool plastic of his glasses. ‘Maybe this is too forward..?’ He glanced away,
feeling insecure in his actions.

Her eyes widened at the intimate contact. ‘This is really close..!’ She screamed in her mind, a blush staining her cheeks. “A-Are you sure, Akira-kun?” Airi whispered anxiously, biting her lip. “I don’t want to be a bothe-” She covered her mouth as she yawned again. She wiped the tears from her eyes, pouting a bit.

Chuckling slightly at the sight, he nodded. “I’m sure.” Akira replied reassuringly.

“OK…” She breathed out, eyelids already heavy with sleep. She rested her head on his chest, letting his somewhat jumpy heartbeat and steady breaths lull her. After a few moments, her breathing evened out, her body relaxed against his.

Biting his lip nervously, he wrapped his arm tighter, and hesitantly rested his cheek on top of her head. ‘This feels nice…’ He thought shyly. His heart pounded in his chest, his breathing just a little faster than normal.

He was lucky that Morgana was napping in his bag. He didn't need any comments about how he was touching Its "Lady Airi." Had he ever held a girl like this..? No one back in Mishima had touched him on purpose, usually just bumping into him or brushing past. Maybe when he was younger, his mother used to hug him, though he could barely remember...

He breathed, his nose smelling a calm scent that reminded him of mint but better. 'What is that?...' He idly thought, feeling himself relax, the scent carrying away his worries and troubles, if only for a little bit. Adjusting his grip on her slim shoulder, he closed his eyes, feeling the dream world call for him as well. They spent the rest of the train ride like this, close together....

...  
...  

“The next stop is Yongenjaya. I repeat, the next stop is Yongenjaya. The time is now 6:25PM...”

Startled from his trance, Akira straightened up in his seat. A heavy weight rested against his chest and he looked down, observing the peaceful expression on the class president’s face with a slight tug on his lips. He gently shook her. “Airi-chan, we’re almost home.”

Groaning in her sleep, she snuggled deeper into his chest, not wanting to wake up.

He blushed feverishly, tensing from the very intimate contact in a public area. Gulping, he shook her again. “Airi-chan.” He called out a little louder.

Scrunching her face in displeasure, she looked up at him in sleepy confusion, eyes open half lid.

“We’re almost home.” He repeated, the blush still apparent against his milky skin tone.

“Oh.” She whispered, rubbing her eyes. Yawning, she stretched her arms up in the air.

His eyes zoomed in at the sight, resting on her chest where the white Shujin Academy turtleneck conformed around her bust before quickly looking away, embarrassed and slightly ashamed of himself. ‘Stop being a pervert..!’

His mind flashbacked to earlier when the fake walked down in that outfit...He clenched his eyes shut, his face heating up again. That might just haunt his dreams...in a good way.

“This is Yongenjaya. I repeat, this is Yongenjaya. The time is now 6:28PM...”
Getting up from their seats, the two students got off the train and went up the escalators with other pedestrians, leaving the station. Walking down the main road into the back streets, Airi yawned again, trying to wake herself up. “I’m going to follow you to Leblanc, if you don’t mind...” She spoke quietly, blinking rapidly. "I need a coffee."

Airi nodded. “Sure. We can do our homework together?” He offered.

“OK.” She smiled. “You need all the help.” She winked playfully.

He deadpanned, and she burst into laughter.

The bell rung when they walked into the cafe, and Sojiro looked up from his washing. “…You sure look satisfied...Something good happen?” He asked nonchalantly.

Airi waved from behind Akira. “Hello, Sojiro-san! One house blend and katsu curry, please.” She requested, holding up a finger.

The older man blinked in surprise. “Oh, Airi. I heard from this guy,” He gestured to the ebony haired student. “That you got injured. You all right?” He asked, a bit of concern shining through his usual apathetic gaze.

“Yep, I’m all healed up.” She reassured, taking a seat at a booth, Akira sitting across from her.

Feeling the bag stop moving, Morgana nestled its face through the opening, yawning from its nap. There weren't any other customers, so there was no need for it to hide inside.

Sojiro came up and placed two plates of curry in front of them, along with a cup of steaming hot coffee. “Doesn’t look like it.” He gestured to the cut on her cheek with a jerk of a thumb, the lines on his face deepening into a frown.

She blinked and covered her cheek. “Don’t worry, it’s not even bleeding!” She smiled reassuringly.

Eyeing her for a moment, he nodded and went back to the counter, opening his newspaper.

The two students dug into their meal, hungry after a long day’s worth of exercise. The blend of intricate spices invigorated them, and they spent a while doing their homework together. While Airi was correcting one of Akira’s math problems, their phones rang out.

An: Thanks. I finally got to avenge Shiho because of you guys...
An: I’m pretty sure there was no way I’d have been able to do anything on my own.
Ai: That’s not true. You would have found a way.
An: Still, thank you. I owe you two so much.
Ak: No need to thank me. Both you and Ryuji helped as well.
An: You think? I’m glad to hear that...
An: Anyway, that cognitive world sure was crazy, huh?
An: What a mysterious place. I can’t believe we actually stole someone’s heart...
An: Speaking of mysterious, there’s also the matter of Morgana’s transformation.
An: When we were escaping, didn’t he turn back into a cat even though we were still in the Palace?

“Oh yeah!” Airi gasped, looking at the yawning feline. “I noticed when we were running that Morgana changed back into a cat...”

Akira blinked, remembering when the cat had jumped onto his shoulder. He looked down at it, the
question in his eyes.

Ears twitching, Morgana smiled. “Lady Ann and Lady Airi sure are sharp! I’m impressed.” It purred. “Basically, the Treasure changes the shape of things. Once that’s gone, that power no longer works. Though the real reason I changed quickly back then was because I’m so incredibly skilled!” It puffed up its chest. “How’s that? Isn’t that amazing?!”

Covering her amused smile, she nodded. “So you changed back because there was no longer a distortion?” She whispered, making sure Sojiro didn’t hear her.

Morgana nodded, purring. Akira typed in a reply.

Ak: He said he’s amazing.
An: Oh yeah, I forgot Morgana is reading these messages too.
An: I think I feel a little better after talking to you. Thanks.
An: We still haven’t seen any results but it feels like a weight’s been lifted off my shoulders.
Ai: At the very least, we know we did something right.
An: Yeah.
An: I hope you don’t mind talking to me too much.
An: Well, see you two tomorrow.

Akira put his phone away and continued his homework, trying out the new method that Airi demonstrated on a particular math problem. Keeping her phone out, Airi started a chat with only Ann, her cup of coffee slowly cooling down in front of her on the table.

Ai: Would you like to go visit Shiho tomorrow?
Ai: We can make more paper cranes.
An: Yeah. After classes end?
Ai: Sure.
An: I heard from Shiho’s mom last night.
An: She said you came in with flowers and asked for her forgiveness.
An: Airi-chan...
Ai: ...Yeah. I did.
Ai: She bowed back to me, saying she was also guilty.
Ai: Don’t worry.
Ai: I know it wasn’t just my fault...
Ai: We all failed Shiho in our own ways.
An: Yeah...we did.
An: But we’re going to make up for it.

Sighing, she put her phone away. Could they ever make up for it? Shiho had almost died...

Twirling his pencil, the bespectacled teen looked at her curiously. “What’s up?”

Airi shook her head. “I’ll be going to the hospital again with Ann-chan tomorrow.” She smiled wryly. “She scolded me for crying so much.” She grasped the handle of the now lukewarm coffee and finished it in one go, sighing as she put the empty cup down.

Pursing his lips, he locked eyes with her. “It wasn’t your fault.” He stated firmly.

Huffing, she avoided his steely gaze. “You all say that...” She whispered.
“Because it’s true.” He replied calmly. “You can’t control someone else’s actions. Suzui-san jumped. You didn’t force her to.” His eyes hardened. “Kamoshida did.”

Biting her lip, she nodded. “It was Kamoshida’s fault.” She repeated hesitantly. "Not mine..."

“Right.” He nodded, giving her a small encouraging smile.

She gave him a wistful smile. “You’re always trying to make me feel better. I should be the one comforting you, Mr. Transfer. There’s still so much negative gossip about you.”

He smirked. “I’m just that good.” He bragged, dramatically combing his hair.

She burst into giggles. "So cool!" She mocked, grinning playfully at the action.

“He’s really not.” Morgana piped in, jumping out of the bag. “You should hear him at night. Definitely not cool.” It smiled mischievously.

She gasped, covering her mouth and looking at her classmate with wide eyes.

Panicked, Akira quickly shoved the cat back into the bag, muffling its mouth. “Err…” He sputtered, sweating slightly. "That's not..."

Airi gave him a look of amusement. “I don’t want to know.” She spoke, packing her books back into her bag.

He held out a hand, some of his notes scattering. “W-Wait, it’s not what you think!”

Placing some bills on the table, she shouldered her bag and covered her ears. “Don’t need to hear it!” She sang. “Good night, Akira-kun, Sojiro-san!” and left the cafe.

Letting his arm fall limp, he rested his forehead against his notes and sighed.

“I only meant that you snored.” Morgana snickered, pushing the hand away with a paw.

Lifting his head, he glared tiredly at the feline. It made it sound like all he did at night was fool around. Now she would think he was a weirdo...

“I’m surprised that your first friend here is a girl.” Sojiro remarked casually from the counter, straightening his newspaper. “But I’m not surprised that it’s Airi. You better not do anything to hurt her…” He warned, eyeing the teenager. “She’s a good girl and doesn’t need any more trouble.”

Sitting up in his seat, Akira nodded in understanding. "I wouldn't." He already swore to himself that he would never hurt her or any of his friends.

He packed his books up as well, and did the dirty dishes. It was the least he could do since he ate for free.

He spent the rest of the night making more lockpicks, Morgana giving him advice at times, and then went to bed.

He breathed deeply. ‘Tomorrow, we’ll see if it worked.’
Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

Just an announcement, but I've been going back and revising the first couple of chapters because they're SHIIIIIT. Please do take some time and reread them, I promise it's A LOT better now haha. I'm finally at that point where I'm satisfied with how I'm formatting and writing it. I've also decided to try to keep the fic in general POV, with everyone's thoughts kept to themselves. Aside from a couple of sections where it's focused on Akira and Airi, it'll be general POV. Please excuse me if I trip up though! Also finally revealed what Airi's Persona looked like at the end of chapter 3 but I'll add it to the end of this chapter as well.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

--------4/19, TUESDAY, EARLY MORNING, AOYAMA-ITCHOME

Today, Akira was walking by himself. Airi was called in to the school early to help with something which she informed him of via text.

Sighing silently, he walked along the other students on the road to school. It was a little lonely without her, even with Morgana. Come to think of it, he hadn’t been alone since the first day of school. He had been surrounded by other people who were in terrible situations as well. He snorted silently. How did that even happen? It’s as if they were meant to know one another...

“I skipped breakfast, so now I’m hungry...”

He turned his head. There were two girls talking loudly to each other at the vending machines. Other students walked passed him without a glance, though they gave him a wide berth. Morgana stuck its ear out, listening in as well.

“Have you ever tried the Nostalgic Steak at the diner in Shibuya?” The hungry girl asked her friend.

Her friend nodded. “Yeah, it’s good! It kinda makes me think of my childhood.” She sighed dreamily. “I get this warm feeling inside whenever I eat it that reminds me of my mom...”

The hungry girl perked up. “Yeah, if comfort had a taste, that’d be it! Just thinking about it is making me hungrier...” She drooled.

Not wanting to be late, Akira continued on, pondering on the information he gleamed from the conversation.

“A comforting flavor, huh...” Morgana mused, sticking its face out. “Hey, what does the chief’s curry taste like?”

He hummed. “It’s good. The spices are perfect.”
Morgana sighed in yearning. “I’m jealous. I can always smell a faint hint of it on you.” It confessed. “When I’m human again, I’m going to eat so much of that curry…” It started wriggling in excitement, the bag shuffling against his shoulder. “Then I’ll decide which is better: the curry or the Nostalgic Steak! Or even Lady Airi’s cooking!”

He smiled slightly at its enthusiasm, and continued to school. It was nice to hear what his pseudo-roommate liked. Morgana was still much of a mystery to him and the others.

“I was reading the essays you turned in the other day, and everyone’s writing is so sloppy!” Kawakami-sensei bemoaned. “I could care less’ indicates that you still have some cares left to give! It’s ’I COULDN’T care less!’” She corrected, writing it on the board.

Resting his cheek against his palm, Akira glanced over at Airi who was diligently writing notes. There were bags under her eyes today, and her brows were furrowed in concentration. She hadn’t told them why she was called in so early, but it must be because of Kamoshida.

“I’ve seen this a lot these days, where people are using a phrase differently from its real meaning.” Kawakami-sensei continued. “One word I often hear misused is the phrase, “kakushinhan,” used now to mean a crime done in cold blood. Like the word “literally,” the real meaning of kakushinhan is pretty much the opposite of how it’s used.” Her brown eyes roamed the room, checking to see if the students were listening. Her eyes landed on Akira. “Do you know what it is, Kurusu-kun?” She called out.

Startled, he sat up in his seat and blinked.

Airi glanced over, gnawing her lip in worry. She didn’t know if he knew the answer. It was a tough question to be asked, especially when the meaning of words constantly shifted.

Morgana stuck its head out of his desk, just enough for Akira to notice. “The true meaning of kakushinhan, huh…This seems tough.” It remarked quietly. “I’ll help you out, so let’s think this through.” It yawned.

The ebony haired student nodded slightly, placing a hand to his chin to seem he was deep in thought over the question.

“What’s the common usage of kakushinhan again, regarding an action you take?” Morgana asked.

“Knowing your actions are wrong.” Akira whispered.

The cat nodded. “Right. When people say something’s a kakushinhan, they usually mean the culprit did it knowing it was wrong. But the real kakushinhan is the opposite, right? So the opposite means…” It trailed off.

“Conviction that you’re right.” Akira answered loudly, lifting his head up.

The teacher clapped her hands. “That’s right.” Kawakami-sensei approved. “A kakushinhan is when someone takes an action, believing that it’s right. So if someone ‘raised their hand against another in kakushinhan,’ they thought it was right to do so.” She explained to the class.

“He’s pretty smart!” A classmate whispered.

“I didn’t expect that.”
"He might not be too bad..."

“You’re on a roll today!” Morgana cheered, purring quietly.

Airi sent him a tired but approving smile, discreetly giving him a thumbs up.

He rubbed the back of his neck bashfully, a little proud of answering it correctly.

Kawakami-sensei cleared her throat. “Kakushinhan was originally a term that referred to a crime driven by moral or political conviction. These days it seems like the wrong usage is becoming more commonly accepted though.” She lectured.

Morgana swished its tail. “Taking action with a conviction that what you’re doing is right, huh...Think that applies to us too?” It asked.

Akira pursed his lips. It was pretty accurate.

The lesson continued on.

When lunchtime hit, the class emptied except for Ann, Akira, and Airi. Some of the girls looked over and whispered, wondering why the class president would willingly stay with those two when she would usually do her rounds, but left anyway. Mishima and even Tsukishima glanced over but kept their heads down, their bruises beginning to fade.

Peeking in through the door, Ryuji stalked in, walking straight to their desks. “Have you seen Kamoshida?” He whispered.

Akira and Ann shook their heads.

He hummed at the answer. “You really think he changed?” He asked, uncertainty coloring his words.

“I hope so.” Akira confessed, pursing his lips.

“He has.” Airi sighed, crossing her arms and leaning back in her chair. “It’s why me and every other class representative was called in.” She stated quietly, closing her eyes tiredly.


She opened her mouth to reply but was cut off by Kawakami-sensei coming up to them. “Oh, perfect timing.” She sighed in relief. “Study hall will be held instead of PE today. I’m letting you know just in case you haven’t heard.” She announced to the four students. “Kamoshida-sensei has taken the day off.”


The others stared in surprise. “He ain’t here..?” Ryuji breathed, eyebrows raised in surprise.

The teacher crossed her arms, gripping her yellow striped sleeves. “Don’t tell anyone that you heard this from me...” She whispered. “But we received word that Kamoshida-sensei is placing himself under suspension.” She chewed on her lip. “It’s such an important time before the tournament too...Principal Kobayakawa went to talk to him about it, but he supposedly wasn’t making any sense...” She trailed off.
Ryuji jerked back. “Wait, a suspension?!” He yelped, staring at her in shock.

Kawakami-sensei shushed him, holding a finger in front of her lips. “Not so loud!” She hissed. “The talks about your expulsions may be put on hold too...I don’t know too much about it though...” She looked away uncomfortably. “Anyway, I’ve relayed what’s going on to you.”

Exhaling softly, Airi nodded. “Thank you for letting us know, Sensei.” She smiled thankfully. She gave her a small smile. “Of course...I'll talk to you about that thing some other time.” She stated before walking away.

Slumping against her chair, Ann slapped the table. “I can’t believe it…” She breathed, eyes staring blankly ahead.

Ryuji crossed his arms and leaned against Akira’s desk. “Looks like something happened...At least it sounds different from a mental shutdown.” He frowned contemplatively. “I guess all we can do is wait...”

Jumping out of the desk, Morgana stretched, letting out a yawn. “We did all we can. Now we wait.”

Ann nodded dejectedly. “Yeah…Oh!” She perked up, looking over at Airi. “What did you have to do earlier?” She inquired, turning in her chair to face the group.

“Well...” Airi tilted her head back, her braid falling off her shoulder. “Niijima-senpai, the student council president,” She looked over at Akira, who nodded in understanding. “…called us all in to help delegate the gym period. Today, all the classes will have Study Hall in their rooms, but for as long as Kamoshida is out, we’ll have to rotate the use of the gymnasium.” She explained quietly. “I'll be overseeing our class during our regular gym periods.”

The others blinked in surprise. “Soo...you're our gym teacher now?” Ryuji asked, scratching the back of his head.

Airi smirked. “That’s right. You better listen to me, or I’ll give you detention.” She joked, snapping her fingers.

Akira chuckled. “We won’t disappoint you then, coach.” He joked right back, adjusting his glasses.

Since it was still lunch period, they all took out their food to eat. Akira was about to get up with his usual cup noodles when a box was placed on his desk. Blinking, he looked over at the class president who had her own box.

“I noticed you don’t eat anything except curry and ramen.” Airi looked at him in amusement. “So I made you a bento. It’s really not healthy to be eating only carbs like that, so...I hope you don't mind more of my cooking.”

He slowly looked down at his new lunch, and moved to open it. It was a simple chicken omurice with lots of vegetables, complete with a Morgana face drawn on with ketchup. He laughed at the doodle. “Thank you.” He smiled gratefully. No one but his mother had ever made him a bento, and he hated his mother's cooking. "You didn't have to..."

She smiled back. “I wanted to. I know what it's like to be eating on a budget.” She took out a small box and opening it in front of Morgana. "And here’s some tuna. I had some left over from the party so I hope you don't mind.”
The feline looked at the meal with shining eyes. “Thank you, Lady Airi!” It meowed as it dug into its meal.

“You’re welcome, Morgana.” She grinned. "I hope Akira-kun is feeding you.” She lifted an eyebrow at the bespectacled teenager.

He looked away awkwardly, not answering. Technically, he had been.

Ryuji looked over jealously, munching on his convenience store bought salmon onigiri. “I wish I could get a bento...” He pouted, giving the class president puppy dog eyes.

Airi laughed, mixing her egg and rice. “I’ll make one for you too, Ryuji-kun.” She promised. “In fact, why don’t I just make us lunch every day? You too, Ann-chan.” She looked over at the model.

Ann blinked in surprise. “Oh, it’s OK! I already paid for school lunch this year.” She waved her hands in front of her.

“Oh, OK.” Airi shrugged, before eating her lunch. “Let me know if you do want one.”

They spent the rest of the period chatting before the bell rang.

Chapter End Notes

-A bento is a lunch packed into a wooden/plastic box. Lots of people use it to bring food from home.
-Omurice is a omelet on rice, usually cooked with lots of ketchup/tomato sauce and chicken bits. It's a go-to meal for working class and students because it's cheap, fast, and easy to make.
Once the last bell rang, both his female friends waved to him before leaving together, most likely to the hospital again.

Sighing silently, Akira packed his bag, subtly urging Morgana to jump in. Guess it was just him today. About to head out, he felt his phone buzz in his pocket.

\textbf{R: Hey, where are you right now?}  
\textbf{Ak: I'm still in the classroom.}  
\textbf{R: I'm still at school too. I'm by the staircase next to your classroom.}  

“So what do you plan on doing? Want to hang out with Ryuji?” Morgana asked, reading the messages on the screen.

Shrugging, he walked out of the class and up to the bleached blond lounging next to the stairs. Other students gave them a wide berth in the hallway, not wanting to go anywhere near the two outcasts. They stuck close to the walls and lockers, as if they couldn't even stand being in the same space.

"Isn't that the transfer student with the criminal record? He's really scary..."

"Oh great. The transfer student is hanging out with Sakamoto..."

"Aren't they being expelled? I'm so glad...School will be much safer without them here."

"Weren't Takamaki and Kimisawa hanging out again? They're all so friendly with each other. Why would Kimisawa be friends with \textit{them}?"

"Who knows...She's friendly but with no friends, so maybe that's why. Or maybe they're blackmailing her."

"I hope not..."

Whispers surrounded them, wary and judgmental glances sent in their direction, but he shrugged them off with a grimace. He had friends now, and that meant he could feel a little better about himself when he heard how he was a "murdering psychopath with a record who would punch anyone if they so looked at him." It still kind of hurt though...

“Yo.” Ryuji greeted, straightening up from the wall next to the stairs. “Let’s do some warm ups behind the gym then.”

Nodding, Akira followed him to the locker room in the Practice Building where they both changed into their gym uniforms.

Walking out into the courtyard, the late afternoon sun shining down onto the occasional student milling about, Ryuji stretched his arms in the air. “Man, this place brings back memories...” He grinned nostalgically, recalling just over a year ago. “This is my secret trainin’ spot. Er,” He
grimaced. “Was. Back when I was on the track team.”

Akira looked at him curiously, resting his hands in his pockets. Was?

“Actually, I’ve been thinkin’ about tryin’ to run again.” Ryuji admitted quietly, rolling a shoulder. He blinked. “Again?” He asked, adjusting his glasses. What did he mean by that?

“Fightin’ in that other world was a total shock. I couldn’t move like I used to. It just felt...lame.” Ryuji frowned dispassionately. “Especially when I fell during our escape. That was...embarrassing.” He looked away uncomfortably before looking back at him, and grinned. “So I started thinkin’, maybe I need to build up my muscles again. Anything’s gotta be better than this flimsy body, right?” He rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. “Plus, maybe then I’ll be able to help out a little more.”

Akira smiled. “You seem pretty excited.” He remarked casually. “I’m counting on you.” He was the other man on their team, and they had to be strong together.

Rubbing his nose, Ryuji beamed. “Heheh. I’m totally gonna wreck your expectations!” He raised a brow at that. That sounded wrong in so many ways.

“...U-Uh, I mean that in a good way!” Ryuji stammered sheepishly before wiping his expression. “Anyways, you act like it’s only me who’s gonna be doin’ this, but you’re gettin’ in on it too.” He pointed out.

Akira stared at him incredulously. Him too? Didn’t they do enough running in the Palace?

Ryuji frowned at him. “Whoa, don’t look so surprised! Why’d you think I had you go and change into that?” He jerked his chin at the gym uniform he wore. “It’d be pointless if I was the only one gettin’ super fast, right?” He sighed before pumping a fist. “All right, I’m gonna do some knee lift sprints. You’re stuck with the normal ones!”

Exhaling through his nostrils, Akira nodded, and the two set off, running for as long as they could. While he kept to his maintained pace, the ex-runner lifted his knees higher with each step, causing him to exhaust himself faster. They did a couple of laps around the school grounds before winding up back at the courtyard.

They slowed to a stop, Ryuji resting his hands on his knees as he panted. Inhaling then exhaling, Akira rested his hands in his pockets, looking at him with some concern. "You good?"

“Ughhh…” Ryuji groaned. ‘Damn, my legs’re all tight…” He grimaced, bending down on one knee and massaging his other leg.

He frowned, looking down morosely, as if he was debating with himself. Sighing, he straightened up and turned to his friend. “Before Kamoshida came along, the track team was the biggest thing this school had goin’ for it.” He began, a dark look in his eyes. “But it all changed after he got our coach fired and took over as the sub.” He clenched his jaw.

Akira listened closely, brows furrowed at the story. He heard parts of it in the castle, but he was now hearing the real, personal side of it.

“That bastard…” Ryuji crossed his arms, a dark look in his eyes. “Right from the very start he was tryin’ to get rid of us. He’d give us crazy workouts, then when we couldn’t do ‘em, he’d add even more on top of that…” He clenched his eyes painfully. “Day after day was nothing but that
bullshit...He was goin’ after me especially.”

He slumped. “He knew...He knew I was the kinda guy who’d fight back.” He kicked the dirt. “If my time dropped even a little, he’d cuss me out. Then on top of that, he brought up my parents…”

“And then you punched him?” Akira asked quietly.

Ryuji rubbed his head furiously and looked away, not wanting to meet his gaze. “Truth is, my mom’s the only one I got.” He confessed. “All my dad did when he was still around was drink. Sometimes he’d even beat me, or my mom.” His eyes darkened at the memories. “I dunno how that bastard Kamoshida found out, but he told the whole goddamn team…”

He sighed, shaking his head. “And as you can guess, I lost it and hit him.” He glowered. “It was like he wanted me to do it though. He called it an 'act of violence,' and shut the team down…” He slumped. “Thanks to that, the other guys on the team treat me like some kinda traitor…”

Akira frowned. Teammates who knew about his terrible home life just condemned him like that? Ryuji stared up at the orange sky, frowning morosely. “And they ain’t wrong. 'Cause of me, they all lost their shot at the championship.” He murmured. "I feel bad, but..."

Hesitantly, Akira reached out and placed a hand on his shoulder. “Do you want to go back?” He asked quietly.

Looking at his friend, he shook his head. “To the track team? Nah...How could I after that?” He furrowed his brows, glaring awkwardly at him. “C’mon, don’t ask me tough questions like that. I’m not very smart, y’know!” He pouted. “Anyways, it doesn’t matter now. That’s all in the past! I’m only thinkin’ about the future now! That’s what we’re gonna do-build the future!” He grinned excitedly. “We gotta think positive thoughts, brother!” He raised his hand, palm out.

Sweatdropping, Akira gave him a lopsided smirk and held up his hand. ‘I feel like my bond with Ryuji is growing deeper…’

Rolling his shoulder, Ryuji gave him a lighthearted smirk. “C’mon, we’re all warmed up, right? How ‘bout another run?” He challenged. “By the way, you’re actually pretty good at runnin’. Not as good as me though!”

Akira snorted. “You couldn’t tell when we were in the Palace?” He asked rhetorically.

They ran another couple of laps, except this time they were already exhausted and was about to fall on the ground. They stumbled into the locker rooms to change back, but only barely managed.

“Holy...crap...” Ryuji panted, still gasping for air after such an intense workout. “My legs’re shakin’...Don’t collapse on your way home, man...Later.” He waved weakly as they parted ways in their regular uniforms.

Walking unsteadily toward the station, Morgana decided to pop its head out of his bag. “So how was your run?” It asked innocently. Akira only groaned in response.

Walking through the now familiar doors, the two Shujin students walked past the blank faced receptionist and into the elevator. Silently, they made their way back to room 203, and slid open the door. The room was still quiet with the exception of the ECG monitor. The nurses had removed
the ventilator from the patient, letting her breathe on her own.

They walked in, closing the door behind them, and took their seats next to the bed.

Airi observed the unconscious girl. There were less bandages on her face, and most of the bruises had faded into a dark yellow. Her leg and arm was still in a cast, and would stay that way for some time.

Silently, she took out a bundle of colorful paper, handed half of them to Ann, and began folding. Their phones rang out then.

Sighing, they took them out.

R: Man, all this waiting’s got me so antsy.
R: We should go on a trip or something, Whaddya think?
An: Sorry, I’m going to have to pass.
R: You busy?
Ai: We’re at the hospital right now.
An: I’m going to be visiting Shiho after school for the next few days.
An: I can’t do much to help her, but it’ll be nice to at least see her face.
R: Gotcha...I hope she wakes up soon.
Ak: I’m sure she’ll be OK.
Ak: Go cheer her up.
An: Yeah, thanks.
R: You also gonna keep visiting, Airi?
Ai: After today, only for a short while.
Ai: I have a full week of work.
R: Yikes...
An: I’m totally down to go somewhere once things have calmed down though.
Ai: Same. Hopefully it’ll be soon.
Ak: Be safe.

Ann exhaled and put away her phone. “Hey, Shiho.” She whispered, grasping a limp hand, the pulse underneath her fingers slow but steady. “How are you? Your face looks better... Too bad they took off the bandages, it hid your ugly mug.” She joked weakly.

She took a deep breath. “We went into Kamoshida’s Palace yesterday. His mind....We stole his Treasure to change him. He didn’t show up to school today, and Kawakami-sensei told us he put himself under suspension.”

She bit her lip, a tear sliding down her cheek. “I think we did it, Shiho... We avenged you. I fought for you.” She choked. “You would laugh if you could see me in my thief outfit...of course it had to be leather, right?” She sniffled. “And I use a whip...you would totally just call me a wannabe dominatrix.” She chuckled, wiping her eyes.

Airi smiled softly at the two. It was good to see Ann trying her best to be strong for Shiho. She continued folding, putting another crane on top of the pile. So far, they had made 140 in total, and they needed 860 more to make a wish.

Sighing, she reached out and gently combed the unconscious girl’s hair, making sure she was comfortable. Whether or not Shiho was awake to notice, she would do her best to accommodate her.
It was the least she could do.

The door slid open, and they both turned. Closing the door was Shiho’s mother, her older face burdened with new stress lines. “Oh.” She uttered, dark eyes widening slightly. “Hello, girls.” She smiled tiredly.

Airi bowed her head. “It’s nice to see you again, Suzui-san.”

Ann waved. “Hi, Suzui-kaachan.” She greeted halfheartedly, a small smile growing on her lips.

The older woman walked over, dragging a stool and sitting next to the model. “What are you kids doing?” She asked curiously, brushing her long black hair.

Airi smiled shyly, holding up the half finished crane in her hand. “We’re making paper cranes to make a wish for Shiho-chan’s recovery.”

The mother covered her mouth. “Oh...” She teared up. “How sweet of you two...Would you mind if I joined as well?” She asked quietly, gazing wistfully at her injured daughter.

Ann handed over some paper from her bundle, and the three quietly folded until visiting hours were over.

When the nurse came in to ask them to leave, they had made 419 cranes.

Dragging the bow against the chords once more, Airi winced. It still sounded off.

Exhaling softly, she relaxed her back and tuned the cello again.

Today had been such a long day. She had had to wake up early to attend an hour long council session with Niijima-senpai, figure out her schedule, and finally visit Shiho.

Even though her body protested, her mind wouldn’t let her sleep, and so here she was, fiddling with the instrument that still made her heart pound in apprehension. It was a strange sensation, to be so mind-numbingly tired but energetic at the same time.

Her phone pinged with a new e-mail, and she picked it up to read it.

Her shoulders slumped. It was a warning from her credit card, saying she had to pay soon or else she’d suffer the late fee. Was this really what being an adult was like? How do people do it? Maybe she just didn't know how. With a heavy heart, she paid it off.

Clenching her teeth, she threw the phone on the bed. She sighed harshly, leaning back in her chair. What she would give to be a normal teenager who didn't have to care about these things. She was so sick of paying bills, of barely meeting her quota because she could only work part time, studying for some metaphorical goal that she still had no idea about, of living.

She still. No, don't say that. She had to live she had to live she had to livelivelive- 'You have to live, Airi! RUN!'

She clenched her eyes, hugging the cello between her legs. She had to live, if only because she had survived them.
Flicking a C major, she listened deeply and nodded. This week was going to be long, but at least she could vent her frustrations.

Swallowing nervously, she took a deep breath and played. She poured her heart out into the notes, letting the music fly into the air. Each note represented a tear she had shed this week. Every note would be a symbol of herself, leaving its own imprint in the minds of her nonexistent listeners. ‘Mom, Dad...Shiho-chan...Takase...Rui...’

She didn’t notice her phone buzzing on the bed, too withdrawn inside the mess that was her mind.

Chapter End Notes

Ryuji rank 2
Arriving back in Yongenjaya in the evening after training with Ryuji, the cafe empty of any customers, Akira's phone rang out.

An: I told Shiho we settled things with Kamoshida.
An: She still hasn’t regained consciousness...but I had to go make amends.
R: Whaddya mean? You didn’t do anything wrong, Ann.
R: Right, Akira?
Ak: It’s not your fault, Takamaki-san.
Ak: This is Kamoshida’s doing.
An: It’s Ann, Kurusu-kun.
Ak: Then it’s Akira, Ann.
An: I wasn’t there when she needed help. I’m a failure as a friend…
An: Airi, who barely even talked to Shiho, did more than me.
An: I just stood there like an idiot…
An: I have to do all I can to make up for that, starting now.
An: Otherwise I don’t think I’ll be able to move on.
R: Man, I didn’t know you were so passionate.
R: I totally didn’t notice that back in middle school.
An: I think it’s because of you guys, Airi especially. I’m a little embarrassed though…
An: Anyway, Ryuji, Akira, Airi...I hope we can keep helping each other from now on too.
An: Airi’s not answering...?
An: I guess she must have crashed...she’s been really tired lately.
R: Yeah. I noticed today she wasn’t as energetic.
Ak: She’s working herself too hard.
An: Yeah, she barely said a thing today at the hospital.
An: I hope she’ll be OK.

Putting his phone away, he bowed slightly to his guardian as a greeting.

Sojiro stared at him for a moment. “Just ‘cause you seem to be takin’ school seriously don’t mean I’m not keepin’ an eye on you, got it?” He warned. “I’ll know what’s what as soon as I see your grades. Wanna prove you’re turnin’ over a new leaf? Make studying a habit as second nature as breathing."

He narrowed his eyes. "You can’t always count on Airi tutorin’ you forever. If you’re going to study, you can use the booth. Just remember to clean it afterward, OK?" He sighed heavily and without waiting for a response, left the cafe, locking the door behind him.

Akira stared after him before turning and going up to his room, the old wood creaking underneath his shoes. He already knew that. There was always a stab of guilt whenever she had to help him with a problem, as if he wasn't smart enough to get it. He had never put much effort into school, always distracted with other things. His parents had always admonished him for it, wanting him to aim higher, but the pressure really only discouraged him even further. He stayed right below average back home, and he was even lower here at Shujin.
He put his bag down, letting Morgana jump out to groom itself.

Sitting down on the beaten couch, he began his homework. The work seemed a little easier after yesterday’s study session with Airi. At least that proved he could be smart too. Maybe he could score higher here so the other students wouldn't be so afraid of him. Knowing he was too busy studying would help his terrible image and they'd back off, right?

He sighed in relief when he was finished, and changed for bed.

The next few days passed by quickly, each of the Persona users using the time to take care of their duties. Ann spent every day after school visiting Shiho, diligently folding paper cranes, hoping that her best friend would wake up soon. She had even canceled any upcoming shoots to spend more time with the comatose girl.

Ryuji spent the time working on his stamina again, feeling the strain in his legs beginning to lessen little by little. When he wasn’t running, he was at the arcade, playing games to pass the time.

Airi was practically swarmed with work, having to oversee the gym period for her class, visiting Shiho with paper cranes, and working right after at the flower shop. The credit card company continued to send her e-mails to warn her about late fees, even when she had already paid, and she was stressed out of her mind trying to solve this. The customer support agent had confirmed that she had paid for her monthly statement, but because she wasn't of age, she had to get an adult to verify.

Reluctantly, she had called Kawakami-sensei to help her out of this situation. The teacher grumbled about it, but offered her assistance as soon as possible as it would reflect badly on her. Once that was resolved, the plumbing in the kitchen malfunctioned. With a cry of frustration, Airi spent thousands of yen on a Plumber to come fix it, and took more shifts to cover the loss of funds. She barely had time to eat and sleep, and was exhausted.

The only time Akira saw her outside of school was in the morning at Leblanc, downing shots of espresso and dark circles under her blank eyes. He asked if he could help, but she just shook her head and smiled tiredly at him.

Akira himself spent the time juggling his studies both at the diner and at the cafe, exploring Shibuya, and running with Ryuji. Morgana accompanied him everywhere he went, not really doing much other than observing him and providing commentary.

Now that it was Sunday, he ended up going to the clinic again, and asking about the strong drug. While the good doctor offered to supply him, he had to participate in under-the-table clinical trials for it. At least the team had access to stronger medicine now. Plus, he still wanted to know why that man was there...

Leaving the clinic and covering his eyes as the warm sun rays beamed down onto the back streets, he turned the corner in front of the supermarket and stopped in front of the second hand store.

Smoothing his black sports jacket and white shirt, he walked in. “Welcome...” The elderly owner greeted, sitting near the front of the open store.

Akira bowed and looked around. There were a bunch of old antiques lying around, and some beaten up electronics. Real and fake plant pots decorated the cramped corners, but he didn't need another plant to take care of. The old CRTV on the table caught his eye however. ‘I could get
that...’ He thought to himself, taking out his wallet.

His room here was pretty boring, and the only TV in the building was on the first floor where customers came and went. It wouldn't be appropriate if he watched his own channels or wanted to play games, especially when Boss would definitely yell at him for disturbing the customers. “Excuse me, I’ll take the old TV.” He requested politely.

The old man looked at him in surprise. “That old thing? Sure...tell you what, I’ll throw in a VCR player as well.” He slowly moved to box it up, knees creaking from the action. “You live at Leblanc, right? I’ll have it delivered soon.”

Thanking the elderly man, Akira handed over ¥3800 and left the store. He had a form of entertainment now. This was one of the rare times he missed his own flat screen TV back in his old room.

He sighed. Even though his living situation right now wasn't as stellar, the company he kept more than made up for it. Besides, why miss expensive electronics when he had actual friends here?

His phone buzzed in his pocket.

R: You heard anything about stuff happening to Kamoshida?
R: Except what Airi told us.
Ak: Nope.
R: I see.
Ak: Did something happen?
R: I dunno. I’m just feeling kinda anxious.
R: I keep thinking about how even with all you did...we might still end up getting expelled.
R: My mom’s totally gonna suffer if that happens…
R: Plus, if we couldn’t even help Ann or Suzui…
Ak: We have to believe.
Ak: If it happens, we’ll deal if we need to.
R: Sorry, I guess now’s not really the time to be getting all down in the dumps.
R: Anyways, I’m feeling a little better now that I’ve talked to you about this. Thanks, man.
Ak: Anytime.
R: Oh, and don’t tell Ann or Airi I was doubting us, mkay?
R: I don’t want them to not rely on us if we’re getting all worried about this shit.
R: Well, seeya!

He slipped his phone back in his jeans, and headed back to the cafe. Walking in through the door, the bell tinkling softly, he blinked and stopped.

Airi was there in one of the booths, a cold cup of coffee in front of her. Out of her regular school uniform, she wore a purple bishop top and a black skirt, her beige trench coat folded next to her on the booth seat. She was asleep against the table, head on her arms and his own comforter over her back.

“She’s been working herself to the bone this past week.” Sojiro murmured wistfully, cleaning a cup behind the counter. He gave the slumbering teenager a look of barely concealed concern, before sighing heavily.

Akira walked closer and looked at her.
Her concealer was fading after a long day, revealing heavy purple bruising underneath her eyes. Rose strands were braided into a bun, messily pinned on the top of her head and half of it falling out. Her mouth was tilted downward, frowning even in her sleep from what seemed to be a stressful week.

He hesitantly reached out with a hand and gently smoothed out her creased brow. He sighed silently, moving his comforter to cover her shoulders better. He didn't know why she had to work so hard, but was it worth it when her health was clearly suffering? She could let them help out too. They were friends, right?

He sat across from her, and quietly began his homework.

Unzipping his bag fully, Morgana jumped out onto the table, looking closely at the slumbering girl with concern in its eyes. “Poor Lady Airi...” It mewed sadly, ears flat against its scalp. It jumped onto the seat, and slowly crawled onto her lap, curling up with her.

Smiling slightly at the sight, Akira started on his homework, letting the quiet sounds of clinking cups and utensils help his concentration. The old ceiling fan turned lazily, a barely there wind slightly blowing his curly hair.

From behind the counter, Sojiro sighed, placing the cup down. “...So. Gettin’ used to the city?” He asked leisurely, making sure his voice was kept at a low volume.

Turning his head slightly in his direction, Akira nodded. “A little.” He confessed. It was very different to his hometown. There weren’t so many buses or trains where he was from, and no where near the massive amounts of people who power walked everywhere. It was true about what they say about the city; there’s never a moment of peace the closer you are to the metropolis.

The older man inspected him. “…I see.” He said after a moment. “You’re the only one here at night, so I’m not gonna bother setting a curfew or anything like that. So long as you’re taking school seriously, I don’t mind if you stroll the streets at night.” He declared quietly, rubbing his chin. “But only around these parts, got it? You go back on your word, I’ll kick you right out.” He warned, pointing a finger menacingly. “If you’re gonna stay over at Airi’s, you tell me beforehand.” He narrowed his eyes. ”...and keep your hands to yourself.”

Akira nodded and gave the older man a grateful look, blushing slightly at the last part. He’d been driving himself crazy at nights, especially since Morgana never let him stay up late. Anytime he wanted to do anything, it was “Let’s not do that today,” or “Aren’t you tired?”

He grumbled silently to himself. There wasn’t even any time or privacy to do...other things.

Like bathing.

A whimper broke him from his train of thought, and he looked over to the other occupant in the booth. Face scrunching up, her eyes slowly cracked open. “Mmgh...” She groaned, slowly sitting up and rubbing her eyes.

Akira cracked a small grin. “Good morning.”

Airi looked at him blankly, eyes still blurry with sleep, before his greeting registered in her exhausted brain. “Huh?!” She gasped, scrambling for her phone in her trench coat.

Morgana yowled at the sudden movement, but stayed where it was.

Grasping the thin plastic, she quickly pulled it out and looked at the time, which read, “8:12PM
SUNDAY.” She sagged, exhaling heavily, and laid her head in her arms again. “Don’t do that.” She complained, voice muffled in her sleeves. "You gave me a heart attack."

“Sorry.” He smiled apologetically.

Sighing, she sat up in her seat, the comforter falling off her shoulders. “Huh? Oh...” She grasped the blanket, pulling it in front of her and folded it. “I must have fallen asleep...” She murmured. “Did you put this blanket on me?”

He shook his head. “No, it was Boss.” He gestured over to the older man behind the counter who looked up at the sound of his nickname.

She blinked in surprise and gave the barista with a small smile. “Thank you, Sojiro-san.”

He waved her away. “Don’t worry about it. More importantly, how are you feelin’?” He asked her, a tinge of concern in his voice. “You’ve been asleep for five hours.”

“Five hours...?” She breathed, closing her eyes tiredly. How much time had she wasted just sleeping away here? Had she inconvenienced the older man who was like an uncle to her, by driving away his customers? Why wasn't there more time...

Akira looked at her worriedly. “Airi-chan...” He began. “You need to stop and take a break... I’ve barely talked to you this whole week.” He pleaded quietly. “Ryuji and Ann are worried as well.”

She looked at him, struggling with herself, before she acquiesced. “Yeah...” She agreed, loosening her bun and running a hand through her limp hair. “I pushed myself too hard. I need to work, but I also want to be there for Shiho-chan...” She whispered morosely. “I’m just so tired...”

Contemplating with himself, he took a deep breath. “...Why do you need to work so much?” He asked hesitantly, brows furrowed in concern.

She locked eyes with him for a moment before tilting her head up, boring into the ceiling. Should she tell him?

He waited patiently, not wanting to rush or pressure her. Maybe it wasn’t a good idea for him to ask this. They’ve only known each other for less than a month. He opened his mouth to apologize, but stopped when he noticed her lips moving.

“...You know my parents are dead.” She began quietly, dark eyes idly counting the wooden beams. “I didn’t have any other family, so...after the funeral, I was sent to an orphanage...” She clenched her jaw. “It...wasn’t a great place to be. I had a really tough time there that they transferred me to another one.”

She took a deep breath, swallowing restlessly. “Long story short, I applied for emancipation last year to claim my parents’ inheritance and property. I was denied of course...it’s just not possible to be an emancipated minor in Japan.” She smiled bitterly, ducking her head. "The only way I could move back home was to have an adult sign on as my guardian..."

He furrowed his brow. "But you're clearly living in your house now, so someone did sign off?"

She nodded. “The only adults I knew were the teachers, so...Kawakami-sensei signed on.”

His eyebrows raised up. Their teacher hadn't seemed like someone who would take on such a responsibility, especially for someone who wasn't related to her. "Really?"
Airi smiled slightly. "Only on paper. There was no one else, and she knew what I was going through because we had a..."friend" in common," Takase. "So I finally went home after so many years...” Idly petting the feline on her lap, she stared off into space, her eyes focused on nothing in particular. “...I have enough money from the inheritance to pay the bills, but for anything else like groceries and clothes, I have to pay out of pocket.” She stated matter-of-factly, shrugging indifferently. “At the very least, because I’m an orphan, I’m exempted from paying taxes in my paychecks…”

“Airi…” He breathed, gazing at her with worry. His friend was literally an adult in all but age. She was class president, a part time employee, a phantom thief, and a good friend. She was practically stretched thin in every direction.

He pursed his lips. It was admirable and unsettling. He saw how exhausted she was, and that was from just one week. Was this what they had to look forward to when they became adults...?

She gave him a small smile. “It’s all right...I don’t regret this. I have my home, I have a good job, and I have good friends.” She said tenderly, scratching Morgana behind its ears.

It purred, turning into goo in her lap. “You’re so strong, Lady Airi…” The cat meowed, looking up at her with large blue eyes.

She chuckled. “I try my best. If I give it my all, maybe...” She bit her lip, looking away. "Maybe I can live with no regrets.” Though she had plenty to weigh her down.

His lips twitched, growing into a delicate smile. “I really admire you, Airi.” Akira spoke softly. "You're such a hard worker. I'm kind of jealous of how tenacious you are."

She blushed. “I-I...” She stammered. "It's not because I want to work so much. I mean, the alternative is that I starve..." She smiled slightly. "But thank you."

He packed his books back into his bag and stood up. She looked up at him curiously.

“It’s late. I’ll walk you home?” He stated shyly.

“Oh! OK.” She gently patted Morgana to get off, who then ran upstairs. Taking out her wallet, she was about to place some bills on the table when Sojiro interrupted her. “Don’t worry about it.” He called out, lazily looking up from his newspaper.

She hesitated. “But…”

He shook his head. “It’s on the house.” He gave her an exasperated smile. "It's nice to have someone in here who won't talk my ear off."

Biting her lip, she nodded, putting her wallet back in her bag. “Thank you, Boss.” She smiled gratefully.

Waving goodbye, the two teenagers left the cafe and into the chilly streets. Shivering a bit, she buttoned up her trench coat and stepped closer to Akira. The two walked together in comfortable silence, traveling down the slightly deserted roads. They passed the unfriendly patrol officer who grunted at them, the mother and her daughter with their old Shiba Inu, and even a few grannies who waved hello as they were making their way home.

Arriving at the Kimisawa residence after a few minutes, Airi turned to Akira with a smile. “Thank you, Akira-kun. I would invite you in for tea, but I’m still really tired...” She bowed her head apologetically.
He waved her away. “Don’t worry about it, just get some proper rest. I’ll see you tomorrow?” He asked, resting his hands in his pockets.

She nodded with a smile and opened her front door. Walking in, she turned and waved as he left.

It was nice of him to have done that. It was a shame the rest of the school couldn't tell he was such a genuinely kind person. Maybe once they knew he wouldn't be expelled, she could try to convince the student body to lay off with the rumors. It was the least she could do for him.

If only she herself could say she was genuinely kind. She barely knew herself at this point.

Chapter End Notes

-In Japan, there's no such thing as an emancipated minor. You HAVE to have a legally consenting adult sign on as your guardian. Their role is to watch over you, give monthly reports to child services, and basically guide you. However, they aren't required to financially support you or even house you, though there is a stipend given if needed.

Announcement: I won't be posting any new chapters for a couple of days, Monday the latest, because Atlus USA decided to spring up a Persona 5 cosplay contest and I'll be too busy doing shoots for it -cries- They gave us a week for the deadline, and I'm freaking out. Like why, Atlus.
Chapter 44

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long absence! This will be a short chapter, but the next one will be much longer!

Thank you so much for over 260+ kudos, 22 bookmarks, and 8000 hits!!!!!! That's insane! <3

----4/30, SATURDAY, EARLY MORNING, SHIBUYA STATION

Her boss had noticed how tired she had been a week ago, and told her not to come to work for at least a couple days.

Airi had forced herself to nod. She would lose money, but pushing herself any further could land her in the hospital for exhaustion, and there was no way she could afford that.

The next couple of days passed by slower now that she had less things to do, and she visited Shiho all the more often to fold paper cranes, whether or not Ann was with her. She wanted to do her best for her. It was still partly her fault for letting go. If she could've held on just a little longer, Shiho wouldn't be comatose in the hospital.

Now that it was Saturday morning, Akira and her were waiting for the Ginza line when Ann walked up to them. “Morning.” She greeted, the two of them waving back. “The board meeting is the day after tomorrow.” She furrowed her brows in worry. “...I wonder if Kamoshida really had a change of heart?” She whispered. “What if we failed? That’s all I’ve been able to think about…”

“We have to believe.” Akira replied, adjusting his glasses. "He's been absent from school, and that's out of character, right?"

Airi nodded in agreement. “Yeah. We didn’t do all that for nothing.” She gave her a small smile. "I'm sure it'll be fine."

The model played with a ponytail. “We did what we could.” She blinked. “But how strange...I feel a bit better now. Maybe it’s because of your composure?” She looked at the two strangely, but smiled. “We’ll be able to avenge Shiho, and you won’t get expelled! After break, we’ll all be able to laugh together!” She smirked slightly “That’s what I’ll believe.”

Airi smiled. “Yeah, that’s right!” She pumped a fist. “We’ll finally be able to relax. Maybe we can go to the spa then?”

Ann nodded. “Yes! I need it so bad.” She groaned dramatically. "I can't wait for the massage, the sauna, the hot springs..."

Akira looked on at his friends with a small smile, content to listen.
“Hi everyone!” Chouno-sensei greeted in English, standing at the front of their class. She was a tanned woman with curly black hair and sultry eyes. Her usual outfit consisted of a purple dress and a red beaded necklace. One thing everyone noticed and quietly made fun of her for is how heavily she applied her makeup, but no one had let it slip back to her.

“These days, it’s expected that you know colloquial English- even idioms based in other languages.” She lectured, dramatically flipping her permed hair. “I want you to forget that you’re Japanese during this class and make yourself believe you’re a foreigner. What’s important is becoming someone else.” Her brown eyes surveyed the class. “In this day and age, being able to swap your mask depending on the situation is a critical talent.” Her eyes landed on the cellist. “How will you fare, Class President? Here’s a question.”

Airi blinked, but straightened up in her seat to show she was listening intently. English was one of her best subjects. Can't target tourists if you didn't know the language, after all.

The teacher smirked. “Are you a wunderkind? See if you can work out the answer based on what you know.”

Her eyes sharpened. “The word is originally German, it means child prodigy.” Airi answered diligently.

Chouno-sensei clapped. “That’s right!” She cheered. “I was asking you if you were a wonder child- in other words, a youth of uncommon talent. But I suppose if you were able to think and adapt so quickly, that proves you certainly must be!” She shifted in place. “Oh, the word “talent” comes from the Greek “talanton,” a sum of money referenced in the Bible. The more skilled a servant was, the more coins they would receive from God-their talent led to worth.”

"Kimisawa-senpai is so smart!"

“I wonder if she has time to tutor us, exams are next week....”

Airi ducked her head, embarrassed from all the compliments. It wasn't that big of a deal to be able to answer that. It was taught in last year's English class.

Her eyes met gray ones, and Akira smiled and gave her a thumbs up. She blushed and covered her face with her notebook.

“The English word “talent” didn’t originally have anything to do with our modern concept of celebrity.” Chouno-sensei explained. “It’s not too far off calling people who can react to things on the spot on TV “talents.””

“The talent of changing masks...” Morgana mused quietly from within its usual seat inside Akira's desk. “Does that make us all “wunderthieves”?” It giggled.

He sweatdropped, writing it down in his notes.

Blowing the whistle, Airi signalled her class to gather up in the large gymnasium. “All right, guys!” She called out.

She grimaced. This was really awkward. Having so much authority over her fellow classmates felt
really uncomfortable. Luckily, no one had protested or complained...so far. In fact, they all seemed
to pay attention.

Akira and Ann were near the back of the class, watching her with amused smiles on their faces.

She cleared her throat, fidgeting with the ends of her gym uniform jacket. “We’ll be running laps
today. I’ll be timing you guys and writing it on the clipboard.” She waved it out for the class to see.
“Please do your best!” She smiled politely. "And take a break if you're having trouble breathing!"

“Yes, Senpai!” The class replied in unison.

Sweatdropping, she cleared her throat. “You guys don’t have to call me senpai…” She began, but
no one seemed to listen and began running.

Sighing resignedly, she observed her classmates, noting who was faring better and those who were
lagging behind. Of course, Ann and Akira were one of the few who were in the front. After all that
running in Kamoshida’s Palace, all of the thieves had to have excellent stamina.

Her eyes roamed over the rest who strayed far behind them. ‘Tsukishima-kun is stopping, might
still be injured from Kamoshida’s “training.”’ She frowned, writing the time on her clipboard. She
should really ask him and Mishima if their injuries were healing well.

‘Takeda-kun is better...Otani-chan stopped...Namikawa-chan is slowing down…’ She continued
writing down their scores until her phone buzzed, signalling that it was time for a break.

Taking a deep breath, she blew her whistle. “Break time!” She announced.

The students slowed to a crawl, their sneakers squeaking on the polished floors. Some collapsed,
laying right where they stopped. Even though they were exhausted, they kept a good distance away
from the two class outcasts.

Resting his hands in his pockets, Akira walked up to her, Ann following. “So, how did we do?”
Ann asked curiously, idly twirling a ponytail.

Airi smiled at the two. “Pretty good! Of course, how could I expect any less from my teammates?”
She winked.

Akira smirked. “We are the best, after all.” He bragged, running his hand through his hair.

Ann choked, covering her mouth as she silently trembled. Airi burst out into giggles, looking at the
ebony haired classmate with mirth dancing in her eyes. He frowned, narrowing his eyes at the two
in confusion.

“W-Was,” Ann gasped for air. “Was that supposed to be cool?” She snickered.

“He does that a lot.” Airi commented, smiling gleefully.

He gave them an unimpressed look, causing them to break out into more laughter.

The rest of the class stared from the other side of the gym, not knowing why the class president
would laugh with them. They covered their mouths as they gossiped to one another, hushed
whispers circulating through the group.

Her phone buzzed, letting Airi know it was time for the class to run again, and she gave her friends
an apologetic look. Blowing her whistle, she clapped her hands loudly. “All right, guys! Let’s run
“And...done!” Airi sighed in relief, placing the last paper crane on top of the pile. It had taken the three of them two weeks to complete this, but they did it. They folded 1000 paper cranes.

Suzui-san burst into tears and covered her face. “Thank you,” She sniffled. “For doing this for my daughter...” She gave them a watery smile, wiping away her tears. “She’s so lucky to have the two of you...”

“No,” Ann interjected. “We’re the ones lucky to have her...Shiho’s the best thing to ever happen to me. I love her like a sister.” She smiled softly at the still unconscious girl, gently grasping a limp hand.

“It’s true, Suzui-san.” Airi smiled gently at the older woman. “Shiho-chan is such a nice girl, always doing her best for others.” She looked away wistfully. “...I was never close with her, but... hearing about her through Ann, I know that she’s a strong person.” She moved to get up, gathering all the paper cranes into one pile. Taking some strings and bead out of her bag, they slowly strung the cranes together.

Ann bit her lip worryingly, tying a knot. “I hope this will work...”

“It has to...” Suzui-san affirmed quietly, frowning deeply as she tied another one.

Airi didn’t say anything, focused on stringing them all together.

By the end of visiting hours, they had the hospital’s permission to hang up the cranes above Shiho’s bed, her own curtain of colors watching over her as she slept. For some reason, just seeing the splash of colorful paper really brightened up the stale whiteness of the room. It brought a certain sense of hope that it would help.

Clapping her hands twice, Airi closed her eyes and prayed. Ann and Suzui-san both followed her example, all three of them wishing for Shiho’s recovery. It was unorthodox for three people to wish at the same time, but hopefully it worked.

She gripped her hands together. It had to.

Walking out of the hospital and into the brightly lit and loud streets of Shibuya, the two teenagers bid the mother farewell before heading toward the train station. Biting her lip, Ann texted on her phone.

An: The board meeting’s tomorrow, right?
R: We’re gonna get expelled if Kamoshida doesn’t have a change of heart by then...
Ai: I’m sure he did. He's never taken a day off.
R: Yeah and he's been gone for over a week.
Ak: We did all we could.
An: It would be a real problem for us if he didn’t.
R: It’s a little too early to give up now.
R: Guess we’ll find out one way or the other tomorrow.
R: We just gotta brace ourselves for all the possibilities.
Ai: Try to get some sleep, guys.
Ai: We’ll need it.
Putting away her phone, the model turned to her friend. “I like how Akira only ever responds like, once.” She rolled her eyes. “Yet, somehow... it’s all we need.” She breathed out, looking up at all the neon signs and the throngs of people they passed; tired businessmen, loud party goers, the energetic late night shoppers.

Airi smiled in amusement, making sure she wouldn't bump into an unsavory looking man. “I know, right? There’s something very comforting about it, like he’s a rock in a hurricane of this mess.” She replied, gazing ahead fondly, thinking of the transfer student. He had changed their lives...

Ann smirked, the two swiping their wallets at the station gates. “Do you...like him?” She moved closer, lacing their arms together.

“Huh?!” Airi gasped, looking at her with wide eyes. Like him? “He’s just...a really nice person. He’s been through a lot, so I...” She mumbled, ducking her head. "I can relate."

Ann scoffed. “So nice that he got you expensive jewelry for your birthday, after only knowing you for a week.” She commented sarcastically, giving the class president a knowing smirk.

Blushing furiously, Airi pushed her away with a pout. They were just friends. Boys and girls could be friends without feelings, right?....Right?

Bursting out into laughter, Ann waved and walked to her train. "Don't deny it forever!"

Sighing exasperatedly, Airi walked to her line and went home.

Turning on the lights once she arrived home, she sat down on a chaise and flicked on the TV. “It’s been three weeks since the tragic subway disaster. In the course of addressing the accident, the Minister of Transport ended up resigning.” The newscaster spoke. “Many questions, however, still remain unanswered, as police struggle in their investigation...”

She frowned. Resigning without addressing the problem? Not a single word from the Minister, either.

‘How incompetent.’ She laced her hands together. Well, it’s not like it can be solved right away. She wouldn’t be able to do anything as a high school student, though she wanted to. Everyone in Tokyo depended on the railway system, and the amount of accidents were only slowly increasing.

If she or any of her friends got injured, she wouldn't know what to do. They were slowly becoming her reason for living...and she wouldn't be able to go on if they were taken from her.
Chapter 45

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

----5/2, MONDAY, EARLY MORNING, AOYAMA ITCHOME

The sky was one whole blue ocean above their heads, and the sun shone brightly to warm up the chilly morning air. The sound of cars driving on the main road faded away as they walked into the smaller streets toward the school. They traveled in silence, shoulders tense with apprehension.

Today was the day. Either Kamoshida was going to confess his crimes or...Airi glanced over at her neighbor. Akira and Ryuji get expelled. She gnawed on her lower lip, unable to keep the anxiety at bay.

Akira walked silently, a pensive frown on his face. He spent most of the night tossing and turning in his bed. Morgana even yelled at him to sleep. His nerves were shot. He didn't want to be expelled and separated from his friends. He didn't want to go back to jail. He didn't want to go back to the darkness.

“Mondays are such a drag…” A male student yawned in front of them. “Why couldn’t they give us today off, too? We have the rest of the week off starting tomorrow…”

His friend nodded. “Yeah, it’s ridiculous. Speaking of, what’s up with that calling card? The one sent to Kamoshida.” He asked. “Didn’t it say something about ‘stealing his distorted desires’ or something weird like that?”

He yawned again. “Yeah, something like that…”

Hearing her phone ring in her pocket, Airi pulled it out. Answering the call, she listened intently. “Right...Yes...”

Akira looked over curiously, tilting his head.

Hanging up, she gave him with an apologetic look. “Sorry, Akira-kun, I’ll have to rush ahead. Kawakami-sensei called me in to help.”

He nodded, and she ran off, sprinting the rest of the way.

“Please head toward the gymnasium in an orderly fashion!” Airi announced, ushering students in the hallways.

She and every other class president and representative were called in early to redirect the classes to the gym. Supposedly, it was for a school wide announcement, but those could have been made with the intercom.

She bit her lip. It must have to do with Shiho and Kamoshida.

“There is a morning assembly in the gymnasium, please do not go to your classes!” Another class
Once all the students gathered in the large gym that doubled as the auditorium, the class presidents walked in last, lining up on the sides. Airi stood at attention near the front of the stage, right next to the exit leading to the courtyard. Exhaling softly, she scanned the crowd of students, picking out Akira, Ann, and Ryuji.

“What’s with the sudden morning assembly..?”

“I bet it’s about that girl that jumped the other day.”

“They don’t have to tell us not to commit suicide.”

“There was that weird calling card too, so I guess the teachers are freaking out?”

Hearing all the callous comments, Airi furrowed her brow slightly. Why were they so insensitive? A fellow student tried to kill herself. She stood at attention when she noticed Principal Kobayakawa getting on the stage.

The grossly rotund man cleared his throat. “Let’s begin this school-wide morning assembly.” He spoke into the mic, the feedback piercing their ears for a second.

The students stood around, fidgeting in their boredom. No one really cared about announcements as they usually pertained to the school, its budget, and clubs. Nothing important was really told to the students during these.

“As you all know, a tragic event took place the other day. Thankfully, we have been informed that she has pulled through, but it will take time until she recovers.” He paused, looking out into the audience.

Ann angrily furrowed her brows at the statement, knowing it was extremely simplified.

Adjusting his collar, Principal Kobayakawa continued. “Everyone here has a bright future ahead. I implore that you rethink the importance of life and-”

The door Airi was next to slammed open. The entire student body turned to look at who interrupted and a hush fell over the crowd. She stared with wide eyes as the reason for the interruption walked through the doors, slamming it behind him. ‘Is this it..?’

Ann gasped, staring wide-eyed at the downtrodden Kamoshida.

He looked absolutely dreadful compared to a week ago. His shoulders were slumped as if the weight of the world was crushing him. His usually defined biceps were skinnier, having atrophied in his week long sabbatical. The biggest difference was the look in his eyes. Constantly exuding confidence and arrogance, it was now absent, replaced with despair and self loathing.

“Kamoshida-sensei.” Principal Kobayakawa greeted hesitantly, looking at the gym teacher with uncertainty. “What’s the-”

“I…” Kamoshida interrupted, exhaustion seeping into his voice. “…Have been reborn.” He hunched his shoulders. “That is why I will confess everything to you all…”

The crowd burst into chatter as the former olympic medalist slowly made his way to the front, and up onto the stage.
“..Huh?” Ann breathed, her eyes never leaving the man as he climbed the small steps onto the stage. She clenched her fists, knowing that no matter what he was going to say, she would never forgive him for what he had done. To her, to Airi, to everyone on the volleyball team...to Shiho.

“What’s going on?”

“Is he going to talk about the volleyball team?”

“Are those rumors true?”

“I have repeatedly done things that were...” Kamoshida paused, taking a deep breath as he finally stopped in the center of the stage. “Unbecoming of a teacher. Verbally abusing students...physically abusing my team, and...” He shuddered in disgust. “Sexually harassing female students.” He clenched his eyes. “I am the reason why Suzui Shiho tried to kill herself!” He fell to his knees, sobbing with the weight of his sins.

“Sexual harassment..?”

“What?!"

“Wow, the rumors were true?!”

“He is the worst!”

He looked up at the students, eyes blurry with tears. “I thought of this school as my own castle...There were even students that I sentenced to expulsion, simply because I didn’t like them...” He bowed his head. “I will, of course, rescind those...”

Principal Kobayakawa looked on in shock, eyes rapidly going from Kamoshida to the students. He held his pudgy hands up, trying to stop the teacher but to avail.

“I am truly sorry for putting innocent youths through such horrible acts...” Kamoshida gritted his teeth in anguish. “I am an arrogant, shallow...and shameful person. No, I’m worse than that...” He got on his hands and knees, forehead touching the wooden floors. “I will take responsibility and kill myself for it...!”

“What?!"

“Did he just say that..?”

“He’s going to kill himself?!!"

The room was filled with loud complaints and comments, the students all staring at the stage incredulously. The principal rushed up to the still prostrated teacher. “Kamoshida-sensei! Please get off the stage for now!” He pleaded.

Staff began to approach the crowd of students, recognizing that this was something only faculty should see. “Everyone, return to your classes!” A teacher yelled.

Kamoshida sobbed. “I-”

“Don’t run, you bastard!” Ann screamed angrily, glaring at the pathetic man in front of her as her voice pierced through the cloud of chatter.

The students near her backed away, staring at the model.
“Shiho’s still alive even after all the things that made her want to die!” She spat, gaze murderous at his confession. “You have no right to run from this!”

Trembling, he nodded. “You’re right…” He sobbed. “You’re absolutely right… I should be punished under the law and atone for my crimes…” He slowly straightened up into a seiza position. “I did horrible things to Takamaki-san, as well.” He admitted shamefully. “In return for giving Suzui-san a position on the team…” He shuddered. “I tried to force her into having relations.”

“Ugh.”

“Disgusting!”

“That’s horrible…”

“So the rumors are true.”

“As of today,” He continued. “I will resign from my position as an instructor and turn myself in.” He looked around frantically. “Someone, please call the police!”

The students and teachers stood around, unsure of what to do. Noticing no one was going to do anything, Airi frowned and pulled out her phone, dialing 110. Covering her mouth, she reported the situation, and the police was dispatched immediately.

“Wow…” Ryuji uttered, staring wide eyed at the stage as the commotion went on around them.

Akira rested his hands in his pockets, gazing pensively at the changed teacher. It actually worked. The difference in personality and morals was like a 180. So this was their power...

“This morning’s assembly is over! Return to your classes immediately!” A teacher yelled out, walking past the two.

They looked around, listening in to what the other students were saying.

“Isn’t this just like what that calling card said..?”

Does this mean the Phantom Thieves thing was for real?!”

“Was something done to Kamoshida?!”

“C’mon, there’s no way you could steal someone’s heart!”

“But why else would he start saying things like he’ll kill himself or turn himself in?”

“Maybe because it almost got leaked? Don’t they go easier on you if you turn yourself in?”

“I wonder what happened…”

“Who knows? But man, Kamoshida turned out to be one sick bastard.”

"Right? Hearing that he sexually harassed the girls...and Takamaki too!"

"Hey, didn't he start trying to flirt with Kimisawa before that weird calling card?"

"Ugh, hitting on minors and cheating. He's so gross! I can't believe he was really our gym teacher..."
They looked on in shock. The rapid change in opinion was almost dizzying. One minute they were praising the man, and now they’re condemning him remorselessly.

Akira frowned.

“Return to your classrooms at once!” The teacher shouted.

Slowly, the students were ushered out of the gym, along with most of the staff. The police arrived in a prompt manner and took Kamoshida into custody, cuffing him into the car.

An officer called Airi over, the remaining staff already being questioned by the rest of the force. "Ma'am, we traced the call back to you. Can you explain to us what exactly happened?"

Now standing in the empty gymnasium, the three Persona users gazed at the empty stage, still stunned at what happened. “His heart really did change…” Ann whispered, shoulders slumping in relief as it was finally over, knowing she didn't have to sell her body.

Ryuji fidgeted a leg. “Seems like it.” He commented hesitantly. “But, was this really for the best?” He looked over at Akira uncertainly.


Bowing to the officers that began to leave the premises, Airi turned and walked up to her friends. “He’ll be detained for now.” She informed them quietly. “They said it’s unusual for a criminal to confess his crimes, so they’ll be conducting an interrogation soon…” She looked away uncomfortably, rubbing an arm.

Ryuji sighed and rested his thumbs in his pockets. “Things’re happenin’ way too fast…”

Hearing footsteps behind her, Airi turned and blinked in surprise. It was Mishima and two of their female classmates, Namikawa and Matsumoto. “Yes?” She asked politely. The other thieves turned as well, surprised to see other students approaching them.

Taking a deep breath, Mishima bowed to his waist. “Takamaki-san...I’m sorry!” He blurted out.

Taken aback, Ann looked at him with wide eyes. “Huh..?”

Straightening up from his bow, but still hunched over, he ducked his head. “We all knew...but we pretended we didn’t.”

Matsumoto stepped forward. “Takamaki-san, I had you all wrong…” She bowed slightly, still towering over the model. “I’m sorry that I spread rumors about you!”

Namikawa walked up behind Matsumoto. “I didn’t know at all…” She added quietly, shyly looking at the group. “Kamoshida was forcefully pushing himself on you...It must’ve been so hard for you..!” She wrung her hands nervously, looking at Ann apologetically.

Matsumoto nodded in agreement. “I’m sure there’s a ton of people who want to apologize to you.” She added, biting her lip. “We’re so sorry..!”

Airi smiled fondly at the three. It was nice to see their classmates being kind toward each other.

After a pause, Ann shook her head. “No, it’s OK.” She dipped her head solemnly “The same goes
for me too…Besides, that’s all in the past now.” She gave them a small smile. "Thanks."

“Hey, you there! Return to class at once!” A teacher shouted, passing by them with a stern frown.

Obeying, Matsumoto bowed slightly to the model. “W-Well, see you around…” She spoke hesitantly, Namikawa following her head.

They started walking back to class when Airi called out. “Wait!” She ran up to the two.

Stopping at the doors, they turned around. “S-Senpai..?” Namikawa whispered shyly.

Airi smiled gratefully at them. “I want to thank you two for apologizing to Ann-chan.” She stated softly. “I’m proud of you guys, and honored to be your class president.” She beamed. “Please don’t spread any more rumors though, OK?”

Blushing, Matsumoto held up her hands. “No, Senpai! Thank you!” She replied quickly. “A-And we won't...I'm happy that you're our class president too!” She declared loudly, bowing to her, Namikawa timidly followed her example.

Sweatdropping, Airi placed her hands on their shoulders. “You don’t have to call me Senpai, we’re the same age.” She smiled exasperatedly. "Honestly, who started that?"

Namikawa shook her head. “No...we all look up to you. You stayed by Takamaki-san even when we spread those awful rumors about her...and now you’re thanking us for apologizing.” She stated quietly. “That’s why you’re our Senpai.” They both bowed again, and with a wave, they left through the double steel doors.

Slumping, she smiled fondly at their retreating backs before turning to her group. It was nice to hear their classmates pushing past their mistakes and owning up to them. They didn't even need to have their Treasures stolen.

Mishima was still there, speaking closely to Akira and Ryuji. “I can’t apologize enough for what I did to you.” He looked down sullenly. “...I swear I’ll make it up to you someday.” He gazed at the bespectacled student determinedly before walking away, bowing at Airi when he passed her by.

“Looks like Kamoshida ain’t the only one that had a change of heart.” Ryuji remarked, eyebrows raised in surprise as he stared after the ex-volleyball student’s departure. He turned to Ann, resting his thumbs at the edge of his pockets. “Man, I’m glad for you. Looks like those weird rumors are gonna go away.”

Ann shook her head. “My thing doesn’t really matter.” She inhaled deeply. “We made Kamoshida apologize about Shiho...That’s more than enough for me.” She stated quietly.

Airi nodded in agreement. “I wish he also apologized to Ryuji-kun and Mishima-kun, as well as everyone else he treated unfairly…” She murmured, pursing her lips in displeasure. “Like Watanabe-san, Nakamura-san, Harada-san, and Tanaka-san…”

Ryuji looked at her questioningly. “Why them?”

“You remember the half naked volleyball girls in the Palace?” She reminded grimly.

His eyes widened with realization. “Shit! Well, they were huddlin’ around each other earlier during Kamoshida’s confession. I think they’ll be OK.” He shrugged awkwardly. He had noticed they were crying quietly, and were the first to leave the gymnasium. "Besides, we’re not the ones in the hospital. You two should hurry and tell Suzui about it.” He smirked faintly. "I'm sure she'd like to
know.”

Ann looked at him in surprise, before nodding. “...Yeah.” She replied resolutely.

They headed back to class, and even though no one really paid attention to the lessons, too busy gossiping about Kamoshida, the day couldn’t end fast enough.

Once the last bell rang, Ann and Airi left for the hospital immediately, and Akira, Morgana, and Ryuji went up to the rooftop to wait for them.

Chapter End Notes

Seiza is the traditional Japanese sitting position. You sit with your legs tucked under you and the top of your feet against the floor.
Chapter 46

Quickly walking into the dead silent hospital from the noisy streets of Shibuya, they power-walked to the elevators and up to Shiho’s room. Quietly, they slid open the heavy wooden door, the breeze from the hallway gently blowing the hundreds of colorful cranes hung up on the ceiling, and they moved to sit next to the bed on opposite sides. It was still a bit early, so Suzui-san wouldn’t be here for a while.

Clasping an unmoving hand, Ann exhaled. “Shiho...we did it...!” She grinned, trying to contain her excitement. “Kamoshida confessed everything...He apologized for what he did to you...and to me. I’m so glad that everything worked out well.” She stared at her sleeping face wistfully. “I wish you will wake up soon…”

Airi scooted closer, brushing some loose strands out of Shiho’s face. “Hi, Shiho-chan.” She greeted softly, voice barely higher than a whisper. “We made that piece of shit apologize to you...” She smiled faintly. "He’ll finally be punished for his crimes.”

Ann looked over at her in amusement. "Piece of shit?"

Coughing, she looked away, embarrassed. “A-Anyway, I hope you will wake up soon. Don’t keep us waiting forever...” Shouldn't they have their happy ending now? Didn't they deserve it? The rapist and long time tormentor was finally behind bars, all because of them. What if she never woke up though? Shiho didn't deserve to be trapped in a coma forever...

Just then, the door slid open and they turned to look at the newcomer, not noticing the minuscule twitch of black eyebrows.

"Hello, girls.” Suzui-san whispered, smiling slightly at them. The continued visits with no progress seemed to be wearing on the older woman. There were more lines in her forehead, and the occasional white strand in her sea of black hair.

Sliding the door closed, the older woman moved to sit down next to Ann, face falling when she noted Shiho’s unchanged state. “You two look happier than usual. Did something happen?”

Ann nodded eagerly with a big grin. “Kamoshida’s been arrested!” She announced loudly, quickly covering her mouth and wincing apologetically.

Stunned, Suzui-san held her hand over her chest. “What..?” She breathed, looking between the two with wide eyes.

Airi nodded in confirmation, smiling tearfully. "It's true. The police came today and took him away."

Dark eyes slowly blurred with tears. “My baby is safe from that-that monster...” Suzui-san sobbed, crying in relief. Ann placed an arm around her shoulders, comforting her.

A quiet groan broke through their conversation, and Airi slowly turned to look, eyes wide. No one else could've made that groan, unless...

Facial muscles twitching, Shiho’s eyes moved rapidly beneath her eyelids. The ECG monitor sped up, the beeping noises coming in faster.

The three looked on with bated breaths, not blinking even for a second. With a weak cough, black
eyes slowly slid open, dazedly looking up toward the ceiling.

Suzui Shiho was awake.

“Shiho!” Suzui-san cried, breaking the tension, and they rushed to the bedside. She gently held the conscious girl’s face, lips whimpering.

Ann gripped a weak hand, crying against the soft flesh. “Shiho…!” She sobbed in relief.

Clasping her hands in front of her face, Airi slowly fell to her knees, tears streaming down her grinning face.

“M-Mom…?” Shiho breathed, her eyes gradually slid from the colorful blurs to the woman next to her.

“Yes, yes it’s me, honey…” Suzui-san gave her daughter a watery smile, moving down to kiss her forehead, brushing her hair out of her face. "I'm so glad...you woke up..." Her voice hitched as tears dripped down, splattering against the thin linen sheets.

“Shiho...everything will be OK now.” Ann grinned, eyes bright with tears. "Kamoshida's in jail. He admitted everything he did!"

With a wince, the black haired girl turned her head at the model’s direction. “Ann…” She whispered slowly, voice still raspy from disuse. “I’m...sorry...for making you...go to him…” She coughed. “I don’t…want to go..back…”

Quickly getting up from the floor, Airi poured a cup of water from the bedside table and held it out in front of the injured student. “Here, Shiho-chan.” She murmured, supporting the back of her head.

Cracking open her mouth, her lips practically sealed together during the few weeks, Shiho let her tilt the water in, gradually draining the cup until it was empty.

Swallowing the last drop of liquid, she gazed at her with wide eyes. “Senpai...” She breathed, the ECG monitor slowing down. “…I’m so...sorry…” A tear slid down her cheek. “Thank...you...for saving...me...” She breathed out, closing her eyes. The muscles in her face relaxed, and she ceased to make any noise.

Halting, Airi looked at her blankly. “Shiho-chan..?” She whispered. What...Please don't. Please don't please don't-...
The three sighed in relief. "Thank god..." Suzui-san whimpered, collapsing on a chair. "I thought..."

Airi grimaced, holding a hand to her racing heart. "Yeah, me too..." They sat down on their seats, letting the steady heartbeat lull them into a calm.

"Shiho will be fine now." Ann reassured, wrapping an arm around the mother.

Biting her lip, Suzui-san nodded and ushered them out of the room with a grateful smile. “I know this is sudden, but...I want to transfer Shiho to a different school once she recovers.” She stated quietly. “I hope you’ll understand why...”

Staring at her in shock, they slowly nodded with crestfallen expressions. "...We'll let the administration know." Airi informed the older woman.

The two students traveled back to school, heading to the stairs. They were sad that Shiho wouldn't ever go to school here again, but they understood. There was no way she would be able to function in the same building where she was...

“I heard Kurusu and Sakamoto threatened Kamoshida...”

“You think they used violence to make him confess?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised...”

“That calling card was a prank then?”

They glanced at each other worriedly as the gossiping students walked past them. The rumors were already running rampant through the school.

They walked up the stairs, passing the second floor landings. “-we were lucky his mind didn’t get messed up either! This was an A+ job!” they heard from a floor down.

Airi deadpanned. Did they have to be so loud? What if someone heard? Thankfully, the school was mostly empty at this time, most of the students left would be in the Practice Building on the other side of the campus.

“Does this mean that they won’t have a mental shutdown even if their Palace disappears...?” They heard Morgana ask, voice muffled from the door. “I see...So we need to persuade the Shadow without killing it, and then send it back to its real self. Our targets won’t undergo a cognitive collapse if we do that.”

“So we can get ‘em to confess with no bad stuff?” Ryuji asked excitedly, voice much clearer than the feline’s. “Hey, that works for me!”

Rolling her eyes, Ann opened the door to the roof, the class president closing it behind them with a squeak. “Do you have to be so loud?” She complained, looking at Ryuji with an annoyed expression.

“We could hear you from the 3rd floor...” Airi added sheepishly, taking a seat next to Akira.

“So...” Ryuji began hesitantly. “How’d it go? With Shiho, I mean...”
Pursing her lips, Ann grinned excitedly. “She’s regained consciousness..!”

Akira and Ryuji looked at her in shock. “For real?!“ The latter yelped.

Wiping her eyes, she crouched, hiding her face in her arms. “It was only for a little bit, but I got to talk to her..!” She sniffed. “I was able to tell her that Kamoshida admitted to what he did..!”

Airi moved to hug her, rubbing a hand on her back. “Shiho-chan’s mother was there as well, and we were all crying in joy.” She continued softly. “She..told us she was sorry…”

Sniffing, Ann got up, pulling the class president’s arms off and holding them in her hands. “Looks like she found out that I was flirting with Kamoshida for her sake…" She chuckled weakly. "And here I was, wanting to apologize to her."

Jumping on top of the desk, Morgana looked at the two with a stern frown. “Kamoshida’s at fault for all this."

Wiping her eyes, she nodded. “I know…” She whispered. “Shiho’s mom wants to transfer her to a different school after she recovers…”

Taking a seat again, Airi idly grasped her arm. “With the truth about Kamoshida sexually harassing students and her...attempted suicide,” She flinched. “People will label her after that.”

Akira gently bumped shoulders with her. "As long as she's safe, right?"

“Shiho said she didn’t ‘want to go back,’ so it sounded like she had the same idea.” Ann added sullenly.

Ryuji leaned back in his seat. “It’s gonna get lonely…” He commented quietly.

Ann shook her head. “I think it’s for the best...I’m sure it’ll be hard if she stays here.” She answered solemnly.

“She’s alive. You can see her anytime.” Ryuji reassured, lacing his hands behind his head.

She looked up at the sky, the clouds streaked orange from the setting sun. “Yeah..." She clenched her hands. "I need to change too.”

“That aside,” He began. “I was surprised you could hold yourself back against Kamoshida’s Shadow. You too, Airi.” He looked over at the class president and snickered. “Especially since he had that other you show up.”

Airi grimaced. “Don’t remind me of that.” She complained, clenching her eyes. That was going to scar her forever. It didn't help that the colors of the fake's corset was basically her entire wardrobe scheme.

Lips twitching, Akira looked away from her, blushing slightly at the memory. All those curves...

Ann shook her head. “It wasn’t like that...I just wanted Kamoshida to apologize himself.”

Morgana looked up at her with shining eyes. “You’re so kind, Lady Ann.” It remarked dreamily.

Ryuji grimaced. “No matter how much of a shit bag he was, finishing him off woulda left a bad aftertaste, huh?”

Airi rolled her eyes. “As if.” She smiled serenely. “Killing him would’ve been too easy. It’s better
if we make him repent for his crimes.”

Ann nodded. “Realizing what he’s done, he’ll grovel for forgiveness the rest of his life, you
know?” She spoke darkly, grim satisfaction shining in her baby blue eyes. “I just believe there are
fates worse than death. He’ll have a great time rotting in prison.”

Looking at the two in shock and slight fear, Ryuji slowly turned to look at Akira. “Holy shit…” He
breathed, jaw hanging open.

Akira nodded slightly, paling at the dark comments. He honestly didn't think they were those kind
of people, but he supposed the circumstances called for it.

“A-Anyways, that’s all settled…” Ryuji stammered awkwardly, uncrossing his legs. “But you
know, there was one more thing I was wonderin’ about that castle.” He looked over at Morgana,
who swished its tail languidly. “Why was Kamoshida the only one who had that Metaverse thing?”

The feline moved closer. “It isn’t necessarily limited to him. It’s something anyone could have if
their heart became warped from their desires.”

Ann furrowed her brow. “Anyone…”

Airi looked away. Who else would register in the app? Could she...No. There wasn't any point.

Morgana tilted its head. “Wanna check it out?”

Ryuji shook his head. “N-Not right now. We better lay low for a while. People are still gonna be
talkin’ about Kamoshida.” He crossed leg nervously. “Then again, it’s totally impossible for
someone to find out what we did at his Palace.”

Ann gave him an unimpressed look. “Yeah, about that...Weird rumors about you guys are already
going around. Stuff like, you got together and threatened Kamoshida with something close to
physical violence…”

“I asked Matsumoto-chan and Namikawa-chan to stop spreading rumors, but,” Airi bit her lip. “I
can’t control the other classes. I’m pretty sure it’s because they heard you were being expelled, and
then Kamoshida confessed...” She shrugged. “It must seem connected.”

Ryuji looked at them incredulously. “The hell?!” He yelped, smacking the table. “We did all that
just to get this kind of reception?!”

Ann rolled her eyes. “People aren’t going to easily believe that phantom thieves really exist.” She
rested a hand on her hip. “The calling card’s being treated like it was a prank by someone who
knew what Kamoshida was doing.”

Sighing heavily, Ryuji slumped in his seat. “Makes sense…” He muttered, “We’re the ones who
did it, and I still don’t completely believe it myself.”

Airi shifted in her seat. “Let’s wait for things to settle down.” She suggested. “If we do anything
weird, someone might report us and then we'd be in real trouble.”

The punk leaned back in his seat, taking out his phone. “Sure...but let’s check how much this
medal can be sold for.” He grinned. “It’d be better if we pawned it off ASAP.”

He tapped the screen, searching online for auction prices. “Ooh, got a hit!” He quickly sat up,
staring intently. His face fell as the screen loaded and he groaned. “...Wait, ¥30,000?! That’s all a
gold medal’s worth?!”

Airi gave him an amused smile. “Well, it’s only plated gold. The inside is just silver.”

“Still…” He argued weakly. “It’s an Olympic medal, shouldn’t it sell for more?”

Ann gasped and turned to him. “Remember that time in middle school? I lent you some money.”

She gave him a fake smile.

Gaping, Ryuji stood up. “There’s no way I borrowed ¥30,000 from you!” He shouted indignantly. “You’re crazy!”

Crossing her arms, she smirked. “Wouldn’t it be around that much with compounded interest?”

He took a step back. “Interest my ass!”

“I’m not saying that I’m taking all of it.” Ann rolled her eyes. “I mean, it’s your fault for not paying me back all these years! It’s just common sense!”

He flinched, resting his thumbs in his pockets. “Dammit…” He cursed, slumping his shoulders.

Airi held up her hands placatingly. “Why don’t we use the money for a group celebration? That way, we all benefit from it.” She suggested, rolling her eyes. “Ann-chan, lay off of Ryuji-kun.”

The model scrunched up her face in displeasure. “Fine, mom.”

Airi raised her eyebrows, surprised at the comment. Mom? What?

Akira huffed in amusement, shaking his head at them. "Yeah, don't fight. It was a team effort so we should all get a share."

Grooming an ear, Morgana sat down. “I agree on laying low and keeping an eye on the situation.”

It scratched itself, looking at the humans. “However, you dragged me into this. It would be nonsense not to celebrate a successful mission.”

Rolling a shoulder, Ryuji grinned. “I guess we could blow this dirty money on something fun.”

The feline nodded, a smile growing on its muzzle. “Discussions among phantom thieves are to take place over luxurious food. How about it?” It suggested merrily.

The three nodded in agreement. “Hey, wait…” Ann paused. “…Nah, I guess it’s fine. There’s somewhere I want to go then.”

Airi looked at her curiously. “Where is it?” She narrowed her eyes. "...Is it expensive?"

“It’s a place Shiho and I have been wanting to go for a while.” Ann replied, looking cheerier. "And don't worry about it. ¥30,000 will cover for all of us."

Ryuji kicked the floor. “I owe money, so I can’t complain…” He remarked sullenly and looked over at the transfer student. “You good with that?”

Akira nodded, smiling faintly. “Fine by me.” It would be nice to eat something delicious and expensive again.

“I’ll leave it to your discretion as well, Lady Ann.” Morgana meowed, waving its tail happily.
Ann nodded. “I’ll call and check the prices later then.” She stated confidently.

“When should we go?” Ryuji grinned excitedly. "Wanna do it soon, like tomorrow?"

Airi winced. “I have work tomorrow...Can we do another day? Like maybe...last day of break?”

Ann nodded in agreement. “It’ll help energize us when school life starts up again the day after.”

Ryuji crossed his arms, a satisfied look on his face. “Then...the 5th, on Children’s day.” He confirmed.

“So, who’s going to sell this?” Ann gestured to the gold medal that was sitting innocently on the desk.

“Leave that to us.” Morgana purred. “We know a store that’ll buy anything. Don’t we, Akira?” It looked over at the bespectacled student.

He nodded, sweatdropping. Back to the airsoft shop for them.

Ann grinned. “OK, I’ll leave that to you guys.”

“Don’t get caught, OK?” Airi advised, biting her lip in worry. "Someone might ask questions as to why you’re selling an Olympic gold medal.”

“I’ll be careful.” Akira replied, smiling softly at her before getting up. It was...kind of nice to be worried over. “It’s getting late. We should go home.”

Everyone nodded and Morgana jumped into his bag. Opening the rusted door, they left the roof and headed down the stairs, missing the pile of cleaning supplies and discarded desks in the corner.

“Oh, I forgot.” Airi gasped, stopping on the second floor. “Kawakami-sensei wanted to talk to me last week and it completely left my mind. Sorry, Akira-kun,” She looked at him apologetically. “I won’t be able to travel with you today.”

He blinked. “It’s OK. I can wait..?”

She shook her head. “No, it’s all right. It might take a while. I have to tell her about Shiho's decision too, so I’ll see you guys tomorrow.” She waved as she split off from the staircase, walking over to the teacher’s lounge instead.

“See ya!” Ryuji waved as he hopped down the steps, his sneakers smacking noisily against the concrete with a plop.

“Tell us if it’s important!” Ann requested, following after the punk.

“See you.” Akira smiled with a small wave, slightly disappointed. Hesitating for a slight second, he walked down the stairs after the two blonds.
Knocking on the door to the teacher’s lounge on the second floor, she slid it open. Most teachers had already left, though thankfully Kawakami had stayed behind for once. Her face was stressed out as she wrote into her report. It was most likely about the incident with Kamoshida earlier. How was the school reacting to it?

Kawakami looked up at the knock. “Oh, Airi-chan.” She flipped her paper, concealing it from the class president. “What is it?”

Airi smiled slightly, walking up to her desk. “Hi, Sensei. I remember you told me you wanted to talk to me like a week ago?”

The teacher blinked in realization. “Oh, right. Way to remember after a week.” She gave her pseudo-daughter an amused look. “I just wanted to ask how you were, did you pay the bills, stuff like that. I have to give in that report soon.”

She pursed her lips. “Right...Sorry again.” She ducked her head in guilt. “I just give you more work…”

Kawakami rolled her eyes exasperatedly. “It’s fine. It's for Takase-kun, remember?” Her eyes darkened. “It’ll be the fifth anniversary this year…”

Airi flinched. “Is it..? When..?”

She sighed. “...It’s December 24th. I...remember it very clearly.”

“Um...” She bit her lip. “Would it be all right if I go with this year? I-I didn’t get a chance to last year…”

Blinking, Kawakami huffed wryly. “Because I yelled at you for asking...” She ran a hand through her messy brown hair. “Sorry again...I didn’t really believe you when you said you knew him. He always mentioned a little sister with the weirdest hair color but to think it was really you…”

Airi grimaced, lightly tugging at her braid. “Is it really that weird? It’s just a mix of blonde and red.”

Kawakami snorted. “We get a complaint each month about a certain class president who dyes her hair, started by the student council president.” She smirked at the blush on the embarrassed student’s face. “But yes...we should go together this year. You don’t even know where it is, right?”

She shook her head. “No, you never told me.” She glanced away. “You never even told me how he died…”
Kawakami sighed heavily. “...Maybe one day. Anyway,” She stuffed her papers into her folder. “I need to go before I’m late. I’ll see you next week.”

"Ah, wait." Airi stopped her, holding out a hand. "I just came back from the hospital. Suzui Shiho's mother told me she's going to transfer her to a different school once she's recovered."

She sighed. "I expected that. I'll be sure to let her homeroom teacher know."

Nodding, Airi left the teacher’s lounge and headed down the stairs and out of the building. Why wouldn't she tell her how he went? It was the first question she had about him last year, but her guardian refused to even touch upon the subject. Was it really that bad...?

White vans caught her eye and she looked up to the left of the school gate. Seemed the news stations didn’t waste any time at all. There were three different TV companies present at the moment, each reporter trying to catch a student about the situation.

“-touch me and stuff all the time…” Blinking, she turned to the closest interview, just outside the gates. It was Watanabe, one of the sexualized girls in Kamoshida’s castle. “I’m glad I don’t have to deal with that sexual harassment anymore…” She sniffed, looking to the world as if she was about to break down any second.

The reporter didn't seem to care, and was prepared to ask another question judging by their shoving the microphone into her face.

Furrowing her brow, Airi walked up and wrapped her arms around Watanabe's shoulders. “There, there. It’s all over now...” She soothed before turning to the Journalist. "If you don’t mind, we’ll be going."

She then guided the victim away from the sputtering reporter and into a secluded corner a couple buildings away, out of view from the news vans. “Watanabe-chan?” She whispered concernedly. "Are you all right?"

Sniffing, the brown haired girl looked up. “Oh, Kimisawa-chan...Thanks.” She wiped some stray tears with the sleeve of her blazer. “I...didn’t really want to talk about it, but he caught me alone from the others, so…”

Rummaging through her bag, Airi took out some tissues and offered it to her year-mate. “Here.”

She took it and blew her nose with a loud trumpet-like noise. “Sorry...It’s been a long day.” Watanabe sighed. “I can’t believe he’s really going to jail. I’m so happy, but...I’m also really mad at myself for never speaking up.” She looked away guiltily. “Maybe it could’ve stopped a long time ago...then me and the other girls wouldn’t have to go through all...that.” She clenched her eyes as a new wave of tears hit, trailing down her cheeks. "And Suzui wouldn't have j-jumped..."

Sighing, Airi gathered up the girl in her arms again and rubbed her back comfortingly. “There, there…” She whispered. “It’s all over now. You and everyone on the volleyball team are safe.” Taking one arm off, she took out her phone from her pocket to search up recommended clinics. “If you’d like, I’m willing to escort you to the train station. I think it would be best if you girls go see a...private counselor.” She worded carefully, not wanting to trigger the volleyball member into a traumatic flashback. Once with Shiho was enough. “I don’t think the one in the school can properly handle this, and I really think it’ll help you guys.”

Watanabe grimaced and took a step back, looking at the screen. “Yeah...I thought so, too. I mean, I don't want his ugly face flashing behind my eyes forever. I’m gonna let the other girls know
“...” She wiped her eyes with the tissue. “We’ll probably go together to support each other.”

Airi brightened. “That’s good! I really admire your strength, you know.” Placing a gentle hand on the volleyball member’s shoulder, she guided her toward the station. “You went through so much and you’re still fighting.”

Watanabe blushed prettily as they walked down the road and opposite of the news vans. “T-Thank you...Senpai.”

She gave her an incredulous look. Her too?!

Walking into the cafe, Akira bowed slightly to the owner who only grumbled quietly to himself. Making his way to his room, his phone rang out when he just passed the TV. Morgana stuck its head out, peering over his shoulder.

An: Is that gold medal real? When did it get inside his Palace..?

“No, that one is a fake. It’s just a by-product of his cognition.” Morgana answered quietly. “The real medal should still be in his possession.”

Akira nodded, typing it into the chat.

Ak: This one’s a fake.
R: What..? You’re telling me Kamoshida still has the medal?
An: Who cares? What matters is that we changed his heart.
An: And anyway, if we had taken the real thing, that’d be stealing!
An: I don’t think he’ll be proud of that medal regardless.
Ai: OK, so...I wanted to say this earlier but I kept forgetting.
R: Wassup?
Ai: We brought items and this medal from the cognitive world into the real world.
Ai: So it technically doesn’t exist..?
R: Uhhh...I don’t understand.
Ai: Basically, we made something from nothing.
Ai: We made a thought, an ideal, into a physical object.
Ai: I’m...you know what, don’t mind me.

Akira stared blankly at the screen, mind blown from Airi’s theory. He’d been traipsing in the mind of another without really putting thought into it, more focused on just getting the Treasure.

“Wow, Lady Airi sure is smart.” Morgana remarked quietly, impressed at the discovery. “She really thought about the connection between the Metaverse and the real world. Unfortunately, I can’t answer that...” It shrugged helplessly. "It’s probably due to the Meta-App.”

Ak: I never even thought about that.
Ak: Morgana says it’s due to the app.
Ai: Well...that sort of answers the question.
An: As long as it doesn’t hurt anyone, it’s fine, right?
R: It's like our jobs. We're being paid to beat up Shadows.
R: And since we got money, Ann....
R: You let go of stuff pretty easy, wanna forget about my debt?
An: That’s different. ¥500 is a lot of money for a middle schooler, you know.
An: Do you even still have that dolphin anyway?
Ai: Oh! I remember that!
Ak: Dolphin?
R: Stop digging that up!
Ai: Back in middle school, we went on a school trip to an aquarium.
An: Ryuji spent all his money on a souvenir, so I lent him some money for the train fare.
Ai: It was really cute!
R: I said I was sorry...It was for my mom.
An: Well I guess I can call it even after all we’ve been through.
R: ...Thank you.
Ai: Did Sakamoto-san like it?
R: Yeah, she still got it.
R: Anyways, we don’t gotta worry about selling that medal off if it’s a fake!
R: End of story!

“Kamoshida will never be proud of that once-in-a-lifetime gold medal ever again.” Morgana stated firmly. “Depending on how you look at it, that punishment might be even worse than death for him.”

Akira nodded slightly. What a depressing end.

Turning around to look at his ward, Sojiro sighed. “Must be nice to have so much time off starting tomorrow...” He closed his eyes tiredly. “For me, it just means more customers and even more work. No matter where you go during Golden Week, it’s packed with office workers on vacation. Why does everyone have to take a break at the same time..?”

Akira gave him a sympathetic look. As far as he knew, the older man was the only one who worked in the cafe. “I can help out, if you’d like.” He offered quietly.

He eyed him for a moment. “...All right. I’ll take you up on that.” He answered, before turning back to the TV, clearly dismissing the younger male.

Shrugging, Akira walked up to his room, letting Morgana out of the bag. At this point, he didn’t really care whether or not the cat saw him near naked, and he changed into his sleepwear and went straight to bed.

He stared tiredly at the ceiling, idly counting the wooden beams that were lined with dust. Today was such a roller coaster of emotions. With the confirmation of Kamoshida’s crimes, there was no doubt he’d be seeing three certain persons soon.

He still had no idea who or what they were. All he knew was that out of the whole team, they only contacted him. No one else seemed to notice the glowing blue barred door at the castle, and they hadn’t mentioned ever seeing a long nosed man in their dreams.

Resigned, he closed his eyes.
Putting on a casual outfit consisting of a black sports jacket, white shirt, and some jeans, Akira sat down on his bed as early morning sunlight streamed in through the dirty windows behind him, and looked at Morgana in front of him. “Come on, we’re going to pawn that medal today.” It chimed.

He nodded, opening his mouth to reply.

“Hey, you can hear me, right?” Sojiro shouted from downstairs. “You don’t have plans, do you? Come help me out, instead of sleeping your life away.”

Closing his mouth, he grimaced. Now?

“We do owe it to him...” Morgana stated reluctantly. “...We’ll just have to wait. Hurry down and help him out.”

Sighing silently, Akira changed into a more comfortable brown knit sweater and went downstairs. The retro cafe had a few customers, like the elderly couple he saw on his first day, as well as the coffee snob who insisted on half insulting them with every breath. Putting on a spare green apron, he helped out by bringing the coffee and curry to the tables.

By the time 3PM rolled by, the cafe was thankfully empty, and he washed the dirty dishes in the sink. He didn't expect how tiring it was to run a cafe, but he hid his discomfort. How did the Boss do this every day?

Sitting down on one of the bar stools, Sojiro sighed. “Heh, sorry I kinda pressured you into doing this.”

Akira shook his head. “It’s fine.” He replied quietly.

“And now to our next topic...” The newscaster on the TV stated. Sojiro turned his attention to it. “Fall from Grace: The story of a dishonored Olympic medalist. Just recently, a high school coach admitted to his school that he had been perpetually abusing students. Given his prior Olympic achievements, this has caused quite a stir.” The reporter informed. “What caused this habitual offender to suddenly confess these heinous crimes to his entire school? The police are hoping that the upcoming interrogations will bring light to this question.”

Sojiro narrowed his eyes at the school shown in the broadcast, crossing his legs. “Hm? Isn’t this...?”

The recording changed from the school to an anonymous student in the Shujin Academy uniform. “My friends would come back from practice with bruises all the time... It was scary, but I’m relieved that the abuse is finally going to end now.”

Sojiro narrowed his eyes at the school shown in the broadcast, crossing his legs. “Hm? Isn’t this...?”

The recording changed from the school to an anonymous student in the Shujin Academy uniform. “My friends would come back from practice with bruises all the time... It was scary, but I’m relieved that the abuse is finally going to end now.”

The screen then switched to a recording of a female student, head cut from the frame. “He would touch me and stuff all the time... I’m glad I don’t have to deal with that sexual harassment anymore...” She sniffed. Another girl stepped up to comfort her, wrapping her arms around her. “There, there...” A familiar voice soothed. “It’s all over now... If you don’t mind, we’ll be going.” She then guided the sniffling victim away.

Switching again to another female student, the view stopping right before her chin. “There were always rumors, sure. Not many people believed them though. Like... I’m totally shocked they were actually true.” She stated casually “At least now I can go to school without worrying.”

Sojiro straightened. “I knew it. This is your school, isn’t it?” He turned to the teen, a stern glare on his face. “I heard Airi’s voice in that second interview.”
Akira looked up at the TV. “Seems like it.” He replied calmly, shutting off the water. He wasn’t surprised to know the class president had been there to comfort some of them.

The older man sighed deeply. “Things might be getting turbulent at school, but you need to just keep your head down, all right?” He warned. “…More importantly, keep those hands moving. I’ve got some more stuff I need you to do.”

Exhaling softly, Akira nodded his head, and obediently did what he was told.

Soon enough, it was evening, and the shop was now empty. Akira rolled his neck, the joints popping under the pressure. He leaned on the freshly wiped surface from behind the counter, exhausted after the long day of work. He was so tired, and he didn't even get to do what he was supposed to do today. He didn't want to hang onto that Olympic gold medal in case it decided to bite them in the ass.

The bell rang, signalling another customer, and he reluctantly turned to look.

His gray irises met red ones, and he blinked.
“Thank you, please come again!” She spoke sweetly, bowing to the customer. She sighed in relief when they walked away. It was finally the end of the shift.

“Good job as always, Kimisawa-chan!” Hanasaki cheered from the bundles of gardenias. She was her boss, a slightly older lady with light brown hair in a bun. She had a kind face, perfect for someone who owned a flower shop. The shop itself was a small little inlet with stands and refrigerators full of flowers.

Airi bowed. “Thank you, Hanasaki-san.” She smiled and took off her apron, leaving her in a dusty pink blouse and black skirt.

Accepting her wages for the day, she bowed again before leaving, putting on her beige trench coat. The underground mall was pretty empty due to it being Golden Week. Most of the shops were closed as well, many of the owners having taken vacations. Her footsteps echoed on the well worn tiles, further emphasizing how empty it was in the usually crowded mall.

Taking the stairs down to the trains, she felt them again. Phantom strings brushed against her fingertips, making her hands twitch. She smiled, slightly bitter. It was nice to play again, after so many years. Even if the image of her parents and the matron kept flashing in her mind.

Since she had the next couple of days off, why not visit Leblanc and enjoy a cuppa?

Taking the train to Yongenjaya, she got off and started walking to the cafe. It was a nice and cool day, the sun low in the horizon, and the streets were packed with adults going to bars, clubs, or on their way out of the city. Brushing past a couple of drunken men with an “excuse me,” she finally made it to the backstreets, still as empty as ever.

She walked into the cafe, the bell ringing on the door. There weren't any customers in the small establishment, though the tables in the booths shined as if they were recently cleaned. Akira was leaning against the counter in a green apron, tiredly turning his head to look at her. “Hi, Akira-kun.” She greeted, taking off her jacket and sitting at the bar.

He straightened up, resting his hands in his pockets. “Good evening, Airi.” He smiled softly.

She blinked. Just Airi? Blushing at the familiarity, she looked away. “No -chan?” She replied, joking weakly.

He tensed and covered his mouth. “Sorry...I...” He looked away. “If it’s OK...” He rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly.

Biting her lip, she nodded, face burning up. “Sorry...I...” He looked away. “If it’s OK...” He rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly.

“Are you ordering anything?” Sojiro butted in, looking at the two with an unimpressed look.

Jolted out of her trance, she blushed furiously and covered her face with her hands. “Blue mountain, please.” She squeaked, voice muffled.
Stiffening, Akira coughed, nervously adjusting his glasses.

Grumbling at the two, the cafe owner went about making her a cup. “Teenagers…” He muttered, taking the requested beans from the shelf.

They both blushed, and refused to look at each other. A silence persisted, only the clinking of porcelain and glass could be heard.

“S-So,” Airi began. “You’re helping out now?” She wrung her hands nervously.

Akira nodded. “Yeah. A lot of people came in today…” He idly tweaked a strand of hair.

Sojiro placed the steaming cup in front of her. “On the house.” He announced before taking a seat at an empty booth.

Airi blinked, turning on the stool to look at the older man. “Are you sure, Sojiro-san…? I can pay.” She bit her lip guiltily. She didn’t want to mooch off of him, and she had gotten paid today. She could afford it.

He waved her away, opening his newspaper.

She smiled fondly at him and took a long swig of her coffee, letting the freshly made brew warm her tongue. The taste was mild and almost creamy, despite having no milk. Delicious. She drained the whole cup, licking her lips of any drops. Putting it back down, she looked up at Akira, about to say something, but paused.

He was staring unblinkingly at her, dilated pupils focused on her lower face.

Blushing again, she stammered. “U-Um.” She took a deep breath. They were friends, right? He wouldn’t mind listening to her... “Would you be free right now?”

He blinked, looking up from her lips. “What?”

She mentally cursed. “Would...you be free...right now?” She asked hesitantly, gripping the empty cup tightly.

He looked over at Sojiro for permission. “Yeah, just go. Here.” The older man threw him something.

Catching it, Akira looked at the object in his hands. It was a pair of keys, freshly pressed and shining flawlessly in the warm cafe lighting. “I can’t wait all night for you. I hope I can trust you with this.” Sojiro stated, giving him a warning look.

Nodding, Akira gave him a grateful smile. Taking off his apron, he went upstairs to grab his bag. Morgana ran up to him. “The chief really worked us hard…” It winced.

Akira gave him an unimpressed look. Us? More like just him. Sighing, he changed into his casual outfit and grabbed his bag, gesturing for Morgana to get in. It looked at him questioningly, but obeyed. Shoulder ing it, he went back downstairs where Airi waited for him near the door, jacket on.

“Ready?” She asked. He nodded.

They left the cafe, and walked down the back alleys. “Where are we going, Lady Airi?” Morgana asked, popping out of the bag and stepping on Akira’s shoulder.
“My house.” She replied shortly, brows furrowed. “I...want to ask a favor.” She requested quietly. She was really doing this then.

They arrived at the Kimisawa residence, the owner opening the door. Taking off their shoes and jacket, she gestured them up the stairs.

Arriving on the second floor, she opened the door to the Study, ushering the two in. “Make yourselves comfortable. I need to go get something.” She announced before leaving the room.

Akira put his bag down, letting Morgana out, and slowly looked around. It was a medium sized room, filled with bookcases and a dark wooden desk with a laptop on it. The walls were painted eggshell white, and there was a small window near the corner of the room, another wall was all he could see.

Hesitantly taking a seat on the computer chair, he waited.

“Whoa, it smells really nice in here.” Morgana remarked, padding around the room. It jumped on top of one of the bookcases. “Oh that’s why, there’s an incense holder here.” It gestured to a clay bowl.

Inhaling, Akira agreed. The scent was like mint but better. ‘It’s her fragrance...’ He thought, thinking back to that time she fell asleep on him on the train ride.

The door opened again and Airi walked in, shouldering a large case. She had changed from her skirt into a pair of black leggings. Dragging a folding chair in, she sat down and unclasped the case, taking out a cello. “So...” She took a deep breath. “I haven’t played in front of someone in a very long time.” She bit her lip nervously. “Would you be my first audience...?” She looked at them hopefully, heart pounding in trepidation.

Akira stared in surprise. He had no idea that she played the cello. His eyes examined the instrument curiously. He’d never seen one in person before. It was large, about one and a half meters tall. Made of dark red colored wood, the shine of its lacquer was impeccable. ‘Haven’t played in front of someone in a very long time..?’ He noted.

Putting it aside, he gave her an encouraging smile, lacing his hands in front of him to show his full attention. “I’d love to.” He stated softly.

Morgana jumped down from the bookcase, and sat down on the floor, staring avidly at the musician. “I didn’t know you played, Lady Airi!” It mewed, eyes shining in excitement. “I wonder what kind of music you’ll play...” Its tail swished behind it back and forth, ears flickering in anticipation.

Airi gave them a nervous smile and began to prep. She extended the end pin and gently placed the large instrument between her legs. She tightened the hairs on the bow until they were all straight and taut. Fiddling with the pegs, she made sure the cello was properly tuned. Straightening her back, she placed the bow before the strings, right above the bridge.

She took a deep breath, heart beating rapidly, and began playing. The first couple of notes were shaky, screeching a bit, but as time wore on, she felt herself relaxing. Tensing her legs at certain notes, she dragged the bow across the chords, fingers dancing on the neck.

The cello sang out the familiar tune of Joe Hisaishi’s One Summer Day, filling the room with its deep tones.

Akira gazed with his mouth slightly open, entranced by the vision in front of him. He watched
avidly as she gazed downward, eyes unfocused in concentration. Her slightly furrowed brow, tense shoulders, and the graceful motions of her arms, manipulating the instrument to sing out the melody she wanted.

The music vibrated in his chest, extending to the rest of his body, conveying joy, loss, and finally acceptance. Listening deeply, he felt himself become attuned to the sounds, unconsciously swaying to the notes. It had been a long time since he'd watch a Studio Ghibli movie, and this piece brought back fond childhood memories.

Letting the last string fade, she exhaled. Sliding her eyes away from the instrument to her two guests, Airi bit her lip, wanting and not wanting to hear their reactions at the same time.

‘I hope that was OK, it sounded right to me..’ She sweated a little. It had been so long since she had played in front of anyone else, and the last time she did still haunted her nightmares. Was she even good..?

His mouth dry, Akira swallowed, wetting his throat. “That was-”

“That was beautiful, Lady Airi!” Morgana interrupted, holding a paw in the air. “I felt the music deep in my bones, as if it was purring for me!” It grinned ecstatically.

She let out a sigh of relief, shoulders relaxing. “Thank you, Morgana.” She rejoiced, smiling happily at the cat. She turned her gaze to her other friend, looking at him apprehensively.

Akira took off his glasses, and lowered his head, resting his face in his palm. He breathed deeply, still feeling the emotions the music welled up inside of him. He'd never been a huge music fan, but...

Airi stared at him in anticipation, feeling a little hurt at the reaction. ‘Is he going to criticize me..?’ She bit her lip, hunching her shoulders. She didn't think she could take it. Her main flaw as a cellist was never being able to take criticism and it had been so long since she played. She had to be rusty. She didn't play it well enough. He wouldn't have appreciated it. He would leave-

Taking a deep breath, he lifted his head to look at her, letting his hand fall. His eyes were wide open, droplets caught in his thick lashes. His gray irises were filled with awe and dismay, freezing her in place. “...I think it might’ve been too good.” He blinked rapidly, wiping his unshed tears. “I’m actually crying...” He chuckled weakly, looking at his now damp hand.

Alarmed, Airi quickly grabbed a tissue from a nearby bookcase and held it out to him. He cried from her playing..?

He reached out, and enveloped the tissue as well as her hand. His thumb rubbed her skin gently, not entirely sure what he was doing.

Blushing at the intimate contact, Airi looked at him hesitantly. “A-Akira..?” She stuttered. Blinking, he let go and took the tissue, wiping his eyes.

Morgana watched on with amusement, blue eyes flickering back and forth between them.

Exhaling, Akira looked at her with a tender smile. “It was beautiful, Airi.” He stated quietly. “...I really enjoyed it.” It made him remember when his parents had spent time with him, watching old Ghibli films in the living room. That would never happen now, but the memory still made him feel warm inside.

Embarrassed, she looked away. “Th-Thank you...I’m glad you liked it.” She replied softly,
joyously smiling to herself. He liked it! It was OK. Everything was fine.

She began packing the cello away, making sure to be gentle when she strapped it in. It wasn’t originally hers, after all.

Akira watched her curiously. Her actions were precise yet still hesitant, as if she wasn’t quite sure she should be doing this. Contemplating himself, he opened his mouth to ask why she hasn’t played for another person when their phones rang. Morgana jumped up on his shoulder, giving him a knowing look, before gazing down at the screen.

R: Did you see?! It was on the news!
R: No way the school’s gonna be able to play dumb after that.
An: I saw it too.
An: You were on it, Airi.
An: They cut your head off from the screen though.
Ai: Small blessings. I don’t need Principal Kobayakawa giving me grief over it.
An: Shiho’s name didn’t come up, right?
R: Not that I saw. I’d bet they wanted to keep that quiet.
An: I’m so glad…
Ai: Yeah. I don’t want any more trouble for her.
R: It’s finally over then…
R: All we gotta do is eat some tasty shit and put all this crap behind us.
R: I’m totally looking forward to this celebration party.
An: I’ll try not to let you guys down!

“All right, we need to go sell the gold medal tomorrow.” Morgana declared firmly. “Even if the chief wants your help, make sure you turn him down, OK?”

Akira nodded. “Right.” He replied, putting his phone back in his pocket.

“Ah, it’s getting late.” Airi announced, putting her phone away. “You should probably go home now.” She suggested and stood up from her chair. Akira nodded, putting Morgana back in his bag, and they both walked downstairs together, arriving at the doorstep.

“I want to thank you again for coming.” Airi began, watching him put on his shoes. “It means a lot to me that you willingly sat through my rusty playing.” She smiled sheepishly.

Akira shook his head incredulously, getting up from the step. “That’s rusty? I can’t imagine how lovely it would sound when you’re more confident.” He smirked lightly, running a hand through his hair.

She giggled at the action, blushing at the compliment. “Well, I’ll let you listen again when I’m better. I’m going to need your help, after all…” She fiddled with her braid timidly.

“What do you mean, Lady Airi?” Morgana questioned, standing on Akira’s shoulder.

She hesitated. “Well...I want to be able to play in front of a lot of people someday.” She bit her lip. The last time was... “I used to be able to, but...Well, I can’t now.” She looked up at her unofficial leader hopefully. “I’d really appreciate it if you could come with me sometime.”

Akira nodded. “Where?” He asked, shifting on one foot.

“A public place with lots of people...Maybe Inokashira Park?” She tapped her chin thoughtfully.
“All right, let me know when and I’ll go with you.” He smiled softly. “We’ll have to go together though...” He rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. “I don’t know how to get there.”

Airi nodded, smiling happily. “Thank you, Akira, Morgana... Have a good night.” She waved as he opened the door.

Waving back, he closed it behind him and headed back to the cafe. ‘I feel like our bond is getting stronger…’ He smiled to himself.

Sighing softly, she went back upstairs to put her cello back in its stand. Taking out a cloth, she slowly polished the instrument, making sure the surface was pristine. Her finger brushed against a scratch. Her mother’s smiling face as her fingers danced across the neck flashed in her mind.

Stilling, she sighed. Could she ever play without the memories acting up? She smiled to herself, thinking back to Morgana and Akira’s reaction to her playing. Her heart fluttered.

Dropping the cloth, she held her hands over her warm cheeks. ‘Does he…’ She bit her lip. She’ll just have to see where this is going.

Getting up from the floor, she walked over to her study, picking up the book Mishima gave her. ‘I should give this a read...Maybe it can help me understand the Metaverse better?’ She tilted her head, opening the book.

“Cognitive psychology studies cognition, the mental processes underlying mental activity. Perception, attention, reasoning, thinking, problem solving, memory, learning, language, and emotion are areas of research. Classical cognitive psychology is associated with a school of thought known as cognitivism, whose adherents argue for an information processing model of mental function, informed by functionalism and experimental psychology.” She hummed, reading a couple of chapters before closing the book with a sigh.

Psychology was so fascinating, it was no wonder that there existed a world created from people’s cognition. Did it always exist though? Before Man came about, or after they gained intelligence?

Stretching her arms in the air, she decided to go to bed. It was pretty early still, but after working and then playing the instrument that still created conflict in her heart, she felt more than ready to sleep.

Her eyelids grew heavy, and she fell asleep, cuddling the Mona plush.

“Hey, are you OK..?” Big brown eyes looked down at her concernedly.

“...Why do you care?” Airi asked quietly, holding her purple cheek with a cold towel.

“Because it’s wrong that they do this!” She argued, pouting her childish lips.

She looked up at the new girl. “...What’s your name?” She asked timidly. She got a sunny grin in response, one front tooth gone. “I’m Rui. Let’s be friends, OK?”

Rui held out her hand with a smile. Staring at the outstretched hand with trepidation, she clasped her hand with hers.
“Airi, run! Get away from her!” Rui screamed loudly.

“You fucking bitch! I was gonna go easy on you ‘cause you’re kids but now, I’ll definitely make it as painful as possible!” He growled, encircling his hands. “I’ll kill you!”

“Airi...Go...” She whispered.

Ruby eyes stared in horror, frozen in her spot. “N-No...No...No!!”

With a gasp, she woke up. Sitting up in the bed, she controlled her breathing, feeling her heart pound loudly in her chest. Raising a hand up, she wiped away the tears that were streaming down her cheeks.

“I’m sorry, Rui...I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry...I wanted to play for you...”

Drawn and colored by me. I’m really proud of the cello!
Chapter End Notes

Airi rank 3
Walking down the stairs of the cafe in his regular black suit jacket, white shirt, and jeans, Akira tried to move past the older man who blocked the small path to the door. “Make sure to do the dishes.” Sojiro reminded.

Stopping in place, he looked over at his guardian. “I can’t right now...When I get back.” He promised quietly.

Sojiro glared at him. “Just do it.” He commanded shortly, placing a hand on a hip. “Don’t get cocky with me.”

The bell on the door rang, and they both looked. A woman wearing a fashionable black suit entered the store, eyeing the rustic surroundings. “Welcome.” Sojiro greeted.

She looked between the two men with a crimson gaze. “Am I interrupting something?” She asked coolly.

The older man grunted and moved back behind the counter. “Not at all.” He replied shortly.

She took a seat on a bar stool, perusing the shelves of coffee beans in front of her.

Akira looked at her, curious to who she was. Her long dark gray hair framed the left side of her face, the other side held back with a few bobby pins. Her black suit had golden scalloped trim on the edge of her blazer, making her look fashionable yet also professional. Her few accessories including her sterling silver drop earrings and a sterling silver necklace shined brightly against the dark backdrops of her suit and hair. Her red eyes were darker and colder than Airi’s, every glance seemingly taking apart whatever it looked at.

The TV behind him was broadcasting the news, penetrating the tense silence. “The cause of the runaway-train incident in the subway the other day still has not been found.”

They all turned to watch. “Police are hurrying to solve the matter as it may relate to the rise in psychotic breakdown incidents.” The newscaster droned. "Onto other news..."

Sojiro raised an eyebrow. “Oh, is that the thing everyone’s been talking about?”

“Doesn’t it make you curious?” The woman asked lowly. “People who were living normal lives suddenly went mad or deranged out of the blue...Not to mention that it’s happening one after another...Could they really be coincidental?” She questioned, frowning solemnly.

Akira looked at her from the corner of his eyes without moving his head. She made a good point. He himself had the power to steal people’s Hearts. Maybe there were other powers in this world that could harm people.

“Hmm...” Sojiro hummed, looking at her speculatively. “Leaving that aside...What’ll you have?”

Pursing her lips slightly, she turned away from the TV. “...I’ll have the house blend please.” She
requested before turn to Akira. “Are you a part-timer? I’m surprised this place can afford one.”

Sojiro glanced over at them. “Uh, that’s exactly the case…” He answered slowly.

She scrutinized the teen. “Are you a high school student? Where do you attend?”

Resting his hands in his pockets, he observed the older woman. “Shujin Academy.” He decided to answer honestly.

The woman raised a fine eyebrow. “Oh..? Someone I know goes there as well. I’ve heard that things are rough right now.” She turned back, leaning her elbows on the counter, lacing her hands in front of her chin. “A teacher named Kamoshida confessed his crimes like he was a completely different person, supposedly. And it happened “all of a sudden” one day…” She mused. “Can a person’s mental state change so easily?”

Crossing his arms, Sojiro gave her a thoughtful look. “Huh…” He exhaled.

She glanced at him. “Is my drink ready yet?” She asked shortly.

Smirking faintly, he moved to grab a cup. “..Coming right up.” He answered breezily.

Taking the opportunity, Akira walked out quietly, no one stopping him. Immediately, the cool air of the outside hit his face, a contrast to the warm cafe. The sun shined dully behind the few clouds in the sky, casting a dimmer light on the decrepit streets.

“All right, today’s the day we turn in that medal for cash.” Morgana spoke from inside his bag. “You know some place that’ll buy it off you, right?” It looked at Akira questioningly.

Tapping his chin thoughtfully, he nodded. “Yeah.” He walked to the station, taking the train to Shibuya. There was only one place he could think of.

Walking down the crowded Central Street, a menacing man stopped him near the VHS rental store. “Hey, you a student?” He asked gruffly, his voice rough from years of cigarette smoke. “You want a job where you can make stacks without lots of work?” He offered with a smirk.

Giving him an odd look, Akira shook his head. Was this one of the dangers of the city that his parents always complained about? “That sounds shady…”

Huffing, the man backed off and turned away. “Well, whatever…”

Walking past the man, he noticed there were billboards advertising a new art exhibit nearby. Putting it out of his mind, he made his way down the alley, turning at the crepe store.

Turning the corner, he noticed two older men in suits standing outside of the airsoft shop. “So this is the place…” The black suit commented.

“Looks like it. Let’s just take care of this.” The beige suit replied, crossing his arms.

“Wait! We don’t have a search warrant yet.” The black suit argued. “Just be patient. I’m sure we’ll get one soon enough. And they’d never think about running off down this narrow alley.”

Narrowing his eyes at the two men, he calmly walked past them and entered the shop, feeling their eyes glued to his back.
Walking up to the counter inside the cramped shop, the same manager from last time looked up from his magazine. “...Huh? You again?” He raised an eyebrow. “What do you want?”

Akira took out the Olympic gold medal from his bag. “I want you to buy this.” He replied shortly.

He furrowed his brows. “Huh? A gold medal? Why do you have this?” He looked at him suspiciously. “We don’t buy any fake or stolen goods here, kid.” He paused, looking him up and down. “...Hold on a sec. Lemme see it.” He requested, throwing his magazine down on the table.

Akira handed it over silently, watching the older man closely. This had to work.

Scrutinizing the object, the owner turned to him. “I’m just...not gonna ask where you got this. How’s ¥30,000 sound for it though?” He offered, chewing his toothpick.

Akira quirked his lips. “Works for me.” He accepted, taking the bills and adding it into his wallet.

Sharp eyes glanced outside the door, noting the blurred shadows moving closer. “It’s almost time…” The manager muttered. Taking a packed paper bag out from under the counter, he handed it to the bespectacled student. “Here, take this with you. It’s a thanks for sellin’ me that medal.” He announced quickly.

Akira grabbed it hesitantly, feeling the hefty weight.

“But, uh...best not to open it. Just bring it with you next time you come back here.” The man advised, keeping his voice at a low volume.

Akira narrowed his eyes in suspicion. “This is a little weird.” He remarked. “...But fine, got it.”

The manager smirked. “Glad you’re so quick to understand.” His eyes darted to the door again. “...They’re here.”

The two men from outside the shop entered, crossing their arms intimidatingly, glaring at the shopkeeper. “Munehisa Iwai, yes? There are some matters we’d like to discuss with you today.”

The manager, Iwai, hmphed. “...Go, kid.” He whispered.

Akira glanced at him questioningly, but moved aside and headed toward the door, the two men moving past him and up to the glass counter.

“Do you know why we’re here?” The beige suit questioned dispassionately.


The black suit slammed his hand against the counter. “Watch your attitude!” He growled.

Sharp eyes narrowed at the threat. “Well, you guys gonna search me? Go on, do what you gotta do.” Iwai acquiesced, holding his arms out invitingly.

Taken aback, the black suit looked at him suspiciously. “...What was that?” He interrogated.

Crossing his arms, the manager looked at the intruders coolly. “An upstandin’ citizen’s supposed to cooperate with the cops, right?” He asked lightheartedly.

The beige suit gave him an odd look, turning to his co-worker. “Hey, you sure that lead was legitimate?” He whispered uncertainly.
Hesitant, the black suit looked at him. “I could’ve sworn it was…” He murmured, furrowing his brow in confusion.

Iwai sighed. “Can you two hurry it up? I got a business to run here.” He requested, giving them an unimpressed look.

“You bastard…” The black suit cursed, eyes darting around the store, landing on the bespectacled teen. “…Hey, you!”

Akira gave them a questioning look, slightly tightening his grip on the bag.

“What’s in the bag, huh? Show me!” The black suit demanded.

His lips twitched downward, and Iwai intercepted them with a quick word. “…The kid’s just a regular ol’ customer. You can check the tapes if that’ll convince you.” He offered. “They’ll show everything that’s gone down here today.”

Akira pursed his lips. ‘I don’t want to be here when the detectives see the footage of me with that gold medal...I should leave.’ He inched back, one hand behind him on the door handle. Just a little closer...

The black suit glared at him, crossing his arms. “I won’t let you get away that easy! Show us what’s in the bag!” He demanded roughly.

He narrowed his eyes at the detective. “It’s none of your business.” Akira stated evenly. His heart was pounding in his ears. ‘If I get arrested again…’ He tightened his lips.

Facepalming, Iwai shook his head and huffed in amusement.

“I said, show it to me!” The black suit repeated, getting angrier.

The beige suit turned to his co-worker, giving him a disapproving frown. “Hey, you’re talking to a kid, remember? Besides, he’s not the one we’re here to see.”

“Urgh…” The black suit grunted in frustration.

Iwai shook his head in disappointment. “That’s right, Tantei-san. Maybe next time try not harassin’ my customers, see how that goes.” He warned.

The black suit scrunched up his face. “Grrr…” He growled, backing down.

The manager turned to Akira. “Safe trip home, kid.” He smirked.

Akira nodded, and left the store, exhaling heavily. He just barely dodged a bullet there. Police were a lot more aggressive in the city than in his hometown.

Morgana shoved its face through the small opening in his bag. “What were those detectives doing there..?” It furrowed its brow. “More importantly...aren’t you curious about what’s in the bag?” It looked up at him, smiling expectantly.

Akira quirked his lips. “Maybe a little…” He drawled. It was certainly tempting and it was in his custody now...

The feline grinned, jumping onto his shoulder. “Well?” It asked enthusiastically. “Come on, let’s open it up.”
He unfurled the bag and peeked inside. His eyes widened at what he saw, nestled in some newspaper.

Morgana leaned closer. “A real gun?! Wait…” It narrowed its eyes. “I think it’s just a model. It’s incredible though! Miles ahead of the one Ryuji had.” It remarked, looking at it with an impressed expression. “There’s something weird about that place…”

Akira examined the gun. It was a black 9mm pistol, equipped with a rubber grip. It seemed a lot better than the one he had now.

“Hey, I just had a great idea...We should totally buy this gun from him later!” Morgana piped up, the teenager looked at the cat in surprise. “I mean, it’s perfect. Something this real-looking would work wonders in the Metaverse.” It suggested cheerfully. "Anyway, he told you to bring it back the next time you came, right? You should try striking a deal with him when we go to return it!”

Humming thoughtfully, Akira nodded. It would be a good way to get stronger guns.

He put the paper bag underneath Morgana inside his purse, and left back to Yongenjaya. By the time he got back to the cafe, it was getting late. Hurriedly putting his bag down, he put on an apron and worked on the pile of dishes in the sink while Sojiro left and closed the shop.

Drying his hands, he sighed tiredly and walked up to his room. Sitting down on the sofa, his phone rang. Looking at the caller ID, he noticed it was Ann.

He picked it up. “Hello?” He answered.

“Hey, it’s me. I saw the news. You know, about Kamoshida. It’s getting a lot of coverage…” She spoke uncertainly.

“Yeah, I saw. It’s a little scary. How do you feel?” He asked quietly.

“I don’t know...The reaction’s been bigger than what I was expecting...I guess I’m just...surprised.” She sighed. “I don’t think we did anything wrong though. I wonder if we helped those people speak up about it…”

“I’m sure we did. None of them wanted to say anything while he was still in charge.” He reassured. "Now that he’s in jail, they have the courage to come forth.”

“That’s pretty amazing, huh? I didn’t think we’d actually be able to do it!” She laughed. “And yet look at us now! This calls for a celebration! Let’s meet in front of Shibuya Station at noon tomorrow. Don’t be late!”

“Right.” He nodded. “I’ll tell Airi.”

“I already told Ryuji. Oh, and did you pawn off that medal? You didn’t forget, right?” She asked.

“I remembered.” He told her.

“Good to hear! I already made reservations!” She cheered. He sweatdropped. That was fast. “You should be really excited about the place I chose, by the way. I’m sure everyone’s gonna love it! Well, see you guys tomorrow!” She hung up.

Taking the phone away from his ear, he sent a text to Airi telling her where and when to meet up.
He got a confirmation a few seconds later.

Putting his phone back in his pocket, he looked over at Morgana who was grooming itself next to him. “Ah, a restaurant of Lady Ann’s choosing. Finally, a decent meal! I haven’t eaten anything tasty since Lady Airi’s lunches.” It scratched its ear with a hind leg. “Hey, what do you think we’re gonna be eating?”

Akira hummed, tapping his chin. “Maybe sushi?” He shrugged. It didn’t really matter to him.

The feline’s eyes shined. “O-Ooooooh! Tuna, sea urchin, and maybe even...salmon roe!” It spoke dreamily. “In any case, I’m surely looking forward to it! Mwehehehe!” It laughed gleefully, circling around its spot before lying down. “Big celebration tomorrow, so let’s get some sleep!” It closed its eyes contently.

Smiling slightly, Akira gave it a few scritches behind its ear and changed for bed.

Chapter End Notes

Tantei means Detective in Japanese (like in yu yu hakusho, Yusuke is referred to as the Reikai Tantei...coughsorry)

I started playing P4 for the first time a couple days ago and I just finished it. It was OK lol Having P5 as my first Persona game elevated my standards too high, I guess. I'm thinking of writing a little side story of the casts meeting each other. I know there are fics like that already, but I have some ideas hmmmm. Should I go for it?
Chapter 50

Chapter Notes

I'm splitting the buffet scene into two parts because it's so long ;w; but we're finally getting somewhere!

Also announcement: I posted the first chapter of my new story! It's a side spin of this one, set after the end of the game and it's crossovered with P4. It's called "Country Bumpkins and City Slickers" and I hope you guys check it out!

Happy USA Independence day!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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5/5, THURSDAY, DAYTIME, YONGENJAYA BACKSTREETS.

She walked to the door dressed in a dark purple long sleeved blouse and skirt, snapping the band of her black thigh highs against her legs. Leaving her beige trench coat open, she slowly put on a pair of black heels.

She felt tired. Ever since she played her cello in front of Akira, she had been plagued with memories of that time. Yesterday went by in a flash with her just ambling about in a daze. She was so out of it that the kettle almost boiled over and set the house on fire. Then when she went to bed, she dreamed of Rui again, with her scolding why she shouldn’t take this. She woke up with tears soaking her pillowcase.

She had never been able to play for her, and the regret and guilt stung like an open wound even years later.

She smiled, albeit bitterly. Now wasn’t the time to think of the past, it was time to celebrate. Hopefully her concealer covered the dark circles that were coming back. She didn't need her friends worrying over her when it was supposed to be a happy day.

Making sure her hair was in a braided bun, held in place with Akira’s gift, Airi closed her door and walked over to the cafe where said teenager was waiting outside. She waved to the mother and daughter who walked their old Shiba Inu, and to the granny who lived nearby with her husband on the end of their morning walk.

Looking up from his phone, Akira smiled at her approach. “Hey.” His eyes slid to her hair, noticing the barrette clipped over the bun. “You’re wearing it.” He remarked softly, a slight blush in his cheeks.

She smiled shyly. “It’s a nice occasion, right?” She swept some hair behind her ear.

Morgana popped out of the bag, giving her a smile. “Good morning, Lady Airi! Are you excited to eat?!” Its eyes shined in anticipation.

She laughed. “Yeah! I hope the food is good considering how much it costs.” They walked to the train station, taking the subway to Shibuya.
Walking up to ground level and exiting the station proper, they saw Ann and Ryuji already waiting for them in front of the unused tram, dressed in their casual outfits. “Hey!” Ann called out, waving them over. “All right, now that everyone’s here, let’s go!” She cheered.

With her leading the group, they chatted on their way, talking excitedly about eating and what their favorites were.

After a few minutes, they arrived at the Wilton Hotel, a five-star hotel that was famous for its buffet. Walking in through the automatic sliding doors, they looked on in awe at the extravagant building, carved pillars and walls decorating the lobby. The floor was tiled in white marble, polished to the point where it reflected them like mirrors.

“We’re eating here..?” Airi breathed, looking around in astonishment. She could never have afforded this.

“Y-Yep!” Ann smiled awkwardly, walking over to the elevators.

Everyone around them were adults, dressed in expensive suits and gowns. Akira looked on uncomfortably. They were the only teenagers here, dressed in casual clothes. They didn’t fit in at all. His eyes slid to Airi. Well, most of them.

“Are we blowin’ everythin’ in our budget..?” Ryuji raised his brows, eyes darting around.

The doors slid open, and they hesitantly entered the elevator, adults packing them in after. Getting off on the correct floor, they walked up to the host. He looked at them with a raised brow, looking them up and down. “Welcome to the Wilton Buffet. Do you have a reservation?” He asked politely.

“Yes, under Takamaki Ann.” The model answered, nervously twirling her hair.

He checked the logs in front of him. “Hm, yes, there you are. Right this way.” He gestured into the buffet hall, past several already occupied tables and its luxurious guests, guiding them to a large table surrounded by a plush loveseat and single seaters. “The time limit is one hour. Please enjoy yourselves to the fullest.” He bowed, and left.

They took their seats and put down their bags. Ryuji and Ann sat across from one another on single seats, while Akira and Airi shared the love seat. “Wow…” Airi examined the golden embroidering on the couch fabric. Looking up, she noticed that every other diner was an adult, not a single teenager or child was here besides them. Was their a business party happening?

“OK, let’s get food!” Ryuji whooped, getting up from his seat and dashing to the amenities.

“Hey, wait!” Ann yelped, following him right after.

Looking at each other with exasperation, the two Yongenjaya residents also got up to grab a plate.
“So good!” Ryuji moaned, digging into his meat filled plate. Their table was laid out with meat, pies, and cakes. Most of the meat being at Ryuji’s end, and cake at Ann’s.

Airi sweatdropped as she cut through a piece of her lamb chop, her knife easily slicing through the succulent meat. This was a once in a lifetime meal for her, and it was almost too rich for her commoner tastes.

Akira discreetly took some sashimi and held it out with his chopsticks for Morgana to eat. “No wonder Lady Ann chose this place!…” It marveled, chowing down.

“Of course it’s good. This is a famous hotel after all.” Ann pointed her fork at them, grinning happily before it fell. “Oh yeah, I heard that the police are coming to interview some people at school.”

Airi nodded in confirmation. “We already had the media come do interviews.” She took a bite. “With the interrogation against Kamoshida going on, I’m sure they want to gather as much evidence as possible to verify.”

“That’s troublesome.” Morgana remarked sullenly, ears close against its scalp.

Ryuji tsk’ed, taking another bite of his pork with a frown. “Our names are gonna come up for sure. People’re spreadin’ all sorts of rumors about us and Kamoshida…” A smile grew on his lips. “But we got ‘em pumped up! I keep hearin’ stuff like, ‘The Phantom Thieves really stole his heart!’” He grinned ecstatically. “I think most people don’t believe it, but some of them actually seem grateful.” He then took out his phone and held it out for the table to see. “Look at this.”

The four leaned in. The screen showed a red website, and in bold letters up top, stated “The Phantom Aficionado.” “The Phantom Aficionado Website…” Ann read out loud, staring with wide eyes. “‘Well done, Phantom Thieves’...’ ‘Now I can keep going too’... ‘Thank you for giving us hope’…” She trailed off. “‘Thank you for saving me.’”

“Pretty cool, huh?” Ryuji grinned.

The model leaned her elbow against the table. “I was just desperate to deal with my own problems, but seeing people saying all this feels...strange.” She smiled, embarrassed at all the praise.

Airi opened the site on her own phone. “I wonder who made it…” She furrowed her eyebrows, reading the forum posts. The site format seemed familiar somehow, but she couldn't place her finger on it. “I’m glad though, that we helped in some way.”

Akira smiled, content at their results. It was good to see the results of their labor.

Ryuji straightened up in his seat. “Yeah...Hey, what do we do now?” He looked at the others uncertainly.

Akira raised a brow at him. “You planning on eating?” He asked coolly, digging into his fruit creme brulee.

“Well of course I’m gonna eat, but…” Ryuji trailed off, looking at him with an unsure expression.

With a gasp, Ann shot up from her seat. “This place has a time limit!”
He looked at her with wide eyes, jumping up from his seat. “Oh crap, we only got an hour to eat!”

She looked at the clock. “Just fifty minutes left!” She corrected, panicking.

Ryuji furiously rubbed his head. “I’m not gonna finish all the beef dishes at this pace!” He complained to himself.

“I need to eat my way through the entire dessert menu..!” She declared.

Akira looked at the two with an exasperated expression. Couldn’t they calm down a little?

“Look after our stuff! We’ll snag something for you guys too, don’t worry!” Ryuji stated quickly, the two blonds rushing off to the food servers and avoiding the other diners.

“Don’t get too much or you won’t be able to finish!” Airi shouted after them. She sighed and turned back to her plate, polishing off the lamb and starting on the kobe steak.

Akira observed the table. “We already have a lot of food…” He remarked quietly.

“Right?” Airi huffed in amusement, taking a bite and moaning at the soft and buttery texture. Akira blushed at the sound and looked away. “Well, we did spend almost ¥30,000 to eat here. I’ll let them learn a lesson about over-consumption.” She smiled serenely.

He sweatdropped, taking another spoonful of his stew. “...You got a lot of meat, too.” He remarked. “Is that healthy?”

She pouted. “Meat like this is expensive, OK. I didn’t think I would ever be able to afford kobe beef in my lifetime.” She held out her fork, a piece of kobe steak on it. “Try it.”

He reddened. Wasn’t this an indirect kiss?

Glasses fogging up from his heated face, he opened his mouth, his lips enveloping around the utensil. Moving back, he chewed absentmindedly, his mind consumed with the thought that they technically just shared a kiss.

Not realizing her faux pas, Airi looked down at the cat curiously. “Morgana, can you eat anything?”

Chewing on the tuna, it nodded. “Yep! I can handle chocolate, rice, and anything this guy makes me eat.” It gave the bespectacled teenager a sullen look.

Akira shrugged, snapping out of his thoughts. “I barely eat better than you, OK.” He argued quietly.

Laughing, Airi held out a piece to the feline as well. “Here, this will definitely taste delicious! It’s the best beef in Japan!”

Sniffing it curiously, Morgana chomped down in one bite. “Mmmmm!” Its eyes glistened, the meat melting in its mouth. “Meoooowww!” It purred blissfully.

Airi quickly covered its mouth, looking around to see if anyone heard. “Shh, there aren’t any cats allowed.” She whispered sheepishly.

A bowl slammed on the table, and the three looked up. Ryuji and Ann were back, and they brought a lot. Lamb chops, pork chops, steak strips, fried chicken cutlets, barbecue. Strawberry shortcakes, tiramisu, Tokyo cheesecake, coconut custard pie, matcha creme brulee. Somehow they were able
to bring back a buffet from the buffet and onto their table.

Throwing themselves back into their plush single sitters, they dug into the food. “Aw man, it melts in my mouth!” Ryuji proclaimed, voice muffled from all the meat.

Morgana looked up at him incredulously. “Seriously? Only meat?”

“Now, where should I start?” Ann drooled, looking at all the desserts in front of her.

Morgana turned to look at the model. “And she’s all about the cake.” It cringed.

Airi sweatdropped. “Guys…” She murmured exasperatedly. There was no doubt in her mind someone was going to throw up.

“So happy…” Ann sang, digging into her strawberry cake.


She glared at him. “Shuddup!” She yelled indignantly. “How much do you think one of these costs?! I’ll never get the chance to do this again!” She took another bite. “Mmm, the Wilton Hotel cake buffet…I’d heard rumors, but I never thought it’d be so amazing!” She marveled happily.

Morgana looked around the table, noticing that the dishes they brought back were more for them. “And…where’s our share?” It inquired awkwardly.

Ryuji pushed a mountain of slop in their direction, and the feline took a few steps back, staring at it with wide eyes. “I didn’t really know what you’d want…So I just grabbed you some beans.” He grinned innocently.

“B-Beans?” Morgana stuttered.

Ann nodded. “There were some pretty bizarre things there too, so we got you guys a variety of those. Fried bananas, preserved eggs, and…some kind of beans.” She beamed, unaware of their incredulous gazes.

“That looks disgusting…” Airi leaned away, putting her hands in front of her in an effort to put some distance between her and the revolting pile of slop.

Akira grimaced. He didn’t want to touch it either.

“M-More beans…” Morgana sputtered, looking at the model in horror.

“We put so much on the plate that it got all mixed up, but it should probably still taste good.” Ann chirped, savoring another bite of tiramisu.

It cringed. “This is just plain grotesque…” It looked up at Akira. “Let’s go, Joker.” It commanded sternly. “These two just don’t know what fine dining means! We’ll show them!”

Staring at the cat with an amused expression, he nodded. “Leave it to me.” He replied confidently, running a hand through his messy hair.

Morgana grinned. “That’s reassuring!” It then looked over at Airi. “Want to join us, Lady Airi?” It swished its tail excitedly.

She shook her head. “I have plenty here. Plus, I’ll have to help Ann-chan finish her cakes.” She looked fretfully at the other girl who was enjoying her cakes, none the wiser.
It nodded. “You guys watch our things while we’re gone! Wait patiently for our return!” It commanded, jumping back into Akira’s bag.

“Ahh, it’s like a meaty explosion in my mouth!..!” Ryuji moaned, stuffing his mouth with another piece of protein.

“Ooh, this part’s cream cheese!” Ann sang out in joy.

The feline sweatdropped at the state of their euphoria. “They’re not even listening…”

Laughing quietly, Airi waved them away. “Go, I’ll watch over everything.” She assured, taking another bite of kobe steak.

Akira smiled and nodded, getting up from his seat and shouldering his bag. Standing up, he surveyed the buffet line.

“As I’d expect from the top buffet at a top-class hotel.” Morgana commented quietly close to his shoulder, no one able to hear his meows. “The ingredients and variety of dishes are crazy good. There’s a reason it costs ¥7,000.” Akira walked around, inspecting the different variety of food. “They have a lot here...but fish should come first!” Morgana urged. “Let’s fill our plate with all sorts of fish. Which table do you think they’re at..?”

Taking a plate, Akira perused the tables, making sure to not bump into anyone, and stopped at the seafood. “Oooh, look! There’s the fish!” Morgana cheered. “I’d prefer it raw, but grilled is great too!”

He made his way to the table. Grabbing a pair of tongs, he overheard a nearby woman dressed in riches. “Have you heard, my dear? The news about that Kamoshida fellow was absolutely dreadful.” She drawled.

Her friend rolled her eyes. “Ah, right. That teacher at Shujin Academy, caught doing such indecent acts. Shameful, really.”

“Hold on a sec…” Morgana whispered.

“And they still haven’t managed to solve those horrible psychotic breakdown episodes, have they?” The woman complained callously. “I wish they wouldn’t let themselves be distracted by such a tawdry scandal.”

Akira narrowed his eyes, making sure not to look at the two women.

“Perhaps it’s a sign of how peaceful this country is.” The woman’s friend swooned. “I honestly pity those poor Shujin students though.”

“Huh. It sounds like the Kamoshida incident is the talk of the town.” Morgana remarked.

“Hm?” The woman hummed, turning to look at them.

“Shoot, they noticed you!” Morgana panicked. “Just grab some food and act natural!” Akira quickly looked down, grabbing some grilled fish fillets and crab legs. “On the plus side, we’ll get to eat the food later.” It whispered.

Out of the corner of his eye, Akira saw the woman give him a dirty look. “Tsk, how did a child like this end up in here?” She murmured. “I certainly hope he didn’t bring friends. I prefer my meals to remain hooligan-free, thank you very much.”
Her friend sneered. “Come, let us go.” They walked away haughtily, turning up their noses at him.

“What’s so bad about kids coming to enjoy a buffet…?” Morgana whispered angrily.

Akira grimaced. Adults will be adults. ‘Always looking down on the younger generation,’ he thought bitterly.

“Hmm, I wonder how the other people here are reacting to the news. Let’s get some more food and listen in.” Morgana suggested.

Akira nodded slightly. He moved to the dessert table where there were three giant fountains of chocolate rushing. There weren’t too many people here, so he began to survey the sweets the buffet offered.

“Up close, it looks even bigger and more delicious.” Morgana whispered in awe. “This giant, sweet- Ah, I got distracted.”

A man nearby wearing an IT company’s tag, signifying him as president, spoke to his companion. “News travels quick. It’s already all over the internet.” He began. “You know, the story about how Kamoshida got his ass kicked by some word-reforming heroes…”

The woman with him hummed. “It doesn’t sound like a serious story to me. Some of the details are pretty far-fetched.”

“Don’t worry about it. We just have to do what they tell us to do.” The IT company president shrugged. “It’s all rumors made up by school kids, anyway. If it’s gripping news, who cares if it’s not true?”

Akira furrowed his brows, making sure his back was turned to the two gossiping adults. Do what they tell us to do? Who was telling them to spread stories about them? “So they don’t believe themselves, but they’re making up stories to make the Phantom Thieves seem real…” Morgana commented quietly, grinning to itself. “And they’re doing this in front of the actual Phantom Thieves.”

“Hmm?” The IT company president furrowed his brow, looking over at the ebony haired teen.

“Whoa! Act fast, and get some food!” Morgana urged. "And make sure it’s got a lot of whipped cream.” Akira grabbed a few cannoli and chocolate dipped strawberries, making sure to cover it in whipped cream as he was instructed.

“What’s wrong?” The woman asked her companion.

“Ah, nothing. I thought some weird kid was looking at us, that’s all. Why don’t we go? It’s almost time for the meeting.” The IT company president waved, and the two left.

Morgana bristled on his shoulder. “Well, that was rude. Did you hear him? He said you were weird.”

Akira sighed. It wasn’t exactly news to him. He was never considered cool or handsome back home, it wasn’t surprising that he wasn’t considered them here. Although...

He shook his head, banishing the thought.

Moving on to another table, he stopped at the meat section. “Ah, meat!” Morgana sighed contently. “I’m not Ryuji, but a meal is just not the same if you don’t have any—”
“When you really look at it, he’s just an ex-athlete who overestimated himself.” A man in a brown suit grumbled. "He should have just accepted his lot in life and quietly done his job as a teacher.”

“It’s not even an incident we can take seriously. The whole story is pretty ridiculous.” The younger man agreed. “We should probably look into it, but we can also just let the low-ranking scrubs handle it.”

“Look into…?” Morgana whispered, narrowing its eyes in suspicion. “I guess they’re investigating Kamoshida? They don’t sound very enthusiastic about though.”

Akira nodded slightly, agreeing with the feline. ‘It’s as if female students being sexually harassed and the volleyball team being physically and verbally abused isn’t a big deal.’ he thought grimly. What was wrong with these adults?

“Hm?” The man hummed, looking in their direction.

“Gah, grab some food! Ah, get the part that’s not too fatty!” Morgana urged, cleaning its whiskers. Akira reached over and took some grilled honey pork and buttery steak pieces.

The man turned away. “He’s going to be arriving soon. We don’t want to keep him waiting, so we better get going too.”

“What is he going to discuss with the higher-ups? Well, I’m sure it’s more important than lunch.” The man in the brown suit rolled his eyes, the two leaving the buffet hall.

“‘He’?” Akira narrowed his eyes in suspicion, before putting it out of his mind and moving onto the rice dishes. “Rice is incredible! It’s the cornerstone of every great meal!” Morgana cheered before quieting. “...Sorry. I got a bit carried away there.”

A girl behind him wearing a fancy dress stood near an older gentleman. “So the ratings for the news were really that good?” She asked. “It was because it was about that teacher who sexually harassed his student, huh? Was it Kamoshida?”

The older man nodded, wearing a pin that signified him as a TV station president. “It’s all about how you frame it. You’ve got to cater to the idiotic public.” He rolled his eyes. “Ratings go up when you show them crude, sensational news, and make it easy for them to understand.”

“How can he be so insensitive? A student almost killed herself because of that Kamoshida…” Morgana whispered sullenly.

Akira pursed his lips. Suzui’s incident wasn’t publicized, but still. To be so callous over it was just a new kind of low.

“By the way, do you think these “sudden changes of heart” might be real?” The fancy girl asked.

The TV station president cleared his throat. “Well, that’s- Hmm?” He turned to look at them.

“Quick, grab some food! Oh, and don’t forget the crispy bits!” Morgana whispered. Akira scooped up some fried rice, placing it on his now full plate.

“So because he had a sudden change of heart, he just confessed to all his crimes?” The girl asked, confused.

“Haha, who knows?” The man laughed her off. “Sorry, but it’s time. I have to go. I’ll call you again after the meeting.” They left the buffet hall as well, shuffling past other diners who surveyed
the buffet lineup.

“A sudden change of heart, huh? I suppose I can’t blame him for seeing it that way.” Morgana commented. “I don’t think there’s anyone else we can listen in on.” It paused. “But it’s shocking...So many of the adults here don’t seem like nice people.”

Akira nodded in agreement. “It’s not so surprising. The more power an adult has, the more heartless they become.” He whispered.

It nodded. “Now, according to what we heard...It seems most adults aren’t very interested in the news about Kamoshida. Well, now that we’ve got a nice variety of food on our plates, let’s head back to the others.”

Taking his now full plate back to the table, he sat down next to Airi and unzipped his bag further for the feline.

“Ooh, you brought a ton back.” Ryuji remarked with a grin, his mountain of meat still piled high in front of him. “Whaddya think about comin’ up against such ritzy food?” He wiggled his eyebrows expectantly.

Akira huffed in amusement. “I’m so happy to eat something that isn’t curry and ramen.”

Airi pouted. “Hey, what about the bentos I make for you every school day?” She asked teasingly.

“They’re great, but that’s one meal out of three per day.” He grimaced. "I would just pay you to make me food at this point..."

Ryuji leaned back in his seat. “It’s cute hearin’ that from someone like you. Just don’t get too excited, got it?”

Morgana stuck its head out. “You’re the last person I want giving advice about that, Ryuji.” It sweatdropped, chewing on a piece of fish.

Ryuji frowned. “Don’t you think you’re eatin’ too much, Mona?”

It waved its tail. “There’s no knowing when we’ll get to come here again.” It reasoned, happily eating another piece of fish.

Akira took a bite of his honey pork, savoring the flavor.

“Sure, but you guys brought back loads of food...It’d be a shame to let it all go to waste.” Ann remarked, digging into another piece of cake. “Why don’t you help them out, Ryuji?” She looked over at the ex-runner expectantly.

He rubbed the back of his head. “We should all help.” He argued.

“Oh, me? I’m wayyy too stuffed! I couldn’t possibly help!” Ann reasoned, smiling fakely.

He sweatdropped. “Yeah...stuffin’ your face with cake...” He sighed. “Whatever. Akira,
Morgana!” He pumped his fist. “Let’s deal with this ourselves!” He declared confidently.

They nodded and dug in, eating whatever was up to their tastes.

Airi rolled her eyes exasperatedly. “All right, I’m telling you guys now so you’ll know I tried. Don’t overeat or you’re going to throw up.” She warned, finishing her platter and starting on her clam chowder.

They waved away her concerns and happily savored the expensive foods.

After a while of nonstop eating, the boys and cat stopped and looked down at their still full plates, sweatdropping. ‘It feels like no matter how much we eat, the amount of food we have stays the same…’ Akira grimaced, discreetly loosening his belt.

Morgana gazed out at the food decorating their side of the table. “There’s still more…?” It despaired quietly, whimpering.

“Don’t give up! Let’s keep at it!” Ryuji encouraged, though he too was starting to look like he’d slow down.

Airi sighed and shook her head, grabbing one of their plates and eating.

Akira gave her a grateful look. They ate and ate until all the food was gone.

They all slumped in their seats. Ann was smiling blissfully to herself, leaning back in her chair. Airi looked slightly uncomfortable, propping herself against one of the pillows. Ryuji held his stomach, a nauseous expression on his face.

“W-We did it…” Morgana groaned, swaying in its seat inside the bag.

Akira leaned his elbows against the table, resting his forehead against his laced hands in front of him. ‘My belt feels multiple sizes too small…’ He grimaced, focusing on his breathing.

“Y-yeah…” Ryuji breathed out. “This is a victory...for all of us…” He groaned, closing his eyes in pain.

Akira gave him an unimpressed look. “That was tough.” He countered.

He shook his head slowly. “We won...because we did it together…” He burped.

Airi rolled her eyes. “I told you so.” She stated smugly, looking at them with pity.

“Good job, you guys. How about one last dish to cleanse your palates?” Ann smiled cheerfully. “I recommend the seasonal tart! The grapefruit has both alluring sweetness and tangy sourness!”

Ryuji pulled a face. “Stop...I don’t wanna hear about sour stuff…” He groaned, burping into his hand. “This isn’t good...I gotta go to the bathroom..” He wheezed.
“M-Me too...Please...carry me gently...” Morgana pleaded weakly to Akira.

Airi gave them a sympathetic glance.

A rich couple swathed in luxurious brands passed by their table, looking at them disapprovingly. “My, look at that table…” The woman murmured.

The man hmphed. “They must not normally have the opportunity to each such exquisite food.” He remarked.

The teens tilted their heads in their direction, frowning slightly.

“I can only imagine what their parents must be like.” The woman laughed. “Perhaps the well dressed young lady is their guardian.” She remarked, the two walking away.

“What was that?!” Ryuji shot up from his seat angrily, before covering his mouth. “..Urp.” He burped. “We don’t got time for that...C’mon, let’s go…” He heaved.

Akira got up, gently shouldering his bag, and the two left for the bathrooms.

Chapter End Notes

Kobe beef is arguably the best beef in Japan. It's made by feeding cows organically grown grass and massages, and they make sure to breed the better quality ones to create a marbled meat with veins of fat. Basically, they give cows spa treatments and they usually price them at the lowest $40 (grade C1) and can go up to $400 (grade A5). For about 8oz. It's intense!
Rushing to an upper level for the bathrooms, Ryuji spent several minutes uncomfortably retching into his porcelain goddess.

Akira stood by in the stall, turning away from Morgana’s business. He grimaced at the disgusting sounds, feeling queasy himself now. This wasn't how he wanted to blow ¥30,000...

Tiredly washing their hands, they left the bathrooms and headed down the hall. “Ughh, I’m stuffed…” Morgana groaned quietly.

Ryuji sighed heavily. “I totally panicked when I saw the “Closed For Cleaning” sign at the bathrooms…” He rested his thumbs inside his pockets as they stopped in front of the elevators.

“You were talking big about eating until you puked, but you really did puke…” Morgana cringed. “Are you some kind of moron?”

Ryuji crossed his arms, glaring at the feline. “Hey, same goes for you!” He argued, before turning to the elevator panel. “What floor was that restaurant on..?” He muttered as other people walked up behind them, also waiting for the elevators.

Morgana blinked. “We came up to get here, so it has to be on a lower floor, right?”

Ryuji pressed the down button, and they waited.

Out of the corner of his eyes, Akira saw a black suit before being roughly pushed to the side. Ryuji gasped in surprise, staring incredulously at the men in suits who stood intimidatingly in front. Akira narrowed his eyes at them. One man stood out, wearing a pair of designer glasses, the light from above shining against his bald head.

“What the-” Ryuji shook his head indignantly.

The distinguished man turned to one of his subordinates. “There’s still no update on the case?” He asked coldly.

“N-Not yet…” A subordinate bowed his head. “Excuse me, but why are you so involved? It’s not something you should be concerned with…”

He turned to glare ruthlessly at his subordinate. “I don’t care about your opinion, you incompetent buffoon!” He spat. "When I say pick up the pace, you do it!”

Ryuji stepped forward. “Hey, you’re cuttin’ in line!” He yelled, glaring at the group of men.

The subordinate turned to look at him, unimpressed. “What do you want?” He questioned aggressively.

Akira rested his hands in his pockets. “Apologize to Ryuji.” He demanded quietly, gray eyes staring darkly at the adult.

The subordinate sneered. “We’re in a hurry.”
Ryuji rolled his eyes. “Oh, I’m sorry.” He spoke sarcastically. “So you can butt in front of other people if you’re in a hurry?”

The distinguished man glanced at the two teens from the corner of his eye. “Hmph. It seems the customer base has changed since I was here last. Have they started a daycare?” He remarked dispassionately.

Ryuji narrowed his eyes at the statement. “What?” He growled.

The subordinate turned back to his boss. “Sir, we don’t have time for this.” He reasoned lowly.

He nodded. “I know.”

The elevators dinged, the doors sliding open. Ryuji took a step forward, but one of the bodyguards turned and roughly pushed him away. Akira clenched his hands, lips tightening at the treatment.

“Don’t bother with them!” The distinguished man commanded, and he and his group walked into the elevator, closing the doors behind them.

Akira stared at the closed doors. ‘That voice just now…’ He gripped his head with one hand, clenching his eyes. Images flashed inside his mind, too fast for him to comprehend. He shook his head.

Ryuji scowled, glaring at the spot where the men stood. “The hell was with that bossy guy?”

“Shouldn’t we head back down?” Morgana asked quietly, looking at the two with uncertainty.

“Yeah, but…” Ryuji pursed his lips, pressing the down button again. “That dick really pissed me off. He wasn’t even hidin’ the fact that he looks down on everyone!”

“Don’t lose your temper over this.” Morgana advised, looking at him sympathetically.

He turned around with a frustrated expression. “I just can’t forgive shitty adults like that..!”

Akira tightened his grip on his forehead, the voices of his friends sounding farther away than they were. ‘That man’s voice...It sounded almost like the one from back then…’ He grimaced. He broke into a cold sweat as that man’s steely gaze flashed in his mind.

He exhaled shakily. Don’t think about that time. That sense of wrongness at the situation, that sense of being scared at his arrest, the *crippling loneliness*. Never again.

Ryuji blinked, noticing his friend’s pained face, and walked closer. “...What’s wrong?” He asked worriedly.

Akira shook his head. “I’m OK. Just a bit lightheaded.” He assured, putting his hands back in his pockets.

He furrowed his brows. “You not feelin’ good?” He asked sympathetically.

Morgana rested its chin on Akira’s shoulder. “He almost never eats well, after all. Lady Airi’s lunches are the most nutrition he gets.” It stated sullenly. “Plus I’m always stuck eating canned cat food…”

Ryuji pursed his lips, turning back to the elevator. “Ugh, that “sir” bullshit makes me sick..!” He muttered, gritting his teeth. “...Dammit!” He shook his head.
The elevator arrived, its doors sliding open, and they walked in and pressed a lower floor.

She watched as the two teenagers and cat walked out of the buffet unsteadily, clutching their stomachs.

“Ahh, so good…” Ann sang, eating the last slice of cake on the table. “I have to go get more!” She grinned, getting up from her seat.

Sweatdropping, Airi decided to follow her. She didn’t even have to help eat any of the cakes. It’s amazing how Ann has kept her figure so well. ‘I should get some drinks for the guys when they come back…’ She told herself, looking at the desserts.

“Ow!” Ann yelped, the sound of porcelain crashing behind her.

Alarmed, Airi turned around.

An older woman was glaring angrily at the model, a dropped plate of food all over the carpet at their feet. “Watch where you’re going, you hussy!” The woman shouted loudly, gaining the attention of the people nearby. “How dare you make me drop my plate!”

Taken aback, Ann gave her an odd look. “What? You bumped into me. I was standing right here.” She argued, furrowing her brows at the accusations.

“Don’t lie! You purposely walked into me!” The woman attacked her verbally.

Airi frowned. She was just like her old matron. She walked up to the two. “Ann-chan.” She whispered, placing a hand on the model’s shoulder and tugging her behind herself. “Ma’am, please calm down.” She requested, politely smiling. Time to put on her retail persona. “I’m sure this is all just a misunderstanding.”

The woman glared at her. “And just who do you think you are? Do you even know who I am?!”

“My apologies, but I do not.” Airi inclined her head, smiling thinly. She eyed the glimmering jewels adorning the woman’s neck and wrists. An attention seeker then. “Why don’t we put this past us? There is more food for all of us to enjoy, after all.” She suggested calmly. “The staff will clean this up. I’m sure you don’t want to cause even more of a scene, who knows what people will say…” Her eyes deliberately slid to their whispering audience, before looking back at the woman.

The woman scrunched up her face, panicking eyes darting around at all the people who were watching intently. “Hmph. I suppose.” She replied, trying to look composed, and walked away.

Seeing that the drama was over, the people nearby turned back to their business. A staff came up to clean the mess, looking at the two disapprovingly.

Airi smiled politely, thanking them before she exhaled, turning around to look at Ann. “What a bitch...Are you OK?” She asked worriedly.

The model scrunched up her face, glaring at the retreating woman. “Yeah.” She bit out. Grabbing a plate and piling as many desserts as she could, she stomped back to their table.

Airi watched her devour a cake, an angry expression clouding her features. Sighing, she went and
grabbed a couple of cups of coffee, as well as a bowl of matcha ice cream and some cannoli, and walked back to the table.

The two ate in silence, mood ruined by the terrible attitude of that older woman.

The boys walked back to the table, exhausted from their ordeal. Ann glared up at them from her empty plate of cake. “What took you so long?!”

Taken aback by the aggression, Ryuji placed his hands out in front of him. “Why’re you all pissy…?” He yelped, staring at her with wide eyes.

She sighed, slumping in her seat. “Sorry...I had a run-in with some woman a second ago.” She scowled. "She bumped into me, but then said it was all my fault when she dropped her plate…”

Ryuji frowned. “Sounds like a real bitch…”

“Yeah.” Ann rolled her eyes. “Thanks though. It’s a good thing Airi came up to us, or else I might have started yelling...” She pursed her lips, looking over at the class president. “I’m amazed you didn’t lose your temper at her too.”

Airi shook her head, frowning lightly. “You have to use diplomacy with adults like those, otherwise they’ll think of you as nothing but a nuisance...” Her eyes darkened, biting a cannoli. “People like her make me sick…”

The two males sat down, and Akira opened his bag fully for Morgana.

“The restaurant workers all looked at us with this disapproving expression…” Ann murmured consciously. “I wonder if we’re out of place here…” She leaned back in her chair.

Akira sighed. “I want to say no, but...It always feels like this.” He stated grimly, resting his hands in his lap.

Airi bit her lip, looking down at her clasped hands. No surprise there. Adults never like when "children" are in their restaurants, as if they were all nuisances to be dealt with away from public.

Ryuji sighed heavily, crossing his leg, and looked at their feline companion. “Hey, Morgana.” He called out.

It looked at him curiously. “What is it?”

“...Anyone could have a Palace, yeah?” He questioned.

The cat nodded. “Anyone with a strong, distorted desire.”

Uncrossing his leg, he leaned forward. “Same for them havin’ a change of heart if their Treasure gets stolen?” He pressed.

Morgana nodded again. “That would be the case.”

Ann tilted her head. “Why are you bringing this up all of a sudden?”

He looked out at the table. “We had trouble earlier too. These selfish shitheads who just looked down on everyone else...” He shrugged. "I was just wonderin’ if we’d be able to change those..."
kindsa people too.”

Blinking, Airi looked at the punk in realization. “Ryuji-kun…” She trailed off.

Akira looked at him in surprise. Was he saying what he thought he was gonna say?

“You mean...you want to continue as the Phantom Thieves?” Ann asked hesitantly with wide eyes.

Ryuji lowered his head. “I’ve been thinkin’...We put a lot of work into changin’ Kamoshida’s heart, but nobody believes in the Phantom Thieves.” He explained. “Plus...those guys who had no other choice but to just deal with it are thankin’ us.” He exclaimed. “Us, of all people.”

“You mean on the Phan-site? It’s pretty unexpected.” Akira remarked.

Airi nodded. “There were a lot of victims...” She bit her lip. "And most likely, lots more out there.”

“I...I agree.” Ann replied quietly. “If we ignore people who are in trouble, I’d go back to being the same as I was before...!” She scrunched up her face.

Morgana looked up at her. “Well...that’s true.” It replied hesitantly. It looked around at the conflicted teens. “You’re under my tutelage. There’s nothing we can’t accomplish as phantom thieves!” It stated confidently.

“Shouldn’t we be able to help ‘em out?” Ryuji asked, gazing at them with uncertain eyes.

Akira blinked. ‘I didn’t even think of such a possibility…But it’s true that with that power, we may be able to help people out…’ He grasped his chin thoughtfully.

“But…” Ann hesitated. “That means we’ll have to fight Shadows again, doesn’t it…?”

Morgana nodded. “Indeed. That can’t be avoided.”

Ryuji grinned lightheartedly. “Eh, I’m sure we’ll manage. Right?” He looked over at Akira hopefully.

“Yeah.” Airi looked pleadingly "If we have the power to help those in need...We should.”

Exhaling, Akira nodded, smirking faintly. “Fine by me. I want to help people too.” He declared.

Everyone nodded determinedly. It was official now.

“Heh…” Morgana smiled. “Even if you guys are still just fledglings, this means we’re an actual organization now.”

Ann uncrossed her leg, leaning back in her seat. “Fledglings…? Haha, that’s actually pretty fitting for us.”

Ryuji straightened up in his seat. “All right, it’s settled!” He grinned excitedly. “We’re gonna catch all these shitty adults by surprise, and make ourselves known to the world!”

Smiling happily, Airi looked over to her neighbor. “Are you OK officially being our leader? We’ve been looking to you for guidance, after all.” She asked shyly.

Akira smirked, running a hand through his hair. “Of course.”

“No objections here! I can’t handle all that responsibility stuff.” Ryuji added.
The two females looked at him amusedly. “We know.” They said in unison.

“Where’s my say in this…?” Morgana complained cheekily. "But Lady Airi made the recommendation, so I’ll allow it.”

Ryuji leaned forward. “Well, should we decide on a name for our group?” He asked, eagerly looking at Akira. “I just went with Phantom Thieves of Hearts last time, but don’t you think a real name would be cooler?”

Humming, Akira leaned back on the couch, placing a hand behind their seats.

“Ooh, I’ve got it!” Ann chirped. “I want it to be something both cute and luxurious sounding…Let me see…” She tapped her chin thoughtfully before perking up. “How about “The Diamonds”?"

Ryuji gave her an odd look. “...I’m gettin’ a real little league baseball feel from it.”

Morgana sat up in the bag. “Well then, here’s my suggestion.” It beamed. "How about “Tilefish Poele”?"

“Tile...what?” Ryuji scratched his head in confusion.

“That’s what I ate earlier. It’s commemorative, no?” It grinned ecstatically.

“Hell no, you idiot!” Ryuji deadpanned.

Airi sweatdropped. “I don’t think that’s very phantom thieve-ish…” She murmured awkwardly. “Maybe...Regalia?”

“Ooh, that’s nice.” Ann marveled, clapping her hands.

Ryuji looked at her curiously. “Uh...Regalia? What’s that?"

“It’s an emblem of royalty.” Airi explained. "For example, a crown for a king is a regalia.”

“Aren’t we tryin’ to take down shitty adults though? It sounds more like we’re protectin’ ‘em with that name.” He frowned.

Shrugging, she looked over at Akira. “Why don’t you give us a name?”

He sweatdropped. ‘I am the leader…’ He shrugged, pulling out his notebook. Writing down a couple of different names, he crossed them all out. “Let’s just go with “The Phantom Thieves.”” He suggested. He wasn't creative enough...

Twirling her hair, Ann nodded. “That’s not bad. It is our original name.”

Airi nodded in agreement. “I’m fine with that.” She smiled.

“A good name, for a rookie.” Morgana added.

“The Phantom Thieves. We goin’ with that?” Ryuji asked.

Akira nodded in confirmation. “If that’s OK.” He put his book away.

Ann leaned forward, lacing her hands together. “Well now that the name’s set, who’s our next target?”
Ryuji hummed, rubbing his nose. “There are tons of rotten adults and all...Why not just stick to targeting big names?”

Akira tilted his head. “Like a CEO?” He inquired, crossing his legs and grabbing a cup of coffee. He nodded. “Yeah, something along those lines. We go after some bigwig, it’s gotta get on the news, right?” He grinned excitedly. "Don’t you think more people would believe in us if we did that?”

Airi crossed her arms and tapped her chin. “While that’s true, we should also take the time to browse the Phan-site forums." She proposed. "People on there are already supporting us. We should show them that we appreciate it.”

Morgana nodded. “That’s not a bad idea.” It remarked.

Ann straightened up. “True. If we become better known...we might be able to give courage to a lot more people, like the comments on the site.” She paused. “I don’t really like the idea of just picking someone out of the blue though.”

“Let’s narrow it down to someone we can all agree on then.” Ryuji suggested, leaning on the chair arm.

Morgana hummed. “Hm, so we need a bigwig we decide on unanimously.” It commented thoughtfully, hanging its paws out of the bag.

Ann nodded excitedly. “I like that unanimous decision part! It’s like we’re making some kind of pact!” She grinned.

Airi nodded in agreement. “Let’s make that official. We all have to agree for every target we take.”

Morgana raised a paw.” Now then, this is the official formation of the Phantom Thieves organization!” It declared.

Ann looked over at the clock on the wall. “Oh no! Our time for the buffet ran out…” She despaired.

Ryuji snorted. “I guess we’ll just have to talk more tomorrow.” He acquiesced, ignoring the model. They all nodded, and got up to pay their bill.

Chapter End Notes

The Phantom Thieves are a-go! It's taken 51 chapters to get here! I'm so thankful you guys have stuck with me on this journey, and I hope you'll stick around for the next 50!! Much love to all my subscribers who I can't see because AO3 doesn't have a counter for that, all the kudos, and all the bookmarks!
I hope I can keep on improving as I go and hopefully not go over 300 chapters lolol
“Well,” Morgana began as they walked out of Yongenjaya station and into the cool dark streets of their neighborhood. “We spent all our money on the buffet, but...We officially established the Phantom Thieves, so it was totally worth it.”

Airi smiled. “Yeah, it was.” A teasing smirk grew on her lips. “We didn’t throw up ¥7,000 though.”

Morgana pouted, ears flat against its scalp. Akira smiled, reaching over his shoulder to give the cat some scritches. Their phones rang out, the loud noise a contrast to the quiet streets.

R: The Phantom Thieves, huh...I’m liking the sound of that!
An: I hope we can really help people.
An: I’m curious about that phantom aficionado website too.
An: I wonder who made it…
R: No clue.
Ai: I have a feeling I know who, but I’ll ask for sure tomorrow at school.
R: Wait, they’re at our school?
R: More importantly, you see the survey on there?
R: I dunno how I feel about it.
An: Yeah, there was this approval rating thing, but it was only at like six percent…
Ak: That’s better than I expected.
An: I guess when you put it that way…
Ai: Well, we were treated like a prank, right?
R: But don’t you just wanna get it higher than that?
R: It’s pretty damn exciting if you try and think about it like that.
An: You know, you’re actually right.
Ai: One thing at a time, guys.
Ai: You have to keep up your grades too.
R: Yes, mom…
An: Well then, let’s keep working hard from this point on!

“Why do they keep calling me “mom”?” Airi sweatdropped, staring at her phone weirdly.

Akira huffed in amusement, putting his back in his pocket. “Because you keep telling them to study hard, sleep early, eat their vegetables...”

She pushed him lightly. “I do not! I just want you guys to be healthy and do well in school like…” She trailed off. “...A mom, OK.”

He chuckled, covering his mouth. “Yes, mom.” He joked.

She cringed. “Please don’t call me that, it’s weird coming from you…” She pouted. “Only the kids can call me mom.”
Morgana jumped out of the bag and onto Airi’s shoulder. “I could definitely see Lady Airi as a good mother!”

Laughing, she encircled her hands around the cat, lifting it up and putting it in her arms, idly petting its head. “Maybe...” She answered quietly. She had never thought about having her own children. She never had time or the freedom to.

It purred, turning into jelly. Akira smiled slightly at the sight.

“Speaking of being a mom,” Airi began. “Akira, did you do your homework?”

He froze. “What...?”

She gave him a confused look. “The homework we were assigned three days ago...?” She asked slowly. "It's due tomorrow."

Rubbing his head sheepishly, he let out a curse.

Sighing exasperatedly, she gently stroked the cat’s spine. “OK, why don’t you grab your books and come downstairs? I’ll help you out.” She offered, giving him a pitying smile.

Giving her a grateful smile, they entered Cafe Leblanc where Sojiro was cleaning up. Giving them a passing greeting, the older man left the cafe to them, going home for the night.

Akira went up to his room and grabbed his schoolbag from the counter. Coming back downstairs, he quickly made some tea for them and they sat at a booth, taking their jackets off. Though the cafe was empty except for them, the lingering scent of coffee and curry as well as the warm lighting from the multicolored glass chandeliers kept up the homely atmosphere

“All right, let’s begin.” Airi instructed, taking her books out as well.

Akira nodded, turning his book to the correct page. Morgana laid down on one of the bar stools, taking a nap.

They spent a quiet evening together, Airi correcting some of his answers and helping him remember his facts better.

Closing his books, he rested his forehead against the table and sighed in relief.

Airi took a sip from her now cold tea. “I corrected a lot less this time. You’re improving!” She smiled encouragingly.

Lifting his head, he smiled tiredly at her. “It’s all thanks to your tutelage.” He complimented quietly.

She blushed slightly. “No, you’re very smart, Akira.” She corrected. “You’re just putting more effort now...” Checking the time on her phone, she stood up, putting on her trench coat. “I should get home, it’s getting late.” She stated softly, heading toward the door.

Akira quickly stood up. “Wait!” He called out, putting on his jacket.

She turned around and looked at him questioningly.
“I’ll walk you home.” He offered, rubbing the back of his neck nervously.

She blinked in surprise. “You don’t have to…”

He shook his head, resting his hands in his pockets. “I want to.” He corrected, smiling lightly. He turned to the napping feline. “Morgana, watch the cafe!” He called out, startling the cat from its slumber. “O-Ok…” It yawned, curling its tongue.

The two walked out the door and into the cool late evening. It was already May, but it was still cold enough that they’d need a jacket. Walking down the empty streets of Yongenjaya, they passed a rowdy bar filled with drunk adults, most likely a after work party from a small company nearby. A man in a salary suit walked unsteadily on his feet, bumping into Airi with his shoulder as he ambled out of the izakaya.

“Ah!” She yelped, stumbling back.

Akira reached out and held her shoulders, steadying her.

The man lifted his head to look at her, his inebriated eyes staring blurrily. “What a cute girl…” He burped, swaying in place.

She wrinkled her nose at the alcohol stench wafting in her face.

He reached with a hand out to grab her, and her eyes widened, bracing herself. Suddenly, the man was pushed away and he fell on the floor in a heap, snoring away.

Akira glared darkly at the drunk, his arm still outstretched. He turned to the class president who had her hands in front of her. “Are you all right?” He asked concernedly.

Airi nodded slowly, still staring at the unconscious man with wide eyes. That was close.

Grabbing her hand, he gently led her away and down the street, heading toward her house.

Stopping in front of her door, he turned back to look at her. “It’s a good thing I was with you tonight.” He remarked, smiling slightly. “I wouldn’t have forgiven myself if you were touched by that drunkard…” He muttered darkly.

Airi smiled back, blushing a bit. “Yeah...Thank you, my knight in black leather.” She winked.

He huffed in amusement. “I’m not Joker right now.” He idly tweaked a strand of hair.

“You say that, but you are. Akira is Joker. Joker is Akira. Always our dependable leader...who keeps sweeping his hair like a nerd.” She teased.

He smirked, doing the action that she described. “And you’re our Elegant, our noble lady who can’t stop worrying over her teammates as if they were her children.” He teased back.

She blushed furiously and looked away. “Nooo…” She shook her head. “Anyway, it’s late and we have school tomorrow.”

He nodded. “Right. Have a good night, Airi.” He stated, smiling softly down at her.

They stood there for a moment, not moving. He looked at her curiously.
“U-Um…” She stammered, still blushing. “You can let go of my hand now…”

Blinking, he looked down at their still connected hands. Quickly letting go, he put his hands in his pockets, looking away, his cheeks heating up. “Sorry…” He rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly.

“It’s all right…” Airi whispered shyly, opening her front door. “Good night, Akira.” She smiled gently, closing the door behind her.

Exhaling, he smiled fondly before turning and heading back to the cafe.

Water dripped nearby, and he snapped his eyes open. He was back in the cell again.

Dragging his body off the slab of wood, he slowly walked up to the bars, his chains clinking together. Grabbing the rusty bars, he looked apprehensively at the inhuman man sitting at the well lit desk.

Grinning widely as usual, Igor greeted him. “First off…I’d like to begin by congratulating you. To think you would find The Aeon...It is a cause for celebration.” He announced, his dual toned vocals echoing through the room. "I had not even expected her to reach you."

Akira furrowed his brow. “‘Aeon’? What are you talking about?”

The inhuman Jailer chuckled ominously. “You may have acquired her, but don’t think her real power will come into fruition so easily...However, just having her with you turns the odds in your favor.” Igor proclaimed vaguely. "How interesting..."

“To think our master would give words of praise…” Justine commented quietly, brushing her silver braid.

Caroline struck the cell bars with her baton, glaring at him with a molten gaze. “You better treasure this moment, Inmate!”

“You have encountered allies who share your aesthetics, and you have found your place in reality.” Igor continued. “The time has come...Your rehabilitation will soon begin.”

Akira narrowed his eyes. “What rehabilitation? I don’t understand.” He exclaimed in frustration. Why was it always him? Why couldn't they just leave him alone. He didn't ask to be dragged into this. The only thing he wanted was to be able to live peacefully with his friends.

Chuckling, the beaked man gazed at him with pinprick sized pupils. “I shall explain it to you now…” He uncrossed his legs. “You have a special potential. However, that must be refined into a useful power. It is weak now, but refining it shall grant you the strength to stand against the coming ruin...That is the rehabilitation cast upon you.”

“Coming ruin..?” Akira questioned hesitantly, looking at the nonhuman with uneasiness. Was something bad going to happen?

Ignoring the teen, Igor continued his explanation. “There are various means by which you may gain the power to resist the ruin. Fighting Shadows and gaining experience is one way.” He tapped his heel against the velvet blue carpet. “The fusion process I taught you prior is another.”
Caroline turned back to the prisoner. “This is all possible because of our master’s guidance, Inmate!” She yelled.

Justine stepped forward. “Though it may be presumptuous of us, we have words of wisdom as well.”

Caroline continued after her twin. “When you’re out in reality, you better hone your relationships with those you have contracts with!”

Justine cut in. “Spending time with those people...will lead to the cultivation of your relationships with them.”

Caroline continued. “If you’ve got time to waste, you’d better visit your contractors, Inmate!”

Justine nodded. “That is another source of power to evade the ruin that our master has mentioned.”

Exhaling through his nostrils, Akira nodded reluctantly. He didn't have a choice. If he was going to be put through this, might as well put his all into it.

Igor tapped his foot. “Thanks to the contracts you’ve formed, your heart is steadily gaining the power of opposition. It seems the rehabilitation is going well. This is a truly joyous occasion...I shall grant you an ability befitting of your newfound growth. Consider it a gift.” He chuckled darkly. “May the devotion to your rehabilitation grow even deeper...I have high hopes of you.”

Akira nodded decisively. ‘I feel like my bond with Igor is growing deeper...Weird. I guess I can hold more Personas now.’

A shrill noise rang out in the room, piercing his eardrums. “…The time has come. Return to your brief moments of rest.” Justine commanded quietly.

“And don’t forget to go talk to your contractors, Inmate!” Caroline reminded, smacking the bars with her baton.

His surroundings slowly darkened before fading away, leaving him in oblivion.

With a gasp, he opened his eyes. He stared blankly ahead before registering the dark wooden beams that was his ceiling, pale sunlight streaming in through the windows to his right.

Sitting up, he sighed. ‘I hate that place…’
As usual, both Akira and Airi were squished together on the crowded train as they made their way to school. It was packed with adults coming back from Golden Week, grumbling about their short vacations. Akira hugged his bag to himself, making sure to not hold it too tightly or else Morgana would yell at him.

Airi held onto Akira’s shoulder for balance, checking her phone for news and announcements. She had another nightmare again last night, _that man’s_ face flashing behind her eyelids as his hands tightened. She didn't want to remember anymore. All she could do was try to be like Rui, to live up to her legacy. Too bad today was going to be another long day.

“I wish I had money. I’d kill for a real breakfast…” A broke-ass college student groaned from a few feet away, gripping onto the safety pole.*

“What about Big Bang Burger? The one on Central Street is holding a contest right now.” Their energetic classmate suggested. “The Big Bang Challenge or whatever. If you go at night, you can eat for only ¥500.”

“You gotta eat one of their giant burgers though, right? How can anyone actually finish that?” The broke ass college student replied. “Still...¥500 is a steal.”

Airi tilted her head curiously. “Maybe you should go try it out.” She murmured to Akira.

“I bet giving that a go will increase your guts.” Morgana added, voice muffled by the fabric.


The train stopped and slid its door open, and they made their way through the sea of people.

Feeling eyes on her back, Airi stopped and turned around. She peered through the crowd, trying to find who was staring at her but no one seemed to be paying attention to her. Who..?

“Is something wrong?” Akira asked, looking back at her questioningly.

She bit her lip. “...No. It’s nothing.” Turning around, they continued on their way to school.

“Like it was last week, there still isn’t a gym teacher.” Kawakami-sensei began, the class listening intently. “Instead of having Kimisawa-chan supervise you today, I’m supposed to give you some guidance.” She took a deep breath. “The gist is, don’t go around talking about the incident. That’s all.” She announced shortly. “The police are still investigating Kamoshida-sensei, so I can’t say anything myself.”

She sighed heavily, looking as if she aged several years. “As a teacher though, I’m ashamed for not having noticed that a student was suffering like that...I’m not defending him, but as a colleague, he
just seemed like...well, a normal person.” She reasoned. “Honestly, it still doesn’t feel real. I guess people can have multiple sides to them…”

Airi frowned slightly, looking at the older woman sympathetically. It’s not like it was her fault that Kamoshida chose to abuse his rights as a teacher.

“The teachers have it rough, huh..?” Morgana whispered pityingly and Akira pursed his lips.

“Oh yeah.” Kawakami-sensei perked up. “I just remembered something I learned about psychology. They say that humans have several different personalities hidden in their subconscious.” She explained to the class.

"Different personalities..?” Morgana frowned thoughtfully.

“Oh, to be clear, I’m not talking about multiple personality disorder.” Kawakami-sensei continued. “These different personalities can be a different gender or different age from you. I mean, if you think about how gods and monsters in myths were first based on the human image…” She crossed her arms. “If you actually saw one of those personalities with your own eyes, it might look like a monster.”

Akira raised his brows. It actually sounded like she was talking about Shadows. The way they looked nothing like their human counterparts, but were from the very hearts of people. How interesting. He glanced over at Airi, who had her eyes narrowed in concentration. It looked like she was thinking the exact same thing.

“Hm?” Kawakami-sensei looked at the class in surprise. “You all seem more alert than usual.” She remarked, smiling modestly. “Did I say something wrong?”

“No, Sensei. It was just very interesting.” Airi reassured, giving her an encouraging smile.

The teacher ran a hand through her curly brown hair. “Well, I’m just saying what I’ve heard. It feels like I just now understood what I learned long ago.” She shrugged.

Morgana swished its tail inside Akira’s desk. “Subconscious personalities...It’s a fascinating topic, and it has a lot to do with us. That teacher’s surprisingly smart, huh?” It remarked quietly.

Akira lowered his eyes, nodding slightly. ‘It feels like gaining that knowledge made me a bit smarter…’ He rubbed the back of his neck. Maybe they should look into psychology too.

Packing her books back into her bag for now and leaving Akira’s bento on his desk, Airi walked up to Mishima who was fiddling with his phone, unaware of her approach. “Mishima-kun?” She called out softly. ‘I should ask about that site…’

His head shot up and he almost fell out of his chair. “Huh?! Oh, Senpai…” He breathed out in relief, clutching his chest.

She smiled sheepishly. “Sorry for startling you. You don’t have to call me Senpai, you know.” She shook her head. “Anyway, I wanted to ask how you were? Since Kamoshida’s arrest, I haven’t had time to talk to you…” She looked down guiltily.

He looked at her hesitantly. “Well...I’m OK now. All the bruises are gone.” He rubbed the back of his head awkwardly. “...My parents didn’t care though. They were angry that I won’t be able to put
the volleyball tournament on my college application anymore...” He looked down resignedly. "But that’s not much of a surprise…”

Airi looked at him in horror, covering her mouth. What was with these terrible parents? “That’s horrible of them...I’m so sorry, Mishima-kun.” She whispered sorrowfully. “If there’s anything I can do to help, please tell me, OK? I want to be there for you.” She promised determinedly. “The book you gave me on my birthday really helped me and I want to help you, too.”

Blushing brightly, he shook his head rapidly. “No, Senpai! I-I don’t want to worry you even more. You already have a lot to do what with being a phan-” He covered his mouth.

She gave him an odd look. “A fan...? A fan of what?” She looked at him curiously. ‘Was he going to call me a phantom thief?’ She furrowed her brows slightly.

Mishima opened and closed his mouth several times. “A fan of...Niijima-senpai, of course..!” He stuttered nervously.

She blinked. “Um, I suppose…” She coughed. “Well, don’t worry about worrying me. Your worries are my concern too.” She smiled reassuringly. "I am your class president.”

Hesitantly, he nodded. “OK…” He agreed, a blush covering his face.

“Airi!”

Looking up, she saw Akira was gesturing for her to come out of the classroom.

She nodded and waved, indicating she got his message. “Well, I’ll leave you to your lunch. Remember, you can tell me anything, OK? I’ll do my best to help.” She smiled again before maneuvering her way through the desks and out of the room. ‘I’ll ask him later…’

Turning around the corner, she saw Ryuji and Ann were also there next to the stairwell. “What’s up?”

They crowded around Ryuji’s phone, opened to a certain website. “It ain’t much, but we’ve been gettin’ more postings on the Phantom Aficionado website.” He grinned and read some of the posts. “‘I want to make my friend apologize for not returning the stuff I lent him.’ Ugh, deal with that yourself!” He rolled his eyes.

Hearing the door to their classroom slide open, Ann looked up and frowned. “Hey, those girls…”

Airi turned around and saw two girls from their class, Ando and Fujiwara, standing a few feet away, having not noticed the group standing just a few feet away. They turned their heads to listen as the two began to gossip in the hallway, their voices carrying down the hall.

“You know that phantom thieves rumor about stealing Kamoshida’s heart? I wonder if it’s true.” Fujiwara wondered, playing with the hem of her blazer.

Ando rolled her eyes. “It’s got to be made up. Do you seriously believe they exist?” She asked skeptically.


“He probably just couldn’t keep hiding it after that girl tried to kill herself.” Ando commented callously, flipping her hair.
Fujiwara hummed. “Yeah, you might be right. I guess there’s no way they really exist.”

Ando crossed her arms. “Most importantly, it seriously sucks that our school is gonna be known for stuff like this!” She complained. “It was bad enough that Kurusu came here, and now this?”

“Yeah, he’s scary. I worry he might hurt Kimisawa-senpai.” Fujiwara bit her lip. “I wonder if this will affect our college entrance…” The two walked away, not noticing the five pairs of eyes glued to their backs.

Airi frowned. “How rude…” She looked at the two departing girls with disappointment and glanced at Akira who looked on with a blank face. The class was still wary of the transfer even though he hadn’t done anything and she was getting so sick of it. Couldn’t they see how kind and polite he was?

Ann nodded in agreement, scowling at how heartless they were.

Akira shifted his balance, sighing silently. Whatever...He didn't want to say anything but he was getting sick of people talking shit about him. Of course they would keep mentioning how amazing it was that Airi could tolerate him, and it only dampened his mood.

Ryuji shrugged it off. “That’s prolly a normal reaction for now, but...they’ll see soon enough!” He advocated weakly. “If we can take care of two or three famous guys, people’ll have to believe we exist.” He grinned.

Ann crossed her arms. “So about those big shots...We don’t have any leads yet, right?” She voiced hesitantly. “Plus there’s that rumor about you two threatening Kamoshida too…” She trailed off.

“Maybe we should just do some research for now, check the Aficionado site a bit?” Airi suggested with a shrug.

Morgana popped out of the bag. “Looks like you’ll just have to live a normal, honest school life for the time being.” The feline gave them a stern look. "Still, make sure you stay prepared just in case anything comes up, all right?”

“I’ll keep an eye out for info on any big shots that might be comin’ around.” Ryuji proclaimed eagerly.

“And I’ll try to dig up some dirt online.” Ann added with a smile.

“We went and formed the Phantom Thieves group, but we can’t even find a target..” Ryuji rubbed his head, putting his phone away.

Airi sweatdropped. “There, there…” She patted his back comfortingly.

He sighed. “I guess sometimes things just don’t go the way we want ‘em to…”

Akira checked his phone. “Lunch is almost over. We should eat.” He suggested quietly.

They nodded and headed back, Airi making sure to hand the extra bento to Ryuji.

In the middle of Hiruta-sensei’s lecture, three phones buzzed. They took their phones out discreetly.

R: The police are really here...I saw ‘em at the entrance.
An: I saw them too! They were talking to the teachers!
Ai: If any of them approach you, don’t say anything weird, OK?
R: Got it.
R: But that change of heart thing is seriously amazing, huh?!
An: I hope they don’t find out we’re responsible...
Ai: Keep calm and look innocent.
R: I’m pretty sure we’ll be fine. There’s no proof it was us.
Ak: We don’t need to worry.
An: You sound sure of yourself...
An: But I mean, haven’t rumors been going around about how you guys threatened Kamoshida?
Ai: Oh, yeah...
Ai: Well, I don’t think anyone would mention that to the police.
Ai: School pride and all that.
R: Yeah, I doubt the cops would believe rumors.
R: Plus, this world’s Kamoshida shouldn’t know anything about what actually happened to him.
An: Still...
R: We did what was right. Don’t go freaking out over some label.
An: I guess that’s true...
Ai: It’ll pass. Just believe in us.
R: Man, I really can’t wait to keep living this double life!
Ai: Don’t let it get to your head. You have to improve your grades.
R: Yes, mom...
R: All right, Akira! We’re gonna be counting on you!

Once the last bell rang, most of the students got up and left, leaving school for home. Airi sat at her desk, writing down the last notes as well as making sure her schedule for this week was correct. Leaning against his desk, Akira browsed his phone, waiting for her.

Hearing footsteps approaching their side of the classroom, they looked up.

Mishima waved. “...Hey.” He greeted, resting his hands in his pockets and stopping in front of the two. “Have you seen that Phantom Aficionado Website?” He asked lightheartedly.

Akira nodded. “I’ve heard of it.” He replied quietly.

Airi perked up. “Oh, right! I was going to ask you earlier, but it completely escaped my mind.” She looked up at their classmate who looked back at her questioningly. “You’re pretty talented with web design, aren’t you? Are you the one who made it?” She inquired. “I remember you did a website for last year’s cultural festival.”

He rubbed the back of his head bashfully. “Yeah, I’m the one who started it.” Moving closer, he was inches away from Akira’s face. He tilted his head back, a little creeped out by how close his classmate was.

Airi stared attentively. It was kind of hot, with cool and collected Akira and cute and stammering Mishima...Silently clearing her throat, she glanced away awkwardly, a blush overtaking her cheeks.
Don’t be a pervert.

“Um...!” Mishima stuttered. “...You guys are the Phantom Thieves, aren’t you?” He whispered.

Akira blinked. “What...? Give me some space.” He coerced, giving him an odd look.

Mishima blinked, noticing their proximity. “...Sorry.” He backed up a bit, embarrassed.

“Although...if things really are as I think, I should keep it a secret.” He proclaimed quietly, giving them a tiny smile. “Kamoshida used me, and I did some horrible things to you guys.” He looked down sullenly.

Airi gave him a concerned look. “Mishima-kun, we don’t blame you...”

“Still...” He shook his head. “I still spread your record.” He looked at the transfer apologetically.

“This isn’t much of a way for me to apologize for it...” He crossed his arms, staring at them resolutely. “But if there’s anything I can do to help the cause, just let me know!”

Akira blinked. “That’s great, but...” He trailed off, looking over at the class president for help.

Airi sweatdropped. “Thank you, Mishima-kun. But we’re not the Phantom Thieves. You should announce it on the website so they’d see it.” She suggested lightheartedly.

He nodded. “I know you can’t admit it.” He looked away. “There are many more evil adults outside of Kamoshida.” He furrowed his brow in resentment. “But I’m sure the Phantom Thieves will do something...They can’t let this end after just one target.” He looked back at them with a determined expression. “That’s why I wanted to make a forum where people could post their problems. There are probably a lot of people who have high hopes for the Phantom Thieves’ next move.” He smiled. “So I’ve also implemented an anonymous poll on the site.”

Taking out his phone from his pocket, he animatedly shoved it in front of Akira’s face, the screen almost smacking his nose. “Do you believe in the Phantom Thieves, or not?” Mishima recited. “I...hope someday my forum is filled with supporting posts. I’d really like to help out in the Phantom Thieves’ acts of justice!...Can I, please?” He looked at them with hope filled eyes.

Akira chuckled slightly. “Sounds like fun.” He humored his classmate. It would be useful to have someone outside of their team who could give them information, especially the very founder of their...fan site.

Mishima smiled widely. “I’ll live up to your expectations...I promise.” He swore quietly.

‘I sense abundantly high expectations from Mishima...’ Akira sweatdropped and nodded.

Anyway, I have to get going. See you.” Mishima waved and ran away.

Once he left the room, Ryuji and Ann entered and walked up to them. “We heard all that.” Ryuji stated, resting his thumbs in his pockets. “Geez...It was a little awkward tryin’ to figure out when to walk over here.”

Ann grasped her chin. “So that forum is Mishima-kun’s...” She marveled.

Morgana popped its head out of Akira’s bag. “Has he figured out our identities?” It asked, eyes wide with the possibility.

Airi hummed and rested her chin against her palm. “I think so. I was talking to him earlier and he almost called me a phantom thief.”
Ann shrugged. “Even so, I think it’ll be fine. He seemed to be playing it cool.”

Ryuji deadpanned. “I guess we should have a little chat about this later.”

Airi leaned back in her chair, closing her notebook. “Well, if he does know, we should be glad to have him.” She smiled. “Since he’s the one who made the site, he can reach out to us personally about the problems instead of having us scroll through the posts.”

Morgana nodded. “A forum where people can post problems may prove useful to us like that.”

They all nodded.

“Anyways, we gotta get lookin’ for a new target.” Ryuji urged.

“And we need to stay sharp until we manage to find one.” Ann added. “Once we do, we’ll have to head into another Palace, so we should prep our equipment and—”

“Wait, oh CRAP!” He shouted.

The others jumped at the loud outburst. “What’s with you?!” Ann yelped, staring at him with wide eyes and holding a hand to her fast beating heart.

Ryuji looked at them in horror. “D-D-Don’t we have an exam comin’ up?!” He squawked.

Airi let her head hit against her desk, sighing heavily. Akira sweatdropped.

Ann gave him an unimpressed look. “...Judging by that reaction, I’d assume you’re going to struggle this time too?”

“I-It’s not like you’re any better! All you’re good at is English!” Ryuji argued indignantly.

“I’d rather that than be bad at every subject!” She shot back.

Morgana grinned mischievously. “Even your Japanese is questionable at best, Ryuji.”

Ryuji pouted and kicked the floor. “What’s questionable is whether you’re really even a human.” He remarked, before grinning at Akira. “Good comeback, huh?”

Morgana glared sharply. “...Let’s discuss this with our fists!” It bristled, fur heckling around its neck.

The ex-runner crouched, ready to pounce. “Bring it!” He replied darkly.

Slamming her hands against the desk, Airi stood up between them. “OK, children, I’m angry now.” She smiled serenely.

The two took a step back, staring at her with wide eyes. Akira and Ann covered their mouths, and watched attentively.

Airi looked down at the feline. “Morgana, don’t insult Ryuji’s intelligence.” She chided, then looked over at Ryuji. “Ryuji, don’t demean Morgana just because they don’t look human.” She gripped their collars tightly and brought them together. “Now say you’re sorry, or no more bentos or tuna.” She declared firmly.

They looked at her incredulously. “B-But...!” Ryuji began, but stopped when Airi glared.
“Lady Airi, I..!” Morgana snapped its jaw shut when she turned to frown at it.

Sighing, they gazed at each other grudgingly. “Sorry…” They muttered.

Airi smiled serenely and let go, ignoring their grumbles. “We’re a team, remember? So be nice.”

Ann clapped her hands slowly. “Good job, mom.” She snickered. Airi shot her a dirty look.

Akira smirked faintly, looking at them all in amusement. “ Anyway, exams are next week?” He asked.

Ann nodded. “Yep, it’s midterms. It’ll be from Wednesday to Saturday.” She confirmed.

Ryuji rubbed his head. “Ugh, I’m gonna die…” He groaned.

Airi rolled her eyes. “Not to brag, but did you forget that you’re good friends with the top scorer in our grade? We can do a study group.” She offered.

His head shot up. “Really…?” He whispered, gazing at her with hope filled eyes.

Ann clasped her hands together. “Oh, please, please, please!”

Akira leaned back against his desk. “Yes, please help us idiots.” He snickered quietly.

Airi gave him an unimpressed look, then giggled. “All right, all right.” She acquiesced. “ I work today and tomorrow but I’m free afterwards. My boss gave me the week off to focus on the exams. Just text me whenever if you need help.” She smiled before getting up. “I better get going or I’ll be late. I’ll see you guys tomorrow.” She shouldered her bag.

“Oh, wait! I want to go to Shibuya too, so I’ll go with you.” Ann piped up, grabbing her bag from her desk.

“Same.” Akira added, zipping Morgana back in.

“I’m gonna hang out around school for a bit. Tell me if you wanna go for a run, Akira!” Ryuji waved, hopping out of the classroom.

Leaving the school, the three teenagers walked together to the station and waited for their train. Ann glanced around, furrowing her brows at the occasional fellow passenger.

Airi blinked, noticing her friend’s nervousness. “What’s wrong?”

The model bit her lip. “It felt like someone was watching me this morning…” She whispered.

Airi tensed. “...You, too?” She murmured, hunching her shoulders. That was strange. Was it someone else, or was it the same person?

Alarmed, Akira furrowed his brow. “What? Why didn’t you tell me?” He pressed, before he tensed with realization. “It was this morning when we were going to school.” He stated quietly.

Airi nodded. “Yeah...I don’t know though, it could just be a one time occurrence.” She tried to shrug but it must've been ineffective since he frowned worriedly at them.
They got onto the train once it pulled into the station. With a start, it sped toward Shibuya, the windows consumed with darkness as it entered the tunnel.

Ann scrunched up her face. “Should we tell the authorities? No, but then…” She trailed off, looking down before she shook her head rapidly. “Ugh, never mind! It’s nothing!”

‘I should say something…’ Akira thought to himself, though he hesitated. He was much closer to their other female teammate.

“Ugh, you’re pathetic.” Morgana whispered to him, the girls unaware. “A real man should know how to soothe a lady’s heart, especially these two ladies!”

Deadpanning at the insult to his manhood, Akira opened his mouth. “Why don’t we hang out today?” He offered. “If you feel someone’s watching you, tell me.”

Ann looked at him in surprise. “Uh...sure! If you’re OK with that.” She stammered. “We could go shopping at the underground mall so we don’t leave Airi alone.” She suggested, looking at the class president.

Airi shook her head. “Don’t worry about me. There’s a lot of security around my job.” She smiled reassuringly. What was more important was their safety. It could've just been a one time occurrence.

“This is Shibuya. I repeat, this is Shibuya. The time is now 4:22PM, the next stop is…”

Chapter End Notes

-Broke ass college student is literally his name in the game. I couldn't help but laugh!
-A lot of names for characters that aren't technically part of the story are ones I've made up for them. It wouldn't make sense if Airi didn't know the names of her classmates, especially since she's C.P. Don't worry about memorizing them though, they don't really matter lol
Chapter 54

Getting off the train, they walked Airi to her job before strolling around the mall. Ann perused the stores while Akira followed after her patiently. There didn't seem to be any indication of a stalker nearby, but he might as well hang with her anyway. She was his teammate and friend too. Out of the whole group, he knew her the least.

Deciding not buying anything, they headed to the diner for food. Grabbing the nearest table, they ordered some coffee. They sat in silence with their steaming cups, not sure what to talk about.

“Hey, um…” Ann began. “There’s something I want to talk to you about, Akira.” She took a deep breath. “…It’s Shiho.”

Blinking, he looked at her questioningly. “Is she OK?” He asked quietly. He only knew she had woken up, and that Ann had continued visiting her.

She nodded, idly twirling a ponytail. “Well…You know that Airi and I have been visiting her in the hospital. She hasn’t come with me recently because she’s been so busy. Shiho...She said she was sorry.” She looked down sullenly. “Sorry for not telling me about Kamoshida...about all the things he was doing to her…”

She clenched her hands. “But it was my fault too. I didn’t realize how much trouble she was in...I wasn’t there for her...I didn’t even know how bad it was until Airi told me that I realized what was happening.” She stated grimly. “So, I apologized as well.”

Akira looked at her sympathetically. “She’s so strong.” He smiled slightly. Was it something about Tokyo that all the girls he knew had wills of steel?

Ann perked up. “Isn’t she?” She giggled. “Shiho really is a great girl. I’m glad I finally got to tell her everything I couldn’t bring myself to say before. And, um…” She uncrossed her legs.

“Remember how Kamoshida threatened to take Shiho off the team if I didn’t sleep with him?” She bit her lip, baby blue eyes darkening at the memory. “I had only agreed to it so that I wouldn’t ruin Shiho’s dreams...But now that I think about it, he never would have put her on the bench and cost his team games…”

She sneered. “I seriously should have dared him to try and take her starting spot.” She slumped. “...But in the end, maybe I just didn’t believe in her ability.”

He pursed his lips. “You can’t blame yourself. This is all still Kamoshida’s fault.”

She looked up at him. “You think so…?” She murmured. “But...it all happened because I was weak. That’s why I believed Kamoshida’s authority outweighed Shiho’s own ability to earn her starting spot.”

She rubbed her head. “Akira, do you remember the last time I talked to you like this? When I got that phone call from Kamoshida…and cried.” She mentioned reluctantly, closing her eyes. “I felt so alone...scared, even...But because you and Airi were there for me, I decided not to go. I was a little surprised at how pushy you two were about it...but I see now you just wanted to help...” She grinned. "Thanks."

He gave her an encouraging smile. “It was no big deal. We couldn’t just ignore you.” He replied modestly.

She rested her chin against her palm. “You’re so kind, Akira. Back then,” Her eyes darkened.
“People used to call me all sorts of names…” Prissy bitch,” “Kamoshida’s girl”… I got tired of it pretty quickly. I know I could have gone to Airi about it, but then I’d be dragging her into that mess…” She pursed her lips. “But to tell you the truth, someday I want to be able to take labels like that in stride.”

She gazed at him determinedly. “Hey, um… Personas are the power of the heart, right? That means if my heart gets stronger, my Persona will too.”

Listening intently, Akira nodded, taking a sip from his coffee.

“So…” Ann took a deep breath. “I want to strengthen my heart. And I want to use that strength to help the people around me. I hope we can save people from trouble, just like we did when we changed Kamoshida’s heart.” She leaned back in her seat. “Though honestly… I don’t even know what “strong” is.”

She sighed. “Sometimes, when I think “strong,” I think of Airi, and when she tried to save Shiho that time… I want to find the courage to act like that. I’m going to find my own answer, I promise.”

Akira smiled at her determination. “Let’s find it together. You, me, Airi, Ryuji, and Morgana.” He declared. “We’re a team, remember?”

She looked at him in surprise. “Huh? Really?!” A grin grew on her lips. “Thanks! I feel like I’m a little stronger already!” She giggled. “I guess that doesn’t really count though, huh?” She smirked. “Well… I’ll be relying on you. Let’s train together and make our hearts super strong!” She pumped her fist.

He nodded in agreement. ‘I sense a heightened motivation from Ann… ’ He noted, finishing off his coffee in one go.

“A strong heart, hmm…” She hummed thoughtfully before perking up. “How about this: I won’t get any refills on fountain drinks! I mean, they’re free, so not getting any would mean you have a strong heart!”

Akira sweatdropped. “Err, I don’t think that’s…”

Ann blinked. “…Is that not right? Well, whatever.” She shrugged, finishing her coffee. "I think I’m going to head home now. Thanks so much for coming out with me to hear my troubles.” She gave him a grateful smile.

She called over the waitress for the check, and after paying their bill, they left the diner. He walked her to the station just in case, though she didn’t say she felt like there was anyone watching them.

Checking his phone, he realized it had only been an hour. ‘I could hang out with Ryuji…’ He pondered, before nodding. It was good to bond with his new friends. Texting the punk, he took the train back to the school.

Sitting on the train, Morgana popped its head out. “Are you going to hang out with Ryuji now?”

He nodded. “I have the time.” He replied quietly.

It sighed. “More sitting around in the locker room, huh…”

Akira winced. He hadn’t considered how the feline was basically forced to wait for him. “Sorry.” He whispered.
Shaking its head, it yawned, showing its tiny pink tongue. “Don’t worry, it’s actually pretty tiring listening in on your lessons and conversations.” It remarked, going back inside the bag.

Getting back to the school, he walked over to the boy’s locker room to change into the gym uniform. Leaving the jacket unzipped like always, he exited out into the courtyard where Ryuji was doing a couple of stretches, putting his weight on one leg and straightening out the other.

He looked up at him with a grin. “Yo, Let’s go!” Jumping up, he sprinted away, starting his laps.

Exhaling softly, Akira went after him at a slower pace. They ran a couple of laps around the school with Ryuji sprinting as fast as he could.

It was about an hour later that they began slowing down, the punk in front of him starting to stumble. They made it back to the courtyard where they started and Ryuji almost collapsed on the spot, holding himself up by his knees. “Ugh, dammit!” He cursed, panting. “I wanna move better, but I just can’t...I was trainin’ for nationals back in the day...” He gritted. “But now I totally suck balls.”

Stopping behind him, Akira looked sympathetically. Screw Kamoshida for ruining so many people’s dreams.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

They looked over at who spoke. The school should’ve been empty by this hour. Three male students walked up to them, also wearing the Shujin Academy gym uniform. They weren't anyone Akira knew.

Straightening up, Ryuji’s eyes widened in surprise. “Nakaoka...Takeishi…” He breathed.

Akira looked back and forth between them, noting the tension. ‘I guess they know each other.’

The tanned one, Nakaoka, sneered. “...Running, huh? I saw you from the window.”

Takeishi scoffed, adjusting his blue sports band. “What, you gonna try to come crawling back to the track team?”

Taken aback, Ryuji tightened his lips. “Huh? H-Hell no…” He replied weakly.

Nakaoka frowned. “Sure...Speaking of which, this was your secret training spot, wasn’t it?” He looked around at the courtyard space. “Well, it’s our spot now.” He declared. “You know, us. The former track team.”

Takeishi nodded. “We don’t even have a locker room anymore, thanks to someone I know.” He glared directly at his ex-trackmate.

Pursing his lips, Ryuji looked down guiltily, not saying anything.

Akira looked at him worriedly and decided to step in. “Let’s not fight.” He mediated, walking in between his friend and his former team.

He looked up at him. “We ain’t fightin’...” He muttered.

Nakaoka turned to the bespectacled teen. “Yeah, this isn’t anything like a fight. Not even close.”
He remarked, before squinting at him. “Hold on, aren’t you that transfer student? You’re really gonna hang around with this loser?”

Akira narrowed his eyes at the insult to his friend, resting his hands in his pockets to hide his clenched fists. He could hang out with whoever he wanted, thanks. It’s not like people were lining up to be his friend.

The third ex-track team member piped up. “You better watch out. He’ll hit you the second he gets pissed off.” He warned mockingly. “I heard his dad was the same way. Like father like son, right? Now that’s some scary shit.”

Affronted, Ryuji stomped his foot in front of him. “That don’t got anything to do with this…” He growled, glaring darkly at his former teammates.

Akira glanced at him, frowning softly. He shouldn’t lose his cool. “Calm down, Ryuji.”

Dark eyes slid to him, and Ryuji straightened up. “...You’re right.” He exhaled.

Nakaoka stared at them in surprise.

Resting his thumbs in his pockets, Ryuji looked at them apologetically. “Look, back then, I…” “I don’t need to hear your excuses.” Nakaoka interrupted, frowning deeply.

“Everyone was going through the same bullshit with Kamoshida. The beatings, the impossible exercises...but we put up with all of it for the track team.” Clenching his fists, the tanned athlete walked up to Ryuji, glaring straight at his face. “But no. You had to go and fuck all of that up!” He shook his head angrily. “Man, I was stupid for ever thinking you were my teammate.”

He turned around, Ryuji facing his back. “...That’s all I have to say to you. I’m outta here.” He walked away, the two ex-track team members following.

Akira exhaled, glad that the confrontation was over.

Ryuji groaned, rubbing the back of his head. “...I nearly smacked him when he was talkin’ about my dad...I haven’t changed at all...” He whispered bitterly.

“You’re trying.” He assured, shifting in place.

Ryuji turned to him, a smile growing on his lips. “Y’know...you actually helped me calm down a little. I’m glad you were here with me.” He grinned. “Thanks, man!” He held up his hand.

Smirking, He lifted his hand up as well, and they high fived. ‘I feel like my bond with Ryuji is growing deeper…’ He reflected silently.

He rolled his shoulder, groaning. “...Let’s call it a day. We still got school tomorrow.” Akira nodded, about to head back inside to change into some more comfortable clothes.

“Hey, Nakaoka! Why didn’t you kick his ass?!”

The two looked off into the distance, seeing Takeishi yelling at Nakaoka. “What?” Nakaoka sputtered.

“The hell’s your problem?!” Takeishi shouted.

Raising an eyebrow, Ryuji crossed his arms. “Now they’re just arguing with each other...I should stay out of it.” He sighed, turning back around. “Anyways, nice trainin’ with you.” He grinned at
Akira, who nodded.

They went back to the locker room to change, before parting ways.

Akira sighed, now in his usual black sports jacket and blue jeans. It had been a long day. Sitting on a bench at a nearby park, he let Morgana out of his bag. “I’m gonna sit here for a bit. Why don’t you stretch your legs?”

Stretching out its body, it yawned. “Yeah, I need the exercise.” It agreed. “I’m gonna get lazy being in your bag.” It jumped down, sniffing at plants curiously and running around.

Akira watched with a small smile, taking his phone out of his pocket. Scrolling through the news, he decided to check out the Phan-site. Dragging his thumb up, he went through countless posts of “I want my boyfriend to apologize to me” and “My friend didn’t give me back something” before giving up.

Sighing, he checked the time. ‘Airi’s getting off soon. I could meet up with her and go home together.’ He blushed slightly at the thought. It wasn’t like they lived together, but at this point, her house and even Cafe Leblanc felt more like home than his house back in Mishima. Smiling fondly, he thought back to the times they studied together, just the two of them.

He could admit to himself that he was definitely hogging her from the others, but it wasn’t as if it she didn’t reciprocate. As a class president, she spent a lot of time with him instead of worrying about how their their class would take it. Was it really OK for someone like her to be with him?

“What are you smiling about?”

Startled, he quickly turned. Morgana stared up at him curiously, lazily waving its tail back and forth.

“Ah, nothing.” He replied evasively.

It narrowed its blue eyes. “Must be nice to be so close to Lady Airi, huh.” It remarked, giving him a knowing look.

Blushing at the accusation, he looked away. “I guess…” He answered vaguely.

Morgana brushed its whiskers. “Well, it’s not any of my business. But if you hurt her…” It trailed off, glaring at him.

Akira smirked lightly. “She’ll be happy to know you’re so protective of her.” He gave the feline a couple of scritches.

It involuntarily purred before shaking him off and jumping into his bag.

Shouldering it, he went to the station and took a train to Shibuya.

It was evening now, and the streets were brightly lit with all the TV screens and lights of Shibuya. He was always surprised to see so many people walking around even after the sun had set. Every store in his hometown closed before 7PM, and to see places that were open for 24HRs was mind
boggling. The city was infinitely more convenient than the countryside.

Walking out of the station, he headed down to Central Street to grab a dinner before picking Airi up from work. He was pretty hungry and she wouldn't be off for a while anyway.

“...There have been far too many incidents recently to ignore! Can anyone deny this?”

Ears perking up, Akira turned. It was the same politician who spoke out against the mental shutdowns and adults taking advantage of the younger generation.

He hummed thoughtfully, stopping in front of the man to listen to his speech. Morgana snuck out of his bag, leaning on his shoulder.

“The runaway-train incident, mysterious psychotic breakdowns, a school with corrupt teachers…”

The politician continued, gesturing out to his minuscule audience. Only a few people had stopped to listen, the vast majority ignoring him. “We have yet to discover the truth of it all! The apathy that permeates society is a direct result of negligence by our government and the media.”

The man gazed at the people, stopping at Akira. “...You're listening quite attentively.” He remarked. “Are you interested in politics?”

Blinking, Akira nodded. “I am interested.” He replied politely.

The man looked at him thoughtfully. “Are you a student? I’m delighted to captivate the interest of someone your age.” He expressed, giving him a small smile. “...Hmmm, I could use the help of a young person, but I can’t hire someone without any experience. I’m sorry about that. However, I’d be happy if you stopped by to hear one of my speeches again.” He inclined his head. “...Well then, that’s all for today. I’m heading to the gyudon shop…”

Akira nodded. “I’ll be sure to do that.” He promised, giving a small bow before walking away. He saw out of the corner of his eye that the politician took his little step board and walked toward Central Street.

“Eating at the gyudon shop, huh? Pretty humble preferences for a politician.” Morgana commented, waving it’s tail in the cool evening air. “That guy seemed to want some help...He isn’t very popular, but his speech-giving skills might be helpful in the Metaverse.”

Akira hummed thoughtfully. It would certainly be interesting learning from a real politician. He nodded.

“Hey,” Morgana perked up. “You should work part-time at the beef bowl shop. If he sees you working hard, maybe he’ll let you help him.”

Akira looked at it questioningly. “Now?” He asked, raising a brow.

It nodded. “Why not, we have time right now.”

Pursing his lips, he exhaled, heading down into the underground walkway. Walking up to the job advertisement stands, he grabbed the one for the exact gyudon shop on Central Street and dialed the number. “Hello, my name is Kurusu Akira. I’m calling about the job offer at Ore no Beko.” He answered politely.

“Oh yes, if you can make it tonight, you’re hired. We need all the help. You’re a high school student, I’m guessing? I'll let you move around your schedule.” The man on the phone offered.
That was fast. “All right, I’ll come in right now.”

“Great. Just come right in and knock on the employees only door.” They hung up.

Exhaling, he walked back above ground, making his way to the restaurant. Walking through the automatic sliding doors, he maneuvered around the full restaurant, hugging his bag to himself. Making it to the employees only door, he knocked twice.

The door opened, showing a man in a suit. “Oh, you’re the new part-timer right? I’ve been expecting you. Here.” He shoved a plastic wrapped bundle in his arms. “This will be your uniform. Please change into it in the bathroom and come back.”

Bowing, Akira did what he was instructed, changing into the blue polo shirt with an orange cross, a blue apron, black slacks, and a blue cap. Walking back to the employees room, he knocked twice and walked in, standing at attention with his hands clasped in front of him.

The manager got up from his desk. “Good, the uniform fits. No need to introduce yourself. I actually need you to start working right away. Do you have any questions about the job?”

Akira blinked hesitantly. What? He didn’t have to sign anything, or show ID? “...What does the work entail?” He asked tentatively.

“Take customers’ orders, prep them, serve them, ring them up, and then clean the store.” The manager answered immediately. “The meals are all ready-made, so it should be simple. Just make sure you’re nice to the customers, OK?” He urged nonchalantly.

Taken aback by the mass of responsibilities, Akira stared with slightly wide eyes. “Are there any other employees?”

The manager sighed. “Not quite. Our budget’s been cut despite being short-staffed...so you’ll have to do everything alone. You’re a spry young dude, right? You’ll be fine. I’ll pay you more to make up for the extra work!” He incentivized, looking at the youth optimistically. “OK, I need to head out for a bit! Keep an eye on the shop until I get back.” He appointed, leaving the office.

Akira sweatdropped. ‘Just me then…’ He thought bleakly. His first job in a restaurant and he was all alone without any other experienced workers to watch him.

Leaving his bag on a nearby chair, Morgana popped out, giving him an incredulous look. “This job is ludicrous. You have to do everything all by yourself from the very beginning?” It shook its head. “Oh well. Just give it your best shot, I guess. I’ll be cheering you on.”

Taking a deep breath, Akira left the room and immediately went behind the counters. First he served some of the bowls to the customers, then took the dirty dishes to wash, then wiped the counters. Over and over again.

Washing the dishes, he was internally panicking. ‘This job is so stressful…!” He yelled in his mind. “Hey, the meat’s done. You’ll burn it if you let it cook any longer.” Morgana whispered frantically, sitting in the bag in the back counter.

He rushed to the back, taking the beef off the grill and dividing them between the bowls.

“That customer there wants to order takeout. Who has time to prepare that..?” Morgana gawked, gesturing over to the corner.

Hurriedly running back to the front, he took the takeout order as politely as he could before
sprinting back to the stoves, throwing the pre-prepared meal on the grill. He panted quietly, sweat pouring down his forehead from the intense workout. He took a cold beef bowl that someone mistakenly ordered and quickly shoveled it in his mouth, starving after not eating for so long. Airi’s lunch wasn’t enough.

Running back to the front, he washed the dishes deliriously. Scrubbing a stubborn stain, he noticed that the politician from before was watching him work. Biting his lip, he threw the now clean bowls into the dryer, before rushing to box the takeout order.

“Thank you, please come again.” He stated, bowing quickly to the departing customer.

He sighed. His shift was almost done, and the shop only had a few customers left, all of them with a meal in front of them. He let his shoulders slump, exhausted from how intense the job was. ‘Why did I do this again…? Oh right, gotta learn for the team.’ He reminded himself weakly.

He heard the doors slide open, and he turned to greet the customer. “Welcome to Ore no Beko!” He bowed quickly.

“…A-Akira?”
Wiping her forehead, she exhaled and took off her apron. It was two hours after what was supposed to be the end of her shift, but her boss had her stay overtime due to the influx of customers. The mall was absolutely swarmed with customers, both window shoppers and real shoppers, and it meant that her hands were absolutely filthy from tousling so much soil and flora.

“Thank you for staying late, Kimisawa-chan.” Hanasaki-san praised. “Here’s some extra on top of your wages.” She handed her ¥5000.

Airi bowed, taking the money. “Thank you very much, Hanasaki-san!”

Her boss waved her away. “You deserve it. Treat yourself to a nice dinner, you must be starving by now.”

Giving her a grateful smile, Airi bowed again before grabbing her jacket, wearing it on top of her purple bishop top and black skirt. Shouldering her schoolbag that also held her uniform, she left the flower shop and went above ground.

She honestly did like her job; her boss was nice and the customers were never too rowdy. Flowers seemed to bring a sort of calm for people, and she could lose herself in arranging the bouquets. But was this what she wanted to do for the rest of her life? Her boss was doing so since it was her flower shop, but could she see herself doing the same thing day after day? Giving bouquets to people in joy, in mourning, again and again.

Her dream had been to play her cello for people. In front of her parents, in front of Rui... but now, she didn't know if that dream could still be reality. They weren't here anymore to praise her, admonish her, or anything of the like. Though Rui would never have said anything bad about her.

She was kind...

“Hey Ai-chan, bring those dandelions over here!” Rui yelled out from her spot in the garden.

Letting out a groan, she did what she was told, brusquely ripping the yellow weeds out of the ground, and brought them to her friend in a fist. “Here.”

She was given a sunny grin in response, filling her stomach with butterflies. “Thanks!” Taking the flowers from her grip, her brown eyes caught mottled purple and took a hold of her hand.

Airi scrunched up her brow, trying to take her hand back from the grip. “H-Hey!”

“...The matron did this to you, huh.” She stated angrily, staring at the mottled bruises on her knuckles.
She sighed. “Don’t worry about it…You can’t do anything against them.” She mumbled sullenly. “No one can…We’re all stuck here.”

Rui gave her a worried look. “But Airi, you can’t let them win! Just because they smashed your-”

“Shut up!” She glared at her only friend, not wanting to hear it. Pursing her lips, she let out a sigh. “Sorry, I don’t…I don’t want to hear it. Go-baka already rubs it in my face enough.”

Giving her a sympathetic smile, Rui shook her head. “No, I gotcha. I’m sorry for pushing. Here.”

Turning back to her pile of flowers, she carefully picked out a dandelion seed head. “Maybe if you make a wish, it’ll come true!”

She looked at it skeptically. “That doesn’t work.”

Rui grinned, shoving it in her face. “You’ll never know if you don’t try!”

Staring at it for a moment, she hesitantly took it. Taking a deep breath, she blew, watching the little white seedlings fly into the air and past the gate that imprisoned them here. ‘Can we be together forever?’

“Airi, RUN!”

She shakily exhaled, feeling the tension leave her body. She shouldn’t be thinking of those things, even though she knew it was unhealthy to keep ignoring it.

Her stomach grumbled, reminding her that she hasn’t eaten. Holding a hand to her abdomen, she made her way down to Central Street for a place to eat. ‘Crepes? No…Diner? Too expensive…’

Her eyes landed on the gyudon shop. Perfect. Heading toward the cheap beef bowl restaurant, dodging the groups of late shoppers, she walked in through the automatic sliding doors. The oily scent of cooked beef and fried rice greeted her as soon as she walked in, as well as the sound of chopsticks clinking against bowls as diners ate quickly and efficiently.

“Welcome to Ore no Beko!”

She stared at the familiar ebony haired teenager wearing the restaurant’s employee uniform. “…A-Akira?” She gasped, covering her mouth in surprise.

Said person’s head shot up from his bow, eyes wide. “Airi?” He sputtered. They stared at each other in surprise, not expecting to see the other here.

“Hey, the beef is burning!” Morgana yelled from the back, no one hearing its meows over the jazzy music that filled the restaurant.

Stiffening, he rushed into the employees section behind the counter and into the back, flailing a bit in panic as he tried to save the meal.

Laughing a bit incredulously, Airi took a seat. The only other customer near her was an older man wearing a dark suit who was watching Akira quite attentively. Raising an eyebrow at that, Airi shook her head and perused the menu.

Akira ran up in front of her, her rose colored strands fluttering in the man made wind. “What would you like to order?” He asked, panting slightly.

“Uh…” She blinked. “A medium barbecue bowl, please.”
Nodding rapidly, he rushed to the back to prepare her order. She stared after him, brows raised at
the harried expression on his face. She looked around. ‘Is he the only employee…?’ She wondered.
Exhaling softly, she took out her phone and scrolled through the trending news, noting yet
another psychotic breakdown. Why were they happening so commonly?

A bowl slammed in front of her on the table and she jumped. “Please enjoy your meal!” Akira
bowed, blushing sheepishly.

Airi blinked rapidly. “U-Um…” She stammered. “Are you the only one working, Akira?”

He nodded. “Yeah…” He breathed out, rubbing the back of his neck tiredly.

She tilted her head. “Why’d you take this job then?”

His eyes slid to the side where the older man sat as he ate a beef bowl, unaware of their gazes on
him. “It’s for the team.” He answered after a moment.

Her eyes followed his, and lifted a brow. “Well, OK... Are you getting off soon? I could wait for
you.” She offered, giving him a smile.

He sighed gratefully. “Yeah, my shift ends in thirty minutes. Take your time.” He waved before
rushing back to his job, waiting on another customer who call him over.

Smiling fondly at his flustered figure, she began eating her barbecue bowl. Chewing on the slightly
burnt meat, she noticed out of the corner of her eye that a certain man was looking in her direction.

“Excuse me, young lady.” He called out.

She looked at him questioningly, swallowing. “Yes?” She answered politely.

“Do you know that young man who’s working? Is he your boyfriend?” He inquired, idly combing
his receding hairline.

Blushing, she shook her head. “W-We’re classmates.” She refuted, heart beating faster at the
mention of Akira being her significant other. Was this the third time someone thought they were a
couple? They were just friends...

The older man hummed thoughtfully. “I see.” He paused. “It’s certainly unfair for him to work the
entire restaurant alone.” He remarked, watching the employee with a frown.

Airi nodded. “Yeah, and we have exams coming up soon, so he’ll be even more exhausted.” She
frowned worriedly. Was he going to keep taking shifts?

The man nodded grimly before placing a couple of bills on the table, and left the restaurant.

Staring curiously at the older man’s retreating back, she turned back to her meal and continued to
eat. ‘I wonder what Akira wants with him.’ She wondered, chewing some rice.

Finishing her meal, she idly scrolled through her phone, trying to stall until it was the end of
Akira’s shift. The shop was almost empty now, with only two other customers left. Akira was
slowly washing the dishes behind the counter, shoulders slumped in exhaustion.

She bit her lip, watching him concernedly. ‘He must be so tired…’

Just then, a man in a business suit walked into the restaurant. “Please excuse me for the
interruption, but our store will be closing in a few minutes. Please pay for your meals and have a
good night.” He bowed, before walking into the employee’s room.

Airi dug into her bag for her wallet, taking out ¥450 for her meal.

Akira made his rounds, collecting the money and handing out receipts. “Thank you very much. Thank you very much.” He bowed politely over and over, the customers taking their leave. He sighed, relaxing his shoulders. He turned to Airi. “Let me get my wages and change. I’ll be back in a few minutes.” He smiled tiredly, walking to the back room.

Akira stood with his back straight, his hands folded in front of him.

His boss nodded. “All right, good work. You can leave now since it’s the end of your shift.” He took out a bundle of yen. “This is your pay. Thank you for today. Well, I hope you can keep it up.”

Akira bowed. “Thank you, Tenchou.” Accepting the money, he added it into his wallet.

The manager nodded, leaving the room. Sighing heavily, he took off his cap and held it loosely in his hand.

Morgana popped out of his bag on the chair. “A-Are you OK? You were alone out there this whole time…” It asked tentatively, giving him a pitying expression. “But you still managed all those orders by yourself. If you ask me, you were pretty proficient!”

He brushed his hair sluggishly, smirking slightly at his accomplishment. “Yeah…” He yawned, covering his mouth. “I have to keep at it until that politician notices though…” He blinked owlishly, gesturing for Morgana to get out of the bag. He took out some of his casual clothes and changed out of his work uniform, folding it into the bag before placing the feline back in.

Walking out of the back room, he double checked the store, making sure everything was clean, before leaving through the front door. Airi was waiting just outside, typing on her phone. “Hey. Sorry for making you wait.” He called out, walking up to her.

She looked up and gave him a smile. “Don’t worry about it.” She put her phone away. “Shall we go home?”

He nodded, and the two left the busy streets, heading down to the subway. Sitting down on the train, he leaned back in his seat with a sigh, closing his eyes. He did way too much today.

Airi gave him a sympathetic glance. “Tired?” She inquired, hugging her bag to herself.

He slowly nodded, opening his eyes to half lid. “My shoulders are killing me…” He murmured, popping his neck.

She hummed. “Did you do your homework for today?” She asked casually.

He froze. Slumping down in his seat, he hung his head. “Shit…” He breathed, chuckling pathetically at himself. He spent so much time today doing everything but his homework.

Airi sweatdropped. “...Well, it’s not too late right now. I can give you a helping hand?”

He stilled. She was offering her help again, even though she had had a full day of work as well. Biting his lip, he glanced over at her with vulnerable eyes. “...Why are you always so willing to help?” He whispered faintly. Why was she so nice to him? Sure they were friends, but...
there seemed to be no limit to her kindness...

She blinked. “Aren’t we friends…? Why wouldn’t I help you?” She asked, looking at him with a confused expression.

Huffing, he straightened up and looked directly at her. “I mean, you were the first to approach me even though you knew I have a criminal record.” He grimaced. “The rest of the class except Ann still avoids me. You help me with schoolwork, at the Palace, with Suzui-san...and even now when you’re probably just as exhausted as I am.” He furrowed his brows. "How are you so selfless..? Why are you so nice to me?"

Airi stared at him blankly, before looking down at her lap, not saying anything. Her? Selfless and kind? Sure, but she wasn't Rui...

Akira watched her for a moment, before exhaling. “Sorry, I only meant…” He paused, changing his mind. “I’m grateful for your help.” He gave her a ghost of a smile.

She nodded, still not looking at him.

Slightly hurt, he looked away dejectedly. They rode the rest of the journey in silence, an uneasy tension between them for the first time.

Walking down the backstreets of Yongenjaya, Akira continually glanced over at the silent cellist, feeling his concern grow. ‘Did I say something wrong earlier…?’ He fretted. Maybe it wasn't time to talk about his lack of self-esteem.

Arriving at the cafe, the lights turned off, he turned to look at the class president. “...Would you like to come in?” He asked hesitantly.

She nodded blandly, still not saying anything.

Swallowing his nervousness, he took his keys out and unlocked the front door. Instead of staying downstairs in the cafe, he guided her up the stairs to his room, pulling on the light switch to illuminate the musty room. “It’s not much but...make yourself comfortable.” He spoke awkwardly, letting Morgana out of his bag.

The feline jumped down onto the wooden floor boards. Giving him a knowing look, it went down the stairs, leaving them alone.

Airi looked around blankly, slightly curious at his living situation. The room was large but sparse, the floor and ceiling being made of old wood. The floor was too harsh to walk around barefoot, so she left her shoes on. It housed a bed in the corner, a old lumpy couch, and a CRTV on the table.

Taking a seat on the couch, she sank onto the plush surface. She blinked in surprise. ‘It’s a lot more comfortable than it looks...’ She idly noted. Exhaling, she leaned back, letting her mind run wild. Should she come clean? She hadn’t ever told anyone else this story except the police. Takase was the only one, but he never really knew the details...

Putting his bag down, he sat down next to her. “Um...so…” He glanced away awkwardly. Taking a breath, he bowed his head. “I’m sorry if I said something wrong earlier.” He apologized, peeking up at her with remorseful eyes. “Please, say something...”
She gripped her hands. “Ah…” She frowned softly, shaking her head. “No, I’m the one who should be sorry. You didn’t say anything wrong…” She bit her lip. Guess she was doing this. "You just reminded me of...some things that I haven’t really told anyone."

Sighing heavily, she leaned against his arm. He tensed, but didn’t push her away. “You know I was at an orphanage,” She began inaudibly, resting her head on his shoulder.

He turned his head slightly, her rose colored tresses grazing his jaw.

She continued her story. “It was Catholic, and I didn’t believe, so...I had a tough time. I had one friend there…” She took a deep breath. "Her name was Rui. She arrived after me, and she was the most loving and gentle person you could ever meet...She always did her best to cheer me up, especially after physical punishments.”

She inhaled shakily, eyes darting away. “...I was so absorbed with my own pain, that I didn’t notice that the other kids were suffering just the same as me. There was even a boy there, Go-kun I think his name was, who would lash out at everyone before he was taken away.” She grimaced as she remembered the bratty orphan who never remembered their names. "I hated him but Rui was the one who helped them, just like she helped me…No one there was happy. We weren't allowed outside of the institution, and the staff were not nice people. It was more like a prison than a haven.”

Her lips tightened. “There was a priest who really liked us though, and it was weird because none of the other staff did. He would give us treats and stuff, just me and Rui.” Her shoulders tensed as she continued. “One day, he called us into his office...he asked us if we wanted to see something special.” She trembled and clenched her eyes tightly.

His face scrunched up in horror and disgust, connecting the dots in his head. “You don’t have to tell me, Airi…” Akira spoke softly, rubbing her back. “Especially if it hurts you…”

She shook her head weakly. “I trust you...I’ve only known you for a month but still, I just...I haven’t told this to anyone but the police…” She huffed shakily. "Just give me a second..."

He nodded, letting her go at her own pace.

“I said no, and he hit me. He unzipped his pants, and r-reached out for me…” She began to hyperventilate, swallowing nervously. “But Rui attacked him with a letter opener from his desk...she got him in the neck, but it didn’t stop him.”

She stared unblinkingly, tears flowing down her cheeks in a steady stream. “He turned to her and began to...to strangle her. I screamed for him to stop, but he didn’t…” She clenched her teeth. “Rui died from asphyxiation, and he died minutes later from blood loss. I...couldn’t save her.” She professed, sobbing quietly. "I...didn't save her. I didn't do anything..."

She said it. She finally confessed her deepest sin. She had let her best friend die. The only person who treated her as if she was worth something in that miserable prison. Watched as her body cooled postmortem, red hand prints staining her tanned neck. Like a fly on the wall, she had done nothing as the kindest person was murdered for a piece of trash like her.

"Why...,” he heard. He looked down, and locked with red rimmed eyes, still flowing with tears. “Why did she have to do that?” Airi whispered. “Why couldn’t I save her too…”

‘This was why she was so heartbroken when Suzui-san jumped…’ He realized. Wrapping his arms around her, he held her protectively as she cried her heart out. ‘Airi…’ He squeezed her slim waist,
trying his best to comfort her. “I’m so sorry.”

Hiccuping, she shook her head. “It wasn’t your fault...it was mine. Rui died for me...I couldn’t do anything.” She blinked rapidly, trying to clear away the tears clinging to her lashes. "I'm not kind if I let the kindest person I know die...”

He frowned. “No, it wasn’t your fault that Rui-san died...and it wasn’t your fault that Suzui-san jumped.” He unwrapped his arms and brought his hands up, encompassing the sides of her face.

She blinked sluggishly, looking at him with red rimmed eyes.

His thumb gently rubbed away a tear track. “It’s not your fault. It was the priest’s fault, and Kamoshida’s fault.” He stated firmly.

Her eyes slid away. “Even if you say that...I still feel guilty…” She whispered. “I could have done something...Anything, really. I wanted to play for her...one day…”

His lips tightened. "You keep trying to shoulder everyone's problems as if that validates your kindness, but you're not responsible for their faults." He frowned determinedly. "I'll just have to convince you."

Sniffing, she gave him a small watery smile. “...If you say so.” She murmured, lifting her hands and grasping his wrists, plucking his palms away from her puffy cheeks. She may not believe him, but his words made her want to.

She wiped her eyes. “When the police arrived, the entire organization was investigated thoroughly and then shut down...All the kids were transferred to other places once they concluded the case, including me. It wasn’t great after that, but...I learned from Rui that I should take care of others, no matter what...” She sighed heavily, tired from laying her soul bare. ”Sorry, but can you just copy my answers? I don't think I have the energy to really help you tonight…”

He nodded. “If you want, the bathroom is downstairs.” He offered.

She nodded, and with another sniff, headed down the stairs. Walking past Morgana who looked up at her in concern, she entered the cafe bathroom, closing the door behind her.

Staring into the mirror, she saw a strained little girl, eyes bloodshot, cheeks puffy from all the crying. She saw a disheveled teenager who could barely hold herself together, acting as if she was some benevolent and intelligent leader of her class. She saw a pathetic leech who couldn’t help anyone, even if they were right in front of her. She saw...

Airi sighed.

“"It's not your fault. It was the priest’s fault, and Kamoshida’s fault."  He stated firmly.

Rubbing her nose, she sniffed. “It’s not my fault. It’s not my fault.” She repeated to herself, taking a deep breath. Turning the faucet on, she cupped her hands and splashed her face with the cold liquid, cleansing the remnants of her recent breakdown. Sighing as the cool water chilled her feverish skin, she twisted the knob, damming the flow.

Tearing off a napkin from the wall dispenser, she dried her face. Wiping any stray tears, she threw the used paper into the trash before leaving the bathroom.

Large blue eyes greeted her as soon as she closed the door behind her, gazing at her concernedly. “Are you OK, Lady- Airi?” Morgana inquired quietly.
Giving the feline a small smile, she nodded. “Yes, I’m OK, Morgana. Thank you.” She lied, bending down to give it a few scritches.

It purred at the attention. “OK…” It replied skeptically, looking at her uncertainly before padding up the stairs.

Airi followed after it, the wood creaking underneath her feet. Arriving back in the attic, she saw Akira had finished copying her homework and was putting his book away. Hearing her footsteps, he turned his head to look at her, giving her a small smile. “Are you feeling better?” He asked softly.

She nodded. “Yes...Thank you again, Akira.” She sighed, smiling wryly. “I always cry when I’m with you. I’m sorry for dumping all this on you…”

He shook his head. “Don’t worry about it. I’m here for you.” He smiled gently. Just as she was here for him.

She gave him a watery smile. “I think I’m going to go home now, it’s been a long day…” She rubbed her now sensitive eyelids, her corneas itching with dehydration. She just wanted today to be over.

He nodded. “I’ll walk you back.” He stated, grabbing his keys. She nodded, too tired to argue. They left the cafe to Morgana and walked down the road.

The streets were empty at this late hour, the cool breeze permeating through their thin jackets. Passing the supermarket, she tilted her head toward the sky, her hooded eyes following the dim astral specks, muted by the city lights. “...Am I terrible for wishing that priest was still alive?” She whispered.

Gray irises glanced at her. “...Why?” He asked quietly.

A bitter smile grew on her lips. “So that he could suffer in prison, of course...Death is too kind of a punishment.” She murmured cynically.

They slowed their pace as the familiar house crept up into view. “...I don’t think it’s terrible.” He admitted, resting his hands in his pockets. “You want justice for your friend, even now. I think that shows you care very deeply.”

She huffed, smiling wryly. “I guess that’s good.” She inhaled, and slowly released her breath. “I try to be kind to others because Rui is kind...Was kind.” She bit her lip. “She saved me...I wouldn’t be here without her, even if that had never happened. That’s why…” She turned to look at him, her eyes quivering vulnerably. “I’ll do my best to help you. You, Ann, Ryuji, Morgana...anyone who wants or needs it.” She swore resolutely. “Because if I don’t...do I really deserve to live when Rui had to die..?”

“Airi…” Akira whispered, gazing at her sympathetically. “Thank you for telling me about Rui. She must’ve been a great person...I’m grateful to her.” She blinked at him, not comprehending why. “Because of her, I met you.” He smiled. “Whether or not you think you’re a kind person, I know that you are.”

What? How could he think so highly of her, even after hearing what really happened...? Her heart jumped into her throat and she swallowed instinctively. Did she really deserve his faith in her? She closed her mouth, lips tightening. Who was she to doubt her leader.

They stopped, now in front of her door. He rested his hands in his pockets, waiting patiently.
Her lips twitched. He must be so exhausted, especially after that shift at the gyudon shop, but he still took the time to listen to her sob story, and even defended her against herself. Exhaling softly, she gazed at him tenderly. “You’re the kind one, Akira...I won’t let you down.” She promised. Biting her lip, she stepped closer.

He blinked, looking at her questioningly.

Stretching her feet, she tip-toed, tilting her head up.

He froze.

Her lips brushed against the smooth plane of his cheek, her nose just barely touching the rim of his glasses, lingering for a moment before pulling back. “Thank you.” She whispered, her cheeks flushed bashfully. Brushing some stray hair out of her vision, she opened her front door and closed it behind her softly, leaving him standing alone outside.

Heart pounding at her bold move, she hurriedly took off her shoes before rushing to run a bath, stripping her clothes into the laundry basket.

Drying her hair from her wash, she walked over to her bedroom and grasped the neck of her cello, hugging it. ‘Mom, Dad, Takase, Rui...I never said this before but...thank you.’ She closed her eyes and prayed silently, idly plucking the strings. ‘I’ll try my best to live for you...’ The chords vibrated, singing the notes into the air. She had no right to not when she survived them all.

Familiar gray eyes flashed behind her eyelids, and her heart skipped a beat. Putting the instrument back, she threw herself onto her bed and hugged the Mona plush Ryuji gifted her. Gripping the soft cotton, she stared up at her ceiling.

Was this…?

A hand slowly reached up, cupping his cheek where he could still feel the phantom sensation of soft lips caressing his skin. Heart beating rapidly in his chest, he felt his cheeks burning under his palm, the difference in temperature like night and day. Wetting his dry lips, he idly wondered what it would feel like if those petals had landed on his own.

Turning away, he walked back home, feeling a grin slowly take up most of his face.

Locking the door behind him, he walked into the cafe and up the stairs. Quickly washing up, he changed into his sleepwear and got into bed.

Morgana watched him curiously, already laying down on its corner. “Why are you smiling so hard?” It asked, giving him an odd look.

Akira shrugged, still grinning widely. “No reason.” He answered vaguely, snuggling under the blankets. “Good night, Morgana.” He wished, closing his eyes in content. ‘That’s the first time a girl had ever kissed me...I feel like I’m getting closer…’

“Oh...good night..?” He heard it answer hesitantly, laying down near his feet.
“Hey there, Kimisawa-chan! Atsuki-chan!” The priest greeted them cheerfully in the hallways, empty of other staff and children. The wooden floors were sparkling clean as the kids cleaned them every day, and the waning light shined in through the semi-tall stained glass windows.

Rui gave him a sunny smile. “Good evening, Shinpu-sama!”

He smiled. “You two were really diligent with your lessons today. I was watching as you balanced in ballet. How about a treat? I have some leftover cake from the staff party.”

She brightened. “Really? You’re always so nice to us!” She nudged her friend. “C’mon Airi, say thank you!”

Biting her lip, she looked down. She really didn’t want to but if Rui said so... “Thank you…”

He laughed jovially. “And of course, we shall thank the Lord for this blessing. Let’s get going, shall we?”

He guided them down the halls of the institution, passing by the practice rooms where there were still children learning ballet and music, the art room next to it completely empty. Turning the corner, he led them into an office, far secluded from the rest of the building and consequently, the staff.

Walking to his desk where he had some open envelopes, he opened the small cooler in the corner of the room, pulling out the opened box of cake. “Here, girls.” Placing them on two paper plates, he handed them to the two children.

“Thank you, Shinpu-sama.” They intoned, one much cheerier than the other, and wolfed down the sweet dessert. They didn’t usually get anything close to this, so it really was a treat.

"Hmm…” He watched them devour the confection, a strange glint in his eyes.

"What’s wrong, Shinpu-sama?” Rui asked curiously, finishing the last of her cake.

“Well, why don’t I have a treat too...Want to see something special?”

Tensing at the look in his eyes, Airi shook her head no. It reminded her of Hisoka, and she didn’t want to remember him.

Narrowing his eyes, he swung his hand and she fell to the ground, her cheek stinging from the contact. “Shinpu-sama!”

He sneered. “Beautiful children like you two only have to stay beautiful by obeying your lord. I was blessed to have you two enter this orphanage courtesy of our employer, and it is time I get to enjoy it.” Throwing off his priest robes, he knelt down in front of her and began to unzip his pants.

Her eyes widened. What was he doing?! Her mother told her to never let a man unzip his pants near her, or let them touch her. Those men would hurt her. This man was going to hurt her.

His face peered down at her, lips spread in a grin.

"Rahhh!!” With a roar, Rui ran up behind him and jumped, a letter opener gripped in her hands. He cried out as the sharp object entered his neck, exiting on the other side.

Airi covered her mouth in horror as a fountain of red showered across the floor, some of the hot
sap landing on her and burning her exposed skin with its heat.

It was just like that time a year ago.

“You bitch!” He growled, turning to the dark haired girl, pulling the makeshift dagger out with a grunt of pain.

“Airi, run!” Rui yelled, grabbing the scissors left on the desk from cutting the cake ribbons.

She couldn’t move, her body wouldn’t respond, why wouldn’t it move?!

Her voice was stuck in her throat as she watched the priest tackle the other girl to the ground.

“You fucking bitch! I was gonna go easy on you ‘cause you’re kids but now, I’ll definitely make it as painful as possible!” He growled, encircling his hands around her small neck. “I’ll kill you!”

Coughing from the pressure, Rui stabbed at his wrists, leaving red scars upon his flesh.

“Airi...go…” She choked out, saliva sputtering out of her mouth as her fight grew weaker. She was too young, too small...

He panted triumphantly, feeling her pulse weaken underneath his grip. “Now...for you...” He coughed, blood spewing from his mouth. He turned to Airi who was frozen on the floor, and began crawling to her, the slick blood moving him along. Reaching out with a hand, he stilled before collapsing on the wooden boards.

Silence pervaded the small office as the two bodies slowly cooled.

“Nn...” Her tongue was like lead in her mouth as she tried to speak. She barely took in a breath with how much she was shaking. “No...” A tear slowly dripped down her face, landing in the pool of blood that began to stain her pants.

“No...RUI!”

Chapter End Notes

Airi rank 4

Translations
Tenchou = Manager (General term)
Shinpu-sama = Father/Priest (General term)
Atsuki Rui = Warm Kind, basically a warm and kind person. Completely made up character for this too.
Chapter 56

Chapter Notes

10k hits wow! Thank you!

----5/7, EARLY MORNING, YONGENJAYA BACKSTREETS

She idly brushed her hair in the bathroom, gazing at her reflection in the mirror. She had woken up with the itchiest eyes, borne from last night’s crying session on Akira’s chest. Aside from that, her shoulders felt...lighter, somehow. As if she had finally stopped wearing a backpack of rocks, weighed down by her guilt.

There was still some, of course. Rui still died for her. She would never be able to forget that. How her chest just slowly stopped rising, how her body cooled in the hours it took the police to arrive. That silence afterward would never leave her ears. Sometimes, she could still hear that absolute absence of noise, even in crowded places.

The guilt for when she left behind the couple of kids at the second house when she applied for emancipation. For her support, her comfort, for food and clothes...

She sighed, frowning with disquiet. It wasn’t like she could have done so forever. She taught them all she knew. Hopefully they would be able to survive on their own. They had to. The one older kid who taught her had already left a couple years ago and wouldn't be able to watch over them. She hadn’t heard anything from him, so it was likely he was either part of a gang...or he was dead.

She frowned. As long as they didn’t hurt the people she cared about, as long as they could live with themselves...She wouldn’t judge them for finding a place to belong, even if it was in the afterlife.

Placing the brush on the counter, she braided her hair into a loose fishtail. Stretching her suspenders over her shoulders, she put on her blazer last. Smoothing the fabric out, she took a deep breath. “All right, Airi.” She spoke to herself. “Time to dance to the music.” She whispered, her eyes shining with renewed determination in the mirror. “No more crying.”

Grabbing her bag and her keys, she left her house behind and walked to Akira’s. ‘So much has changed in so little time...and it’s all because of him.’ Her lips quirked.

Before he arrived, she just lived day by day, trying to help others before herself. There wasn’t really anything to look forward to. Her future only consisted of working to keep her house and paying bills.

But now, she was a phantom thief, fighting the injustices done to young people. She was surrounded by friends who understood what it was like to be used and discarded by adults, and they supported each other without a doubt. She found a place to belong, to not be left behind again.

Turning the corner into the narrow street, she saw Akira waiting outside the cafe, idly browsing his phone while leaning against the brick wall. The sun shown bright today, the light highlighting the black messy mop he called hair.
Her heart danced a little faster as she called out a greeting, walking up to him. Please don’t look at her with pity. Please don’t treat her any differently. Please let her still be Airi to him. “Good morning, Akira.”

He lifted his head from his phone and gave her a smile. “Good morning, Airi. How are you feeling?” He asked quietly, pushing himself from the wall.

They walked down the road together, passing the usual elderly folk on their morning stroll. “I’m better...thank you again.” She smiled shyly, ducking her head slightly. “I feel a bit lighter now, thanks to your support.”

A rosy hue appeared on his cheeks and he looked away, rubbing the back of his neck. “My pleasure…” He replied bashfully.

His bag rumbled, and Morgana pressed its head out of the small opening. “Good morning, Airi! Are you going to do the study group tomorrow? This guy definitely needs it.” It gestured to Akira. Said teenager deadpanned at the insult to his intelligence.

Laughing, she nodded. “If everyone has the time, then sure.”

Making their way onto the crowded train, Airi grabbed onto her leader's shoulder for balance as she was squished between another girl and the train doors. Akira hugged his bag closely, doing his best to avoid the other passengers as they crowded the cart.

“...Move a little more to the right, I can’t see the screen.” Morgana whispered. He adjusted his stance, putting his back to the inside of the train cart.

Loosening her grip, Airi clutched his arm instead, the train shaking causing her to bump into his side. She felt her classmate tense up.

Blushing at the familiar closeness, she didn’t move away even when the train stabilized on the tracks, relaxing against the warmth emanating from him. After last night, she found it really comforting to be near him. ‘Must be because of his kind nature…’ She reasoned. ‘He’s such a good friend to me...’

What she didn’t see was the bespectacled teenager’s face, skin feverish from the blood rushing to his cheeks. “Now for today’s Train News.” The monitor announced over the roaring of the train tracks. The three Persona users looked up to the screens above the doors.

“Today’s headlines are...” Volleyball Beating Investigation!” The school claims to have left teaching methods up to its staff. It has denied once again that it had any knowledge of the beatings.” Airi furrowed her brow. Principal Kobayakawa trying to save face, huh. “Pollen Warning as of Next Week!” Greater volume and arriving later than in previous years. “Hotspots of Tokyo!” Experience art in Shibuya! The Madarame exhibit opens next week.”

She blinked. Madarame exhibit? Where had she heard that name before? She bit gnawed on her lower lip, trying to remember. ‘At school? No...At work? No...Oh!’ The billboards next to the bookstore on central street were advertising it.

“People are really talking about the Kamoshida incident.” Morgana remarked quietly. “No one in this car knows that we’re the ones who did it.” It snickered quietly
They walked into their classroom a few minutes before the first bell rang, Akira moving directly for his seat next to the windows.

Airi dropped her bag off at her desk before moving to the front of the class. She clapped her hands loudly, garnering the class’ attention. “Good morning!” She spoke loudly, a smile painting her lips.

“Good morning, Senpai!” The class replied in unison, still sitting around casually.

Fighting the urge to roll her eyes at being called senpai, she continued. “So as you all know, we have exams coming up.” Some classmates groaned and she laughed. “Yeah, I know right? But we have to do them, so please do your best! If you have any concerns, you can come to me, OK?” She bowed. "Let's all get high scores!"

“Hai!” Her classmates bowed back.

Kawakami-sensei entered the room, and Airi moved back to her seat. “Good morning.” She greeted, placing her folders on the side. “As I’m sure Kimisawa-chan told you, we’ve got exams starting on Wednesday. Don’t tell me you forgot.” She raised an eyebrow at the students.

Anyway, today we’ll be talking about “The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter.” Most theorize it’s the oldest story in Japan; for some, it’s the oldest science-fiction story in the world.”

Ann listened to the teacher, a bored look on her features. Akira stared out the window, leaning against his palm. Airi didn’t bother writing anything down, it’s a famous story after all.

“But if you ask me,” Kawakami-sensei continued, rolling her eyes. “It’s the oldest story in Japan about a terrible woman. I mean, Princess Kaguya gives her suitors absurd tasks, demands fancy gifts, then runs off to the moon. Some men lose their fortunes, some are humiliated, and some even get serious wounds or go blind.” She criticized. “Women like Princess Kaguya actually show up in a lot of stories from around the world. Now then,” She looked over at Ann. “Takamaki-chan.”

Ann blinked and sat up in her seat. She usually wasn’t called on in class.

“What do people generally call a woman who has a charm that sometimes leads men to their doom?”

“A...femme fatale?” Ann answered hesitantly, blue eyes darting around the room. "Right..?"

The teacher clapped. “That’s right, the answer is femme fatale. Good job, Takamaki-chan.”

The model twirled her hair, smiling jubilantly at getting it right.

“Literally translated, it means “fatal woman.”” Kawakami-sensei explained. “Some famous examples are the witch Morgan le Fay from Arthurian legend and Queen Salome from the Bible. Not to mention the wild, seductive dancer of opera, Carmen.”

The three thieves blinked. Carmen? Wasn’t that…?

Two pairs of eyes bore into Ann’s back, and she turned back to them and shrugged, looking just as surprised as them.

Airi hummed, tapping her mechanical pencil against her notebook. Were all their Personas based off of famous figures in history? Scratching lead against paper, she made a note to do some research.

“...Let me just warn you that exams aren’t so easy that you can pass them with a single night of
cramming. Take your time and make sure you understand the material, OK?” Kawakami-sensei advised, before starting their lesson.

Morgana wiggled itself a little out of Akira’s desk, looking up at him with one blue slit. “...You heard her. Must be tough being a student. Well, you have nothing to lose from studying.” It lightly smacked its tail against his thigh. "Give it all you’ve got."

Akira huffed and nodded slightly, glancing over at his neighbor. With her help, he knew that he would do well.

Giving him a wave, Airi left for work, saying it was going to be a short shift. He would have went with but there weren’t any open shifts at the convenience store today.

Sighing silently, he shouldered his bag and walked around in the hallways for a while, looking at all the clubs the school offered. Maybe he should join one. Then again...

He glanced at Fujiwara and Ando who stood near the doors of their class, unaware of his gaze. "Hey, I totally forgot, but Kurusu-kun hasn't been expelled, has he?"

Ando shushed her. "Hey, not so loud. He's been showing up pretty regularly, so it looks like he'll be sticking around."

Fujiwara oohed, covering her mouth. "I see. So is the thing about him having a criminal record not true, then?"

Ando shrugged, looking uncomfortable. "I don't know, I'm too scared to ask. Anyway, it's probably best not to get too involved with him."

"But Kimisawa-senpai hangs out with him all the time...Wouldn't that mean he's OK?"

She rolled her eyes. "Senpai's got guts, that's for sure. Maybe he's blackmailing her..."

He pursed his lips, walking in the opposite direction of them. ‘People are still afraid of me…’ He thought resignedly. It wasn’t as if it was a huge difference to before his arrest. He didn’t have anyone he could call friends back in his hometown, any teachers who liked him, his parents...

He closed his eyes. Did they even remember he existed? It’s not like they’ve tried to contact him since shipping his clothes here.

He smiled bitterly to himself. It’s ironic that his arrest actually improved his life, in a way. Even though people were afraid of him, he gained new friends, ones who understood and actually liked him, and a new power to stand up against the injustices done to them and others.

“Hey, what are you stopping for?” Morgana whispered, swatting his shoulder blade from inside the bag.

Rolling his eyes, he started walking again.

After two hours or so of browsing clubs and getting shaky rejections from the club presidents, he made his way to the rooftop, Ann and Ryuji already waiting for him. Joining them as the sun set in the sky above them, he let Morgana out and leaned against one of the large air conditioning units, peeking at the phone in the ex-runner's hand which was open to the Phan-Site.
Tilting his chair back, Ryuji sighed. “None of these posts are any good. Everyone’s just bitchin’ about their parents or their boyfriends.” He complained sullenly. “There ain’t even a hint of a hint about a new Palace…” He propped his feet on top of a desk.

Ann leaned forward from her seat on a vent shaft. “We can’t get everything online…” She reasoned glumly. “Finding a post with a name and location is asking a lot…” She shook her head, her ponytails whipping around.

Akira sighed and stared up at the orange sky. Going from Kamoshida’s Palace to no action at all was so anticlimactic. Maybe he should text Airi for Mishima’s number and ask him…

Ryuji stretched. “Guess we just gotta find one ourselves then!”

Licking a paw, Morgana gave him an unimpressed look. “Are you seriously suggesting we look for a target that even the police have overlooked?”

Akira raised an eyebrow at it. “You can’t count on the police to find anything on their own. They had no idea about Kamoshida.”

The feline gave him an appraising look, before nodding in acquiesce.

Ryuji sighed. “...Well, we should prolly just hold off ‘til exams are done with, huh? We can wait and see for a little longer, then worry about comin’ up empty handed if it happens…”

A creak echoed throughout the rooftop, and four pairs of eyes snapped to the door. Morgana leapt off the desk and up onto the air conditioning unit Akira was leaning against, out of eyesight.

“Oh…” Ann uttered in surprise.

A female student walked up to them, her short brown hair fluttering in the breeze, held in place with a braided band at the top of her head. She brushed her black vest of any dust and adjusted her stance on her brown boots. “This place is off limits, you know.” She raised a sharp eyebrow at the group, her red eyes silently questioning them.

Akira observed the newcomer. ‘She’s not in our grade…’ He deducted, narrowing his eyes.

Ryuji watched her warily. “...We’ll get outta here once we’re done chattin’. ” He replied, mouth tightening. “Anyways, what’s Miss Council President want with us?”

Akira blinked. This was Niijima-senpai? Airi's superior in the student council?

Said student council president tucked her hair behind an ear. “The troublemaker, the girl of rumor, and the infamous transfer student...Interesting combination.” She remarked calmly, eyeing around the rooftop. “Is Kimisawa-kouhai not here? She’s usually seen with you as well...To think that Ms. Perfect would hang around such a group.”

Affronted, Ann glared at the upperclassman, pink lips molding into a sneer. “Great way to start a conversation…” She muttered.

Red pupils slid to him, and Akira straightened up, resting his hands in his pockets. “By the way…” Makoto began, crossing her hands in front of her hip. “It seems as though you got to know Kamoshida-sensei pretty well.” She commented.

“Not really.” He answered coolly.
“Yeah, y’know he’s only been here a month or so.” Ryuji defended.

“Hm…” Makoto hummed, observing the bespectacled student like a hawk. “I heard Kamoshida-sensei used a volleyball team member to spread details of your past record. Don’t you hate him? Kamoshida-sensei, I mean.”

He hooded his eyes at her obvious digging. “What’s interesting is that you still refer to him as a teacher, even knowing he did terrible things to the students.” He shot back.

Taken aback, she opened her mouth. “I…"

Ryuji leaned forward in his chair, resting his elbows on his thighs. “What’s all this about? My friend here’s an upstanding guy.”

Makoto crossed her arms. “I don’t mean to offend. Many students have been shaken up by what happened with Kamoshida-sen,” She paused. “Kamoshida.” She corrected. “The rumors about that odd, calling card-esque posting aren’t going away either.”

The blonds glanced at one another. “I didn’t expect someone like you would care about that tactless stuff, Niijima-senpai.” Ann stated, lifting her eyebrows at the brunette.

“I dunno that it was tactless…” Ryuji murmured, crossing a leg. He turned back to the upperclassman. “Anyways, we done here? We can’t leave if you keep talkin’ to us.”

Akira snorted silently. Can always count on Ryuji to get straight to the point.

The brunette glared. “At least try to understand my position. Being forced to deal with this horseplay…”

Ann glared at her incredulously. “Horseplay…?!” She hissed.

Composing herself, the student council president directed a thin smile at them. “Ah yes, by the way…It’s been decided that this place will be closed off due to the incident. I heard some people are coming up here without permission, after all.” She stated sardonically. “…I’m sorry to have interrupted you. When you have time, please tell Kimisawa-kouhai that I want to see her on Monday.” She turned and walked away, closing the door behind her.

Standing up, Ann glared at the door. “What was that about?” She huffed. “And what the hell does she need Airi for? I hope she’s not in trouble…”

Morgana jumped down, landing on a desk. “…She’s on to us.” It stated grimly. “That girl seems rather sharp. We should be cautious of her.”

Ryuji leaned forward in his seat. “She really pisses me off!” He growled.

“We’ll have to be careful.” Akira stated, leaning against the unit. “If she’s figured us out…” He pursed his lips at the thought.

The ex-runner slammed back against his chair. “Talk about a pain in the ass…” He groaned. “Who wants to tell Airi about this?”

Ann’s hand shot up in the air. “I vote Akira!” She shouted quickly, grinning at him knowingly.

He gave her an odd look. Why did she keep doing that? “Fine.” He replied, taking his phone out of his pocket.
Ak: We just ran into Niijima-senpai.
Ai: ??? Did something happen?
Ak: She’s on to us. She might have figured out we’re the phantom thieves.
Ai: Oh no...Well, we can’t really do anything about that except be careful.
Ai: Did she say anything else?
Ak: She said she was looking for you.
Ai: I guess she wants to question me herself.
Ai: Thanks for telling me.
Ai: I have to get back to work. My shift is ending soon.

Turning off the screen, he put his phone away.

Morgana flicked an ear. “That reminds me...Study hard. Especially you, Ryuji. There are bound to be traps that will need to be solved with brains.” It warned. “Keep in mind that everything you do in your daily lives has an impact on your abilities.”

Ann tapped her chin. “True, studying won’t be so bad if we just think of it as helping us prepare to be phantom thieves.” She proclaimed optimistically. “Plus, we’ve got the smartest student in our grade to help us!”

Ryuji stood up from his seat, resting his thumbs in his pockets. “I guess you got a point...But man, it’s just so lame...” He rubbed his head. "I was all fired up about helpin’ people, not about studyin.’...”

Morgana purred. “Well, I do have somewhere interesting to show you beforehand.” It announced. “You guys did originally promise to help me out with my mission, after all. Is Airi getting off work yet?”

Akira nodded. “She said she’ll be done soon. Should I tell her to meet us somewhere..?” He adjusted his glasses.

It nodded. “Tell her to meet us at the station square in Shibuya. Let’s go!” It jumped off the table and padded to the rooftop door.

“What..?” Ryuji rubbed his head cluelessly. The teens followed after it, Akira sending a quick text to Airi.
“What’re you bringin’ us here for?” Ryuji questioned.

They were standing next to the tram car across from the Hachiko statue, with the punk sitting down on the dirty bricked ground. People walked by to and from Shibuya station, adults standing a couple meters away in the smoking area enjoying a break. The sun was beginning to set and the sky was a nice gradient of orange and blue, casting shadows on the tall buildings that surrounded them.

“I’ll tell you once Airi arrives.” Morgana answered vaguely, laying down on the ledge of the station staircase that led underground.

With a sigh, he hunched his back, resting his arms against his propped legs.

“Sorry I’m late!”

They turned to see Airi running up to them, slightly out of breath. “There was this customer and she wanted her bouquet exactly how she imagined it.” She rolled her eyes exasperatedly. “She yelled at me when she saw the red rose was just a centimeter too large…”

Ann wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “There there…let’s go to the spa after exams, yeah?” She comforted, looking at her sympathetically.

“Please.” Airi beamed, resting her head on the model’s shoulder. “So what are we doing?” She asked curiously.

Getting up on its paws, Morgana jumped down in front of them. “One of you take out your phone and go on the phan-site.” It requested.

Ryuji took his out. “All right, I’ve got the Phantom Aficionado Website up. Now what?”

They grouped together, looking down at the phone. “Look for a post with a full name in it.” It instructed patiently, licking a paw.

He rolled his eyes. “I already said there’s no info on any big shots. Don’t you remember?” He sighed. “But man, people actually go put someone’s real name on here. That’s some scary shit…”

Ann rescinded her arm and took her phone out as well, scrolling through the forum posts. “He won’t listen to what I say’…No wait, there’s no name on this one.” She stated absentmindedly.

Sighing, Airi turned to her neighbor. “So what did Niijima-senpai say exactly?” She whispered, not wanting to break their concentration.

Akira leaned against the ledge. “She implied that we were responsible.” He pursed his lips. “She also sort of insulted us too...she sarcastically called you “Ms. Perfect.””

Airi furrowed her brow, taken aback. “Wow...I didn’t know Niijima-senpai thought of me like that.” She murmured morosely, a bit of hurt shining in her eyes.

Akira rested his hand on her shoulder, comforting her. “Are you guys close?”
She scrunched up her face. “Ehh...Kind of? As fellow student council members, we know we can rely on each other. I trust in her ability to take care of things as council president. Other than that though...” She shrugged. “I don’t have many opportunities to talk to her outside of duties, since she’s an upperclassman. I do know her sister is a public prosecutor though.”

Akira nodded in understanding.

Ryuji perked up. “‘Someone’s bad-mouthin’ me in online chat rooms...This one’s got a name.’

“Ignore those. Aren’t there any posts about more serious trouble?” Morgana yawned.

“I don’t know what to do about my ex who’s stalking me. His name is Nakanohara Natsuhiko.’” Ann read, furrowing her brow. “It says he’s a teller at City Hall.”

“What a mouthful.” Akira commented sarcastically, idly tapping the ground with the front of his foot. Airi snickered.

“A government worker’s stalkin’ someone...?” Ryuji exclaimed incredulously, a look of disgust smearing his features.

“That should be a suitable target.” Morgana nodded. “All right, now get the Meta-Nav ready.”

He perked up. “We’re just gonna jump right into a Palace? Fine by me!” He grinned, doing as he was instructed.

“Hey!” Ann snapped. “What happened to all that talk of “unanimous decision”? What do you think we should do, Akira?” She asked, turning to the other two. “Airi?”

Akira nodded. “Let’s go. We need to do this.”

Airi nodded as well. “Stalkers usually get impatient sooner or later, so we should help her out.”

Ryuji grinned at him. “That’s what I’m talkin’ about!”

Airi tilted her head. “Nakanohara is only stalking one person, right? Is that distorted enough for a Palace...?”

The ex-runner looked at her in shock. “Dude, of course it’s wrong!”

She huffed. “I didn’t say it wasn’t, but Kamoshida had several distorted desires, and he had over ten victims. This seems much smaller by comparison.”

Morgana smiled at her reasoning. “Very sharp, Airi.” It commended. “You’ll see!”

Ryuji looked at her confusedly, before shrugging. “We need a name and a place, right? So the name is...”

"Actually,” Morgana interrupted. “We don’t need a location this time. Just enter exactly what I say. The keyword is...”Mementos.””

Airi blinked. “Mementos...?” The name didn’t ring any bells in her head.

“Huh?” Ryuji squinted his eyes at the feline. "What're you tryin' to pull?"

Morgana pouted. “Just listen to me. It should work...I think.” It whispered the last part.
“Geez, that again..?” Ryuji sighed resignedly. “Uhhh…”M-e-m-e-n-t-o,” was it?” He entered it into the search bar.

The phone pinged, confirming it.

He shot up from his seat. “We got a hit?!”

They all looked at the phone in surprise. “Just as I thought!” Morgana purred satisfactorily.

The air around them fizzed like TV static, the colors fading into red and purple. For once, no one panicked while they were transitioning through. The buzzing feeling faded, along with every person who was in the vicinity.

They looked around with wide eyes. “Everyone disappeared..!” Ann gasped.

“Are we in the Metaverse? But everything looks exactly the same…” Airi pondered, her eyes roaming the surroundings. The only thing that was different was that there wasn't anyone else aside from them. It was weird to see the busy station turn into a ghost town...

Ann nodded slowly. “It...kind of feels like I’m walking on air..?!”

Taking a few steps, Ryuji spun around. “Is this that Nakanohara guy’s Palace?” He questioned incredulously.

Morgana hummed in amusement. “That’s half right, but half wrong.” It answered. “This is a type of Palace, but it’s different from the normal ones.”

Akira stared at it questioningly. “How so?” He asked, idly tweaking a strand of hair.

It padded toward the stairs. “Come on, let’s head down. The Shadows here lurk underground.” It stated. “I don’t quite understand why. It may be because they’re drawn to something.”

Ann played with a ponytail. “Underground..? How are we going to get there?”

Airi walked toward the stairs, going down a few steps. “How we usually do, right? Everything looks normal so far…” She looked to the feline.

It nodded in confirmation. “You use it every day on your way to school. Follow me!” It dashed down the stairs, Airi following it at a slower pace.

“Ah! Wait up!” Ryuji yelped, the three running after them.

"The hell is this place..?” Skull questioned, looking around disconcertingly.

What was supposed to be the Shibuya underground station was instead some sort of hellish parody of it. The lights were extremely dim, barely illuminating the red halls. The TV screens all showed static, buzzing constantly in an unsettling manner. The most disturbing aspect was the mass of red-black veins, growing like cancer on the walls, ceilings, and everything in between.

Cringing away from the carnage, Elegant moved closer to Joker, feeling a little nauseous.

Turning around, Skull took a step back in shock, looking at his teammates. “Wait, our clothes changed?!”
They gazed down at themselves, wearing their usual thief outfits. “The Shadows know we’re here?!” Panther shrieked, looking at the others incredulously.

They all turned to Mona who was standing on a turnstile. It nodded. “Since the moment we stepped in.” It confirmed.

“You should’ve told us!” Skull complained, glaring at it.

“We’re still safe right here.” Mona assured. “I’ve come to investigate a number of times. Shadows never come up to this floor. But it’s a different story once you go down. This place is simply teeming with them.”

Elegant tilted her head. “Why is that? Is there something deeper that draws them, like some sort of magnetic force?”

Mona smiled. “You’re on a roll today, Elegant! Yes, there seems to be. I haven’t checked that far, but Mementos continues deep underground.”

Panther held up her pink gloved hands in a stop motion. “OK, more importantly, what is this Mementos?!” She asked irritably. "It’s about time you start explaining."

Placing its paws on its hips, it stared at them grimly. “Mementos is...everyone’s Palace.” It announced.

Skull looked at his teammate in confusion. “Huh? Whaddya mean “everyone’s”..?” He asked hesitantly.

“As Elegant guessed earlier, a Palace as grand as the previous castle only forms when a person’s wishes are extremely distorted.” It explained. "So, instead of many individual Palaces, the general public has one gigantic shared Palace. That’s where we are now...Mementos.”

Ruby eyes covered in silver lace widened. “Wait, everyone’s? There’s over 37 million people living in this city!” Elegant exclaimed.

It nodded. “Who knows how far down it goes with so many people.”

The humans looked at each other uncertainly, unnerved at the revelation. “Now that you mention it, this place feels a bit different from Kamoshida’s Palace…” Panther commented hesitantly.

“When you say shared,” Skull began. “...You mean they’re all put together? Even though they’re just strangers..?” He asked warily.

“Think of it as the collective unconscious...No, never mind.” Mona sighed despondently. "You wouldn’t understand that.”

Joker pursed his lips, looking around their surroundings with a new approach. ‘This is what Tokyo’s like metaphysically..?’ He pondered, disturbed. How would his home town look like?

“I have another question…” Elegant began hesitantly, looking around. “This is just Tokyo’s...right? Does this mean every town and city have their own Mementos..?” She furrowed her brow at the thought. She knew every person had their own distorted thoughts, but to see it with her own eyes...

Mona shrugged. “All of Tokyo's inhabitants are in here, though I'm not sure if it includes other territories...” It answered unhelpfully. "It's possible this isn't the only Mementos, but this is the one
where all the Shadows congregate to."

Skull groaned, clutching his head. “Ugh, this is too much…”

Panther took a few steps, looking around. “So what you’re saying is...Using this place, we can even change the hearts of people who don’t have a Palace?” She asked, a hopeful glint in her eyes.

The feline thief nodded and smiled. “Correct! The steps to do so are slightly different though.”

Skull walked near the inoperative escalators leading down into the abyss. “But this place looks pretty huge. Are we gonna be able to get around just by walkin’...?” He questioned, scratching the back of his head.

With a jump, Mona landed a few feet away from its teammates, crossing its arms. “It seems the time has finally come…” It announced dramatically.

They turned to look at it questioningly.

With a firm expression on its cartoonish face, it struck several super sentai poses, paws out. “Morganaaaa...Transfoooorm!” It yelled, jumping into the air. A puff of smoke enveloped it, and a black bus fell, landing noisily on the tiles.

The humans all took a step back in shock, gaping at their now vehicular teammate.

The bus had one yellow stripe extending from its hood to its rear, blue orbs floating in front as its headlights. The license plate read “2-22”, a golden cat emblem as its brand logo, and had a cat tail in the back near the exhaust pipe.

Its exterior moved around. “Come now, Panther, Elegant. Ladies first.” Mona purred, the sound more similar to an engine now than a cat.

“A car...?!” Panther yelped, flabbergasted.

“No way!” Skull squawked, staring with wide eyes.

Joker stared, barely comprehending what just happened. ‘What the fuck…’ He thought.

“Uhh…” Elegant articulated, not blinking.

“This comes from the way cognition materializes in the Metaverse, plus a bit of extra training.” Mona explained, its voice coming through clearly even as an automobile. “It’s not dissimilar to how you guys transform.”

Skull flailed his arms. “You turnin’ into a car is totally different than our clothes changin’!” He shouted.

Elegant continued to stare, tilting her head. ‘Why does this seem familiar…’

The car jumped, its wheels bouncing in and out of its axles. “For some reason, “cats turning into buses” is an extremely widespread cognition among the general public.” Mona explained.

“Why a bus though?” Panther asked, crossing her arms.

The bus jumped, as if it shrugged. “...No idea.”

“Wait.” Skull interjected. “Why didn’t you do this at the castle?!”
“I would have if I could!” It replied, shaking its metal doors. “But that castle was cramped, there were tons of stairs, and no way this fits on top of a chandelier!”

Joker snorted. “We could have ran Kamoshida over with this.”

A gasp sounded out, and they all turned to Elegant. “Oh!” She exclaimed, eyes shining with elation. “This is from My Neighbor Totoro!!!” She clapped her hands happily. “It’s been so long since that movie came out, I almost forgot!”

Realization dawned on their faces. “Ooh! That’s where this is from!” Panther gasped.

“Whoa...I forgot about that old thing. Who votes for a movie night?” Skull proclaimed. “Maybe Mona will get why he’s a bus!”

The cat bus tilted. “Is that where the concept comes from?”

Joker nodded, a nostalgic look on his face. “It’s been a long time since it came out but it’s internationally famous.”

“I love Studio Ghibli movies...” Elegant gushed, her purple gloved hands holding the sides of her face dreamily.

Joker smiled sheepishly, sweatdropping. “Yeah, you play the music, right?” He asked.

She nodded happily. “They were the highlights of the week with the younger kids.”

Skull slumped. “You’re makin’ me want to watch ‘em all again...C’mon, let’s go!” He rushed to the back, opening a door.

“Hey, Skull! Ladies first!” Panther yelled indignantly, running after him and wrestling him off.

“Stop pullin’ me! That’s dangerous!” The pirate scolded.

The bus shook violently. “Panther! Please be gentle!” Mona yelped.

Walking calmly, Joker opened the other side and took a seat next to Skull. “All aboard, let’s go!” The punk cheered, leaning back in his seat.

Panther looked out the window at Elegant, who still stood outside. “Hey Elegant, are you going to come in?” She called out.

Hesitantly, she grasped the door handle, opening the driver’s seat. “Uhh…” She uttered, furrowing her brow in discomfort. “What am I touching…? Am I going to be sitting on your insides, Mona? Am I going to hurt you?” She asked worriedly.

“Don’t worry, Elegant! I trust you to drive me.” The vehicle chirped.

She blinked. “I have to drive…?”

The headlights blinked. “Yeah, I’m a car, remember? I’m not going anywhere unless someone drives me.”

“You can’t drive yourself?!” Skull cried out from his seat.

Panther looked at her teammates. “Do any of us know how to drive?” She questioned.
Joker straightened up. “Time to bust my moves.” He announced, pulling the door open and getting into the front bench.

Sweatdropping, Panther stared at him perturbedly. “...Uh, safety first, OK?” She muttered awkwardly.

“You’d better not smash up my beautiful face, you hear me?!” Mona warned.

Narrowing her eyes, Elegant got into the driver’s seat first, holding a purple gloved hand in front of her leader’s face. “No. I am not letting any of you drive unless you’ve taken your driver’s test. Have you?” Her eyes zeroed in on Joker’s.

“N-No...” He sweatdropped, staying in the passenger side. "I've only driven racing games..."

Sighing, she reached down and turned on the engine with a flick of the switch. The vehicle turned on, engine purring. “Haha, that tickles!” The bus shivered. “Oh, there...That feels sooo gooood...”

Staring at the controls with horror, she hesitantly gripped the steering wheel. ‘What am I touching..?!’ She screamed in her mind, sitting stiffly.

Panther leaned against the front seats, right behind Elegant. “We’ll leave the driving to you then!” She cheered. “I trust your driving skills more than Joker’s.”

Said thief turned and gave her a flat expression. "Thanks."

Skull shook his head. “Uh, is that purrin’ I hear..? What a creepy-ass car!” He cracked.

“Don’t underestimate my meowtary engine. We’re going full throttle! It’s time to fly!” Mona declared underneath them.

With a shrug, Elegant stepped on the pedal, driving onto the train tracks. The station gave way to a foreboding and dark tunnel, the winds vacuuming stray metal and scraps pass them.

“Man...This place totally does feel like a Palace...” Skull marveled, looking out the window.

“Yeah, I guess it’d be strange driving on the tracks like this in the real world...” Panther reasoned. “Anyway, Nakanohara’s somewhere in here, right?”

The engine rumbled. “Most likely in a segment of his own creation. Don’t worry, it won’t be the size of a Palace. Our next step is to find an entrance to that segment.”

“And what’s this entrance gonna look like?” Skull asked, shifting in his seat.

“I have no idea, but strong distortions should be a pretty obvious visual clue.” Mona confessed.

“So we just gotta go wanderin’ around for it then? What a goddamn pain in the ass...” He groaned, leaning his head against the back rest.

“Hey, at least you’re not the one driving into hell.” Elegant retorted, changing the shift.

“I can take over if you need a break.” Joker offered, smirking slightly.

“No.” She replied flatly.

Stepping on the pedal, they drove down the winding tunnels, looking curiously at every path. Occasionally they hit dead ends, forcing them to turn around.
One dead end actually held a treasure chest. “Oh, a treasure chest! Joker, go get it!” Skull grinned.

The leader leapt out of the vehicle, pocketing the treasure and jumping back into his seat.

“So there’s treasure down here, too...:” Elegant remarked, reversing the bus.

Driving down the track, they saw something move in the hazy darkness. “Is that...?” Panther trailed off, squinting at the lumbering figure that walked back and forth around the tunnel.

“It’s a Shadow! Let’s sneak up on it!” Mona advised.

“Wait, what? Do I just...slam you into its back?” Elegant questioned, hesitantly looking down at the steering wheel.

“Yes. We’ll catch it off guard like that, then we can kill it!” It answered.

Disturbed eyes looked over at her leader and Joker shrugged in response. He had no idea what to say either.

Shaking her head lightly, Elegant slammed her foot against the pedal, ramming Mona’s bumpers against the figure. It flew into the air and landed in a heap, and the thieves quickly got out of the bus to fight. “Now’s our chance to fight! Go!” Mona urged, changing back into its cartoonish cat form.

The Shadow looked to be a black inky figure with multiple white masks, before it convulsed and turned into its true form. The shadows drew back, revealing slimes, and they made quick work of the weak enemies.

“They were too weak.” Panther remarked as they got back inside the Mona bus.

Joker took out his phone to check the Meta-Nav. “We’re in the Path of...” He squinted at the unfamiliar word. “Qimranut..? Area 1.”

Skull leaned against the front seat. “Wazzat supposed to mean?” He questioned, scratching the side of his head.

“I don’t actually know...” Mona answered glumly. “But if it says Area 1, it must be there are other areas after it.”

Driving down the tunnel, out of the corner of his eye, Joker saw something flicker. “Stop!” He called out. Elegant pressed against the brakes, slowing the car to a stop. “Is that it?” He pointed toward the swirling red vortex.

The train tracks near it looked like they were being sucked in. Black and red blended together as the portal rotated into itself, leading to who knows where. “Dude, the hell is this...?” Skull narrowed his eyes at the entrance. “It’s all wavy and shit.”

“This is the place... I sense the target up ahead.” Mona confirmed. “Now, are we ready?”

Elegant looked at her passengers. They all nodded. Shifting the gear, she drove straight into the vortex. Coming out the other side, she slammed the brakes. Through the windows, they saw a shadowy figure of a man standing in the center of the room. Coming through the walls and ceilings were red tubes that twisted down a separate tunnel, pulsing gently but disturbingly...like a heartbeat.
Elegant narrowed her eyes. ‘They look almost like veins…’ She observed, feeling a shiver go down her spine. She didn’t like it.

They jumped out of the car. “She’s mine...” They could hear resonating throughout the room, echoing down from the person in the center. “That must be Nakanohara’s Shadow.” Mona remarked, changing back into its normal bipedal form.

“Lemme see. Some front desk guy at City Hall became a stalker, right?” Skull asked, readying his steel covered bat.

Panther glared at the Shadow. “I don’t know how much evil he’s done, but we have to do something if he’s bothering other people.”

“Let’s go.” Joker commanded. The thieves ran up directly in front of the Shadow, readying their weapons.

“Who are you?! The man shouted. It was a typical Japanese salaryman, with a bowlcut and rectangular glasses. His venomous yellow eyes glared darkly at them.

“Are you that stalker?! Haven’t you ever stopped to consider how your ex feels?” Panther yelled, stomping her heel.

Nakanohara swung his arm. “She’s my property! I can do whatever I want with her!” He snarled. "It’s not like she didn’t treat me like a plaything! What’s wrong with me doing the same?!"

Skull glared at their target. “You can’t treat someone like shit just ‘cause they did it to you! What a load of crap…” He grumbled. “We’re gonna change the hearts of all the bastards like you!” He stomped his foot.

“There are millions of people far worse than me!” Nakanohara retorted.

“That doesn’t excuse you, you’re still doing the wrong thing.” Elegant narrowed her eyes.

He sneered. “What about Madarame…? He stole everything from me, but you’re letting him off the hook?!” He yelled indignantly.

The thieves were taken aback. Who? “…Madarame? The hell’s this guy goin’ on about?” Skull scratched his head.

Joker frowned. ‘That name sounds familiar…’

With a burst of black, the man transformed into an Obariyon, the little troll dancing around in front of them.

“Get ready! Here he comes!” Mona shouted from the back as they all readied their weapons.

“Now that I finally have what’s rightfully mine...I’m not going to let you take it away…” Nakanohara spoke. “Look...This is a winner-takes-all world. Come fight me and I’ll show you what I mean!”

Taking his gun out, Joker shot a bullet at the Shadow. “Go down!” He shouted. It barely fazed the target, only leaving a scratch as it bounced in place.

Rushing up to it, Panther swung her whip, flogging the enemy several times and leaving black wounds all over its body.
“Let me!” Elegant cried out, following up her teammate’s attack by slashing Nakanohara with her scythe. Spinning several times, she jumped up and struck down with the tip of her scythe.

Getting back up, the Shadow rushed at the noblewoman, hitting her several times with his fists. She grunted, wincing at the hits but didn’t falter.

“Captain Kidd!” Skull shouted, the ghostly pirate floating behind him. “Take this!” He sent a Zio, the shock of lightning critically injuring him.

The obariyon fell to the ground, dizzy. “They’re on the ground! Nice going, Skull!” Mona complimented from the back.

They rushed up, holding their target at gunpoint. Nakanohara stayed silent, glaring at them from underneath his fringe.

Exhaling, Joker flipped back and commenced the attack, the others following after him. Hitting it several times, the Shadow finally fell down.

Landing on his back, Skull flipped himself upright, holding up a rock sign. “Oh yeah!” He grinned viciously.

In a splash of inky liquid, the Shadow disappeared, revealing the teller again who was holding his chest in defeat. “I-I was wrong...Please forgive me…” Nakanohara whispered, looking at them shamefully. “That evil teacher used me, then threw me out on the street. That’s what caused my fixation on her…”

Joker furrowed his brow. “Evil teacher?” He repeated.

“Huh? Could it be that Madarame guy he was talkin’ about earlier?” Skull questioned, shifting his feet.

The Shadowed man nodded. “Yeah...I just didn’t want anyone to throw me out again…” He murmured timidly.

Panther crossed her arms. “So some selfish bastard was making you suffer too…” She whispered, looking at the man sympathetically. “Still, you shouldn’t have dragged an unrelated woman into your mess.”

Elegant nodded in agreement. “Please go and apologize to her. Learn from your mistakes.”

Nakanohara nodded sullenly. “Yes, I know that now. I’ll put an end to my love for her…” He looked up at Joker thoughtfully. “...Hey, you can change people’s hearts, right? In that case... Won’t you change Madarame’s heart?! Before more people fall victim to him...” He pleaded. A glowing blue light slowly enveloped him and he disappeared, leaving ¥7200 as well as a ball of treasure floating in front of the thieves.

“Change...Madarame’s heart?” Panther repeated, blinking her eyes.

“Hm? What’s that shinin’ thing?” Skull asked, walking up to the ball of light.

“It’s the bud of a Treasure.” Mona answered, crossing its paws. “Had we left it be, it very well may have blossomed into a Palace. Joker, this will make a perfect reward!” It cheered.

Nodding, Joker walked up to the Treasure and grabbed it with one hand. Unfurling his fingers, he observed the Attachment Pearl charm.
“So Nakanohara had a change of heart, right?” Skull looked at Mona.

It nodded. “Most likely.”

Panther blinked. “But how are we supposed to know if we succeeded?” She pressed.

Skull crossed his arms. “The lady posted the dude’s name online. If he really does change, she’ll prolly comment again.” He reasoned. “Either way though, trainin’ against Shadows down here’s the best! It’s great prep for our next target!”

“It’s also nice to be able to give courage to the people who post their problems online.” Panther added, playing with a ponytail.

Elegant nodded. “Maybe when people see her fulfilled request, they’ll post more serious problems too.” She dusted off her gloved hands.

Mona jumped. “On top of that, we can sell whatever treasure we get for some cold, hard cash!” It grinned covetously.

Skull rolled his shoulder. “Sounds like things are goin’ pretty great for us!” He laughed.

Joker raised a brow. “More money is always good.” He agreed.

Elegant rolled her eyes. “We’re going to break the economy…” She muttered.

The others ignored her. “All right, we did it!” Skull turned to leave.

“Hold on.” Mona called out. They turned to look at the feline. “There’s somewhere I want to show you guys before we leave.” It announced somberly.

“Are we going deeper..?” Elegant asked hesitantly.

It nodded, jumping in place. “Don’t worry, it won’t take long.” It assured, walking over to the vortex. “Why don’t we leave this room first?”

They nodded, and Mona transformed back into a bus. They walked back to the car, Elegant glancing back at the pulsing tubes with a thoughtful frown.

“Elegant?” Panther called. They were already back in their seats, looking at her curiously.

Biting her lip, she shook her head. “I’m coming.” She assured, sliding into the driver’s seat and turning on the engine. She shifted gears and drove through the portal. Ending back in the regular tunnels of Mementos, the swirling vortex behind them disappeared, leaving a vein covered wall.

“So? What else do you wanna do?” Skull asked, leaning back in his seat.

“There’s something I’d like to check in an area further down.” Mona stated, the truck rumbling underneath them. "First off, we should look for a platform that’ll let us descend.”

The pirate raised a brow. “Wait, you’ve been here before, right? Don’t you got like a map or something?”

The vehicle shook. “That would hold no meaning in this place. The layout changes every time you enter.”

“Wait, so our path changes too?!” Panther yelped.
"This place is the fused cognition of a countless number of people. It’s constantly shifting. Even so, our destination should be pretty close." The engine purred. "I’m counting on you, Elegant!"

"That's pretty cool…" She marveled. "It’s like Tokyo the city is alive, and the people who live in it are just parts of it."

Joker tilted his head. "Like blood cells?" He inquired.

She nodded enthusiastically. "It’s like Hiruta-sensei’s lessons about biology. How every person is bunched together to make one whole being, which is apparently the Shibuya underground. We should borrow some books from the school library." She suggested.

Skull groaned and flopped back in his seat. “Great, more studyin’…”

Pressing on the gas, they drove down the tunnels, killing Shadows that showed up in their view. Joker acquired a new Shadow, a Jack Frost, and they continued on their way. Turning around a corner, they rammed against a chained door, opening it to reveal an underground station.

“All right! We reached a platform! We can keep going to the next area now!” Mona cheered.

They got out of the car, Mona changing back into its cat form. “H-Hold a sec...You guys hearin’ something?” Skull stammered, his dark eyes darting around.

They stilled, trying to listen over the loud vacuum of wind that was sucking up debris into the darkness of the tunnel. A screeching noise echoed, and they turned their heads in the direction the sound was coming from. On the other side of the platform, a train slowly pulled up, the windows all glowing an ominous red.

“The trains’re totally runnin’!” Skull commented, brows raised in surprise.

“Of course they are." Mona replied. "We’re in the subway, you know.”

Panther looked on incredulously. “Yeah, but I thought this was a Palace.”

“Then maybe this is how the public views this place?" The cat shrugged. "I don’t know.”

She looked at it in horror. “People go through this darkness...every day...?” She whispered.

Joker narrowed his eyes at the train, something inside him screamed at him to be wary. ‘Why is it so unsettling…?’

Clenching her hands in front of her, Elegant took a step back. “It feels...wrong.” She uttered, watching the train cautiously. Shifting himself, Joker shielded her from the view, placing an arm in front.

Skull rubbed his head. “Forget that! You sure we’re cool runnin’ around on these tracks?!”

The feline nodded. “It should be fine as long as we’re not on the same ones...I think.” It shrugged. “I’m no train expert.”

He groaned. “You’ve gotta be kiddin’ me…”

“Anyway,” Mona ignored him. “Let’s head to the lower area. It should be right after we go down that escalator.” It gestured to the inoperative steps that led down the abyss.

Glancing at one another, they headed down toward the next underground level. Landing on another
platform, they gazed ahead.

“All right, there it is! What I want to check is just past there!” Mona cheered. They slowly walked up to what it was talking about.

On both sides of them, trains were running at high speeds, never stopping at their station. To the front was an ominous wall, carved with glowing red symbols in a curved diamond pattern and an upside down triangle. Surrounding the walls were tendrils of black and red veins, as if they were creeping out from the crevices like parasites.

Panther scrutinized it. “...What is this place? It’s kinda creepy.” She remarked hesitantly.

Elegant nodded weakly, feeling her head pound the longer she looked at it. “I’m getting a really bad feeling from it...Like the closer I am to it, the more wrong it is.” She confessed, looking a bit nauseous.

They turned back to her. “You gonna be OK?” Skull asked, concern seeping into his voice.

Taking a deep breath, she nodded. “I’ll manage.” She bit out.

“Tell us if you don’t feel well, we’ll stop.” Joker advised, placing a gloved hand on her shoulder.

She exhaled. “Thanks, but don’t worry. I’m not going to hold us back. This is important, after all.” She smiled reassuringly at her leader who reluctantly nodded.

“Well...” Skull began, looking back at the wall. “It’s a dead end though. Why’s it even exist?” He scratched his head.

“Now hold on...Just watch. This is most likely not an ordinary wall.” Mona reflected, holding out a white paw. “If my hunch is correct...” It ran up and tapped it.

The floor beneath their feet began to rumble and the humans looked around, alarmed. Dust flew into the air as the wall moved, separating into various pieces before folding into the sides, revealing escalators descending below.

“It opened..!” Panther gasped, taking a step closer to look down into the black abyss.

Feeling his phone vibrate, Joker took it out of his pocket. “A new area has been confirmed in the depths. Updating guidance information.” It droned out, the Nav opened to a new screenshot of the location.

Mona jumped in joy. “See?! It’s just as I thought!”

“What do you mean?” Elegant asked, idly grasping her arm.

“That wall wouldn’t budge when I came here by myself before. But it’d be weird for the deepest part of Mementos to be some normal place like this, wouldn’t it?” It explained, waving a paw.

Skull crossed his arms. “So you were thinkin’ there’s gotta be more?”

It bobbed its head. “Yeah! Now that Kamoshida’s Palace is gone and people are actually starting to talk about us...I knew something had to have changed down here!” It proclaimed cheerfully.

Panther peered into the dark depths. “How deep is it? Should we try going further down?”

Elegant grimaced at the thought.
Mona shook its head. “Let’s not. That’s not why we’re here today, remember? We’ve already accomplished our goal. We should head back and I’ll explain more once we’re home.” It urged, hopping back to the up escalators.

Elegant drove them back up to the first platform, and they exited the Metaverse.

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They stood in their previous spot, the sun setting behind them in the Tokyo skyline. “Mementos, huh..? I still don’t really get that place.” Ryuji confessed. “Oh, and what was that wall thing we saw at the end?” He looked at the feline, now in its normal cat form.

It licked its paw. “I’m not entirely sure, but it blocked us from going in past a certain depth.” It disclosed somberly. "If Mementos is the public’s Palace though...it might be affected by the general public’s belief in us.”

Akira shifted his foot, leaning against the cement. “So we can’t go further without more progress, huh.”

Leaning next to him, Airi sighed heavily, rubbing her temple. “Most likely. It’s kind of like a clam, we have to be patient for it to open up to us…”

Gray eyes slid to look at her, narrowing in concern. “Are you OK..?” Akira asked quietly.

She waved him away, trying to blink away the muffled feeling in her head. “Just a headache…”

Giving her a worried glance, Ann shifted her bag. “Why do you know so much about it, Morgana?”

Its ears drooped. “My memories are a little foggy in that regard…” It confessed reluctantly. “However, I need to know what lies in the depths of Mementos, no matter what.”

“No matter what..?” She repeated, raising a brow.

The feline rose up on all fours, its back hunched. “Mementos is not just everyone’s Palace, it’s the source of all Palaces. It used to be that Palaces like Kamoshida’s with one ruler simply didn’t exist. So, if we can do something about the greatest cause of distortions, I’m certain my appearance will...!” It trailed off, looking down solemnly.

Ann gazed at it sympathetically. “You wanted someone to save you too…”

It blinked, bristling defensively. “I-I just needed pawns.” It justified, eyes wide.

With a chuckle, Airi picked up the feline and held it in her arms. “We understand, Morgana.” She spoke softly, petting the top of its head.

It purred, relaxing in her embrace.

Ryuji straightened up. “I see...So that’s why you came pokin’ your nose around with us.” He laced his hands behind his head, a hint of a grin on his lips.

“...I’ll help you. I hope you can regain what you’ve lost.” Ann declared determinedly. Akira nodded as well, showing he was also going to help. Shaking off the class president’s scratching, Morgana looked at them demurely. “I’ll...be relying on you guys.”
The teenagers all smiled at the cat. “By the way, Morgana...are you a boy? Or might you be a
girl?” Ann asked curiously, crossing her arms.

“Could it be a car?” Akira joked, idly tweaking a strand of hair.

The students all grinned. “That is a possibility!” Ann teased.

“I wish I could deny it, but...I just can’t be sure.” Ryuji stated, his face contorting in bewilderment.

“Our little cat bus.” Airi cooed, humming the totoro theme. "Hm hm hm hm hm hmmm..."

Morgana gaped. “Why not?!” It shouted bashfully. “...In any case, of course I’m male!” He announced. “I mean, I...” He looked at Ann timidly, a hint of red on his cheeks.

Ann blinked. “...What is it?” She inquired.

He shook his head. “No...It’s nothing. We’re done talking about that!” He blurted, burrowing into Airi’s neck. She stroked his back, exchanging amused faces with her friends.

“Anyway,” Morgana continued, voice muffled in her blouse. “We now know that we can perform
minor changes of heart in Mementos. If we come across any eye-catching leads, it may be worth
dealing with them for a bit of combat practice.”

Ann shifted in place. “There weren’t any other outstanding ones though…” She stated sullenly.

Ryuji perked up. “I bet we’ll get tons of ‘em if we can change someone famous and make the
Phantom Thieves well-known.” He spurred, grinning at them excitedly. “The big fish are our main
targets after all.”

Morgana snorted, snuggling more into the cellist's inviting warmth. “First, you need to find a way
to get through your exams.”

He slumped. “I gotta study…” He groaned pitifully.

Airi looked up from her petting, letting Morgana down onto the ground. “Well, I’m free now. We
can do our study group today?”

“I’m up for it!” Ann cheered. Akira nodded, smiling slightly.

Ryuji fell to his knees dramatically and hugged her legs. Looking up at her, he teared. “Save me…”
He pleaded.

“Uhh…” Airi sweatdropped, one hand reaching awkwardly to pull down the edge of her skirt. He
was really close to her...

Gray eyes sharpened and Akira grabbed the back of his clothes, pulling him away from the class
president.

“Urk!” Ryuji sputtered, the collar of his shirt choking him. “Dude, what the hell?!” He looked up
at his bespectacled friend indignantly who glared down at him.

Ann rolled her eyes. “Ugh, why are you such a pervert?!” She groaned before walking away. Airi
moved to follow her, shaking her head exasperatedly.

“Hey, wait! What’d I do?!” Ryuji shouted, getting up from the floor and chasing after them.
Huffing, Akira picked Morgana up and put him in his bag, walking calmly after his friends.

Walking with Ann to the turnstiles, Airi tensed. ‘This feeling again…’ She glanced over at her companion, who had an uncomfortable look on her face. “Do you feel that?” She whispered.

The model nodded slightly, her eyes darting around. “I hate this…” She hissed in frustration.

The boys caught up to them and they all walked to the train to Yongenjaya, not mentioning the stalker.

LOOK AT THIS!!!!! I actually follow her on instagram and I didn't know she was following this story! It seriously made my day yesterday! Thank you so much, Yukitalian!

I'm always so happy and delighted to receive any sort of praise or fanart for this story. I never expected this, to be honest. I really only wrote this story for me because (ILOVEAKIRAOSMUCH) but now I'm also writing for all of you! Thank you from my heart for all your love, support, and appreciation!
Chapter End Notes

Super Sentai - Power Rangers, Kamen Rider, etc. Basically TV superheroes.
222 - It's February 22 which is Japan's national cat day. 2 is pronounced Ni, and Ni Ni Ni sounds like Nya Nya Nya which is the Japanese cat sound effect instead of meow.
Chapter 58

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all your wonderful comments yesterday! It has honestly renewed my determination to keep writing this fic!

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---5/7, SATURDAY, EVENING, YONGENJAYA BACKSTREETS

Taking off her shoes once they arrived at her residence, Airi directed them to the dining room. “I’ll make some tea and food for us!” She called out, rushing to the kitchen.

Putting the kettle on the stove, she took out some avocados, chicken, tuna, and greens. Scooping up some rice from the storage bin, she washed the grains gently before placing it in the cooker, pressing the "COOK" button. Turning on the stove, she dripped some cooking oil on the pan, rolling it around so it would cover the entire surface. Letting it heat up, she began slicing the chicken on the cutting board to her right.

“Can I help?”

Startled, she gripped her knife and turned around, pointing it outward to who sneaked up on her.

Akira stared at it in surprise. “Sorry…” He apologized, rubbing the back of his neck.

Shaking her head, she gave him an apologetic smile. “No, I’m sorry. Um, can you wash the vegetables?” She gestured to the cabbage head that was left on the counter.

He nodded, washing his hands before handling the greens. They worked together in peace, letting the sounds of Ann and Ryuji arguing echo down the hall.

“I told you to drop it!”

“I was just askin’, jeez woman!”

“Lady Ann doesn’t need your help!” Morgana's voice interrupted them. "Let me, my lady…”

Akira rolled his eyes. “Do they have to argue all the time?” He sighed as he pushed the chopped cabbage in her direction.

Giggling, Airi rewashed her hands before dumping the chicken and cabbage into the pan, the sound exploding through the kitchen. She turned on the kitchen hood, the vacuum humming loudly.

“They’ve always argued.” She confessed, adding mirin and soy sauce. "Even the first time they met was an argument." Though she would save that story for another time.

He leaned against the counter, watching her cook. “You’re really good at cooking.”

“Hm?” She replied, glancing in his direction. “I couldn’t hear you.” She shouted as she sprinkled
some grounded garlic.

He took a deep breath, “You’re really good at cooking!” He repeated loudly, the loud vacuuming noise from the hood muffling most of his voice.

She smiled shyly, a hint of blush in her cheeks. He complimented her cooking again. “Thank you, I hope it’s OK!” She killed the heat and turned off the hood. “Can you take out some bowls from the cabinet?”

He nodded, crouching to open the drawer doors below the kitchen counters. Grabbing five bowls, he placed them on the flat surface up top. Opening the rice cooker, he scooped the steaming rice into four of them and packed them in.

Turning around from the stove, Airi gently pushed the chicken and cabbage on top, before placing the pan in the sink for later. Slicing the avocados, she placed them to the side of the bowls and sprinkled some dried parsley as a decoration, just like how the cooking show demonstrated. “All right, dinner is served!” She announced. “Can you bring them to the table? I’ll make the tea now.”

Airi nodded. Balancing the bowls in his arm, he slowly maneuvered over to the other side of the room. “Guys, move.” He called out, the two blonds making way for him to place the bowls down onto the table.

Ryuji moaned, drooling at the sight. “Oh, this smell’s amazin’…”

Ann straightened up in her seat in anticipation. “Oh yeah, we didn’t eat earlier…”

Looking up at the table, Morgana tilted his head up at his carrier. “Where’s my share?”

“Right here!” Airi interjected, walking up a moment later. She held a tray of tea as well as a bowl of salmon roe and tuna. “Here you go, Morgana.” She placed the sashimi in front of the feline, and carefully placed the steaming cups of tea onto the table.

“Meeeoowwwwwwww…!” He drooled, gazing at the sashimi with shining eyes.

Passing out the chopsticks, they all sat down. “Itadakimasu!” They said in unison, digging into their food.

Ann moaned, swallowing the soft avocado. “Ugh, I wish I could eat this good everyday…”

“I did offer my bentos.” Airi reminded, taking a sip from her green tea.

“Mmmphgmmg..!” Ryuji added, mouth filled with food.

Ann looked at him with disgust. “Can you not?” She complained.

Swallowing, he rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. “Sorry.” He apologized. “I meant to say it’s so good!”

Akira shook his head, eating his meal. “Compliments to the chef.” He smiled at Airi.

She rolled her eyes lightheartedly. “How do you guys not starve without me?” She joked.

“All that canned cat food…”

Everyone laughed.
Laying down on the floor of the tatami room across from where they were just sat, Ryuji rubbed his stomach satisfactorily. “That was good…” He sighed, closing his eyes.

Ann grinned blissfully, sitting down on the other side. “Thanks again, Airi. We’ll pay you back for all the food!”

Airi laughed. “Don’t worry about it. I’m happy to cook for someone other than myself.” She smiled, taking the cups to the kitchen to refill them with fresh hot tea. Bringing them back, she placed it on the low table. “OK, break’s over. It’s time to study.” She lightly kicked Ryuji’s side.

He groaned, squinting open his eyes to look up at her. He stiffened, gazing up with wide eyes and a dark red flush in his cheeks spread to his ears.

She looked down at him curiously. “What?” Why was he so red?

He gaped. “Y-Your…skirt…” He stammered, still staring unblinkingly.

She scrunched up her face and pulled her shujin skirt down. “I’m wearing shorts underneath!” She defended, quickly moving away to the other side of the room.

“You pervert!” Ann shouted, glaring at him. “What is with you today?!?”

He sputtered, shooting up from the mat. “It’s not my fault! She was standin’ right above me!” He argued. He looked over at Akira for support, but was taken aback at the dark glare he received. “Ryuji…” Akira growled as a warning.

Paling, he clapped his hands in front of him in a prayer. “I’m sorryyyyy…”

Rolling her eyes, Airi slammed her textbooks on the desk. “Let’s begin, Ryuji-kun.” She stated, smiling serenely at him. He let out a whimper, slowly taking his books out.

“What should we start with?” She asked the others.

“I’m kinda shaky with history…” Ann confessed hesitantly, taking out their history textbook.

Airi nodded. “OK, let’s go with that for now.”

They opened their books and began to study, Morgana taking a nap after his delicious meal.

Slamming his forehead against the table, Ryuji sighed. “My brain is fried…” He grumbled.

“Serves you right.” Akira muttered darkly, still writing down notes into the margins of his notes. He wasn’t going to admit that some part of him was jealous that the ex-runner could look up her skirt. He was not sinking to that level.

“Hm?” Ryuji looked over at him, not hearing what he said.

“I said we should take a break.” He lied.

Airi took a sip from her lukewarm tea. “Sure. We went through a lot anyway.”
Ryuji sat up. “But man, forget about the books for now. That Nakanohara guy was a piece of cake.” He commented with a grin. “If we can take down some kinda big target next, we’re totally gonna get famous.”

Ann gave him an unimpressed look. “We’re trying to help people, not get famous!” She refuted, fiddling with her mechanical pencil.

“But if people don’t know who we are,” Ryuji argued. "how’re we gonna give them any courage?“

Sighing, Akira nodded in agreement. “He’s right.” He stated, twirling his pen.

“See?” Ryuji pressed, giving him a thankful look.

She pursed her lips. “I don’t think you’re necessarily wrong...But should we really be doing this at all if we don’t have a reason like with Kamoshida?” She asked hesitantly.

“You mean we shouldn’t be sticking our noses into other people’s business?” Ryuji elaborated. She nodded.

Airi straightened her books. “Well, we’ll just have to find a reason, right?” She smiled slightly. “I mean, the people who send in requests tell us why they want us to change those hearts. If they’re in trouble, we should help out.”

Ann hummed, before acquiescing. “Yeah, I agree with that, and...” She mumbled. "I guess I was glad we were able to solve the stalker case.”

“Plus, what good are our Personas if we don’t use ‘em for good?” Ryuji reasoned, looking at her expectantly.

Akira nodded in agreement. “I want to help people. This is a good way for us to do so.”

Ann nodded. “You’re right, guys. Sorry.”

Ryuji leaned back, resting his hands behind him. “We don’t got much time to be arguing over this either. That Madarame guy bothers me.”

Airi perked up. “Right. I was wondering why that name was so familiar.” She voiced, taking out her phone. After a moment, she flipped it to show the others, opened to a results page. “Madarame Ichiryusai, a renowned Japanese artist known for his vast amount of styles.” She explained. "He’s internationally famous and is holding an exhibit starting next week in Shibuya.”

Ann squinted at the screen, reading the short bio section. “It says he takes in orphans and helps them become artists..? He sounds nice.”

Ryuji frowned. “If he was so nice, why would a guy in Mementos ask for his change of heart then?”

They sat in silence, trying to think of the possibilities.

Akira sighed. “We’ll have to leave it after the exams.” He yielded. “We’re not gonna find anything else until after anyway.”

The others nodded. “Well, let’s keep studying, shall we?” Airi suggested, smiling at her yearmates.

Ryuji groaned, slamming his forehead against the table.
Wearing his usual black sports jacket, white shirt, and blue jeans, Akira sat down on the couch and packed his workout clothes into his bag. He might as well try to train today, maybe call Ryuji too.

His phone rang out. Taking it out of his pocket, he stared at the text message from the unknown number.

???: Hey, I saw on the forum! Nice job sticking it to that stalker!

???: This is Mishima btw.

M: I got your number through Airi-senpai.

M: My Phantom Aficionado Website came in handy, didn’t it?

He huffed in amusement. ‘How resourceful of him…’ He saved the number into his contacts.

Ak: What are you talking about?

M: It’s OK, you don’t have to say it. I know deep down in my heart that it was useful.

He snorted. Morgana looked up at him curiously. Akira tilted the phone so they could both see the screen.

M: Anyway, I’m in Shibuya right now.

M: I’d love it if you could come hear me out about your future actions!

M: I’ll be waiting at the diner in Shibuya. You gotta swing by!

Ak: Got it.

“What is he up to..?” Morgana narrowed his eyes. “Either way, it sounds like he has something important to say. Why not go see what it is?”

Akira nodded, pocketing his phone.

The feline jumped down onto the floor. “I won’t be joining you though. There’s something in Mementos I need to go look into.” It announced, padding to the stairs.

He blinked in surprise. “Do you want any of the others to go with you?” Akira offered, resting his hands in his pockets.

He shook its head. “No. Hopefully Mishima has something useful for you.” He gave him a grin before taking off, darting through a small window above the stairs.

Exhaling through his nose, he shouldered his leather bag and made his way to Shibuya where Mishima was waiting for him outside the Diner. He was wearing a green and white baseball shirt, along with beige cargo slacks, perking up when he noticed his approach. “You made it!”

Akira waved, and the two went upstairs to the Diner, taking a seat at a booth. The waitress came over and took their order for coffee, smiling emptily each time she came by.

“How have things been? You know, with the...special activities?” Mishima yawned, covering his mouth. “Oops, sorry about that. I haven’t been getting a lot of sleep lately.” He apologized, looking at him with half lidded eyes.
Akira raised a brow. “It’s all right.” He waved him away.

He scratched his head. “I’ve been staying up managing the Phan-site all night, every night. I think it’s called...PR?”

He blinked. “...Phan-Site?” Akira asked, adjusting his glasses.

Mishima grinned. “The Phantom Thieves Aficionado Website! Phan-Site for short. You need a catchy name if you want people to notice you. This is all a bit of P-Thieves propaganda!” He cleared his throat. “Basically, there’s no point to taking down bad guys if nobody’s gonna know about it. That’s why I’ve started a blog for posts from people you guys saved, while filtering out the haters.” He explained eagerly. "We need the Phantom Thieves to be seen in the proper light if we want to make the name popular, right?"

Akira smiled slightly. “That sounds pretty tough. You’re doing a good job, Mishima.”

He brightened. “Really?! Just hearing you say that makes my all-nighters worth it!” He grinned. “I hope Senpai appreciates it too…” He whispered, blushing a bit.

Akira narrowed his eyes slightly.

“Though actually, I really wanna know how you punish people...” Mishima rubbed the back of his head. “Don’t worry, I’m not gonna ask. It wouldn’t be any fun if you just up and told me.” He smiled impishly. "After all, the Phantom Thieves have a reputation for being secretive!"

Akira sweatdropped, nodding his head to humor him.

Biting his lip, Mishima looked down at his lap. “I...I wish I could be more like you guys somehow.” He admitted quietly before looking up. “But I’ll still be here to draw attention to the stuff you do!” He stated determinedly. "You can leave that part to me! I’m gonna use my Phan-Site to promote the Phantom Thieves, and weed out any negative comments. Your popularity is gonna be at my mercy,” He paused. "Or uh, my fingertips. It’s like I’ll be your strategic image management representative, so to speak.” He beamed.

Akira blinked. “Sounds cool. You’re really hyped for this.” He remarked, taking sip from his coffee. It wasn't as good as Leblanc but he'd deal.

Mishima perked up. “I knew you’d understand. Anyway, I’m gonna do everything I can to make sure that title’s more than just...for...show...” He slowly closed his eyes, breathing softly.

Hesitantly, Akira reached out a hand and gently shook him. “Drink some coffee, man.”

“Uh!” His eyes snapped open and he yawned. “I’ve gotta say though, managing the Phantom Thieves’s reputation is tiring work…” He muttered tiredly. “The forum gets all sorts of weird posts, including tons of things unrelated to reforming society…” He sighed. “It’d defeat the purpose of the site if the truth of the Phantom Thieves was buried among all that garbage.”

He drank his coffee in one gulp, letting out a small gasp as he put his cup back down. “Oh, but you don’t need to worry. I’ll sort through all the trash.” He promised. “Speaking of which, I’ve actually already found some worthwhile info about our very own school. Our quest to boost your popularity can start close to home!” He grinned. ‘I’ll give it my all!”

Sweatdropping, Akira nodded. “We’ll count on you.” He stated. ‘Mishima seems motivated…’

He nodded. “I hope I can make you and Senpai proud of me...” He blushed and looked away.
‘Is he..?’ Gray eyes darkened behind reflective glass at the mention of "Senpai" again.

Mishima yawned again. “I might be overworking myself though…” He rubbed his hair tiredly. “Man, I’m exhausted...I think I’d fall asleep on the spot if I weren’t talking to you. I should head home…”

Akira nodded and called the waitress over to pay for their bill. Leaving the restaurant, they parted ways once they walked down the stairs and back into Central Street. “See ya later!” Mishima waved, heading underground.

Checking the time, he realized he had the rest of the day to kill. Shrugging, he texted Ryuji to see if he was free.

Ak: You free right now?
R: Yeah!
R: Y’know how I was looking for somewhere good to train?
R: Well, I found a great place! I can practice as much as I want now!
R: This is kinda sudden, but wanna go check it out now?
Ak: Sure, I’ll go.
R: That’s what I’m talking about!
R: There’s a cheap gym in a back alley over in Shibuya.
R: Let’s meet up and I’ll show you the way.
R: Where you at now?
Ak: I’m on Central Street in front of the diner.
R: Gotcha! I’ll be there in a sec!

Putting his phone away, he waited for Ryuji, leaning against the wall next to the diner entrance. “Hey!” He heard.

Turning to look, he saw Ryuji running up to him in his usual clothes. “Let’s go, it’s this way.” He grinned, gesturing over to Big Bang Burger.

They walked over to the alley next to the restaurant. A little further in was a dingy old elevator, and in front of it was a neon green stand with an image of a bodybuilder, the words “Protein Lovers Gym” up top.

“Here we are...Protein Lovers gym!” Ryuji exclaimed, turning back to his friend. “It’s pay per visit, so you don’t gotta worry about any bullshit contracts or something.” He assured excitedly. “The equipment’s kinda crappy, but they got tons of variety. Plus, it’s real damn cheap. Totally worth, even without a pool or a hot tub.”

Bemused, Akira nodded. “Sounds good.”

“Oh yeah!” Ryuji perked up. “You bring your stuff?” He looked at him expectantly.

“...Protein powder?” He answered hesitantly.

Ryuji nodded. “Hell yeah, man. If you wanna beef up, you gotta-” He shook his head. “Wait, that aint it! I’m talkin’ about spare undies! Gettin’ back into your sweaty clothes after a nice hot shower is like, the grossest goddamn thing.” He scrunched his face in disgust. “...Oh, but don’t go gettin’ your hopes up. No way I’m gonna let you use mine.”

Akira sweatdropped. “...Yes, I have a spare.” He answered after a moment.
Ryuji nodded. “Cool, let’s head in.” He gestured to the elevator. They took it up to the third floor where the gym was, paying at the reception.

Sighing heavily, he took the train back to Yongenjaya. Every time he hung out with Ryuji, something always had to happen. This time he met his former Senpai, Ikeda, who was part of the track team back when it was around. To think they would try to reinstate another sports team so soon. Did they even have a gym teacher yet?

Walking down the backstreets, a black blur jumped onto his back. “Huh?!” He stumbled, grabbing whatever landed on him.

“How was your meeting with Mishima? I don’t care if you hang with him, just be sure you get your studying done, OK?” He lectured.

Rolling his eyes, Akira nodded.

He walked into the cafe, the sun setting behind him. Sojiro was the only one in the cafe, cleaning some cups. “That reminds me, the home shopping program is airing today...You wanna check out the TV?” Morgana whispered.

Shrugging, he walked over to the TV. “Hi everyone! It’s time to do some shopping!” The male host announced enthusiastically in front of a colorful background. “Here’s what we’ve got for you today! 50 Adhesive Bandages! Apply them to your wounds and feel yourself get better! We’re selling them for only ¥1980! You get 50 Adhesive Bandages for ¥1980! This is a limited offer, available only for today!” The screen showed a scrolling number on the bottom, trying to entice buyers.

He tilted his head. ‘We could use that in the Metaverse…’ He noted, taking his phone out and dialing the number. “Hi, I’d like to order the 50 adhesive bandages special...Kurusu Akira...Cafe Leblanc, Yongenjaya...Yes, thank you.” He hung up.

“Oh, another buyer’s just called in! Thank you so much!” The female host cheered.

“Now all we have to do is wait for it to arrive.” Morgana purred.

“Hey.” Sojiro called out. “You’re free now, right? Come help me out.”

Akira nodded, going upstairs to put his bag down before changing into more comfortable clothes and an apron. Time to pay for his room and board.

Chapter End Notes

Mishima rank 2
Ryuji rank 5
Chapter 59

---5/8, SUNDAY, DAYTIME

Brushing her hair into a french braid, Airi put on a purple blouse and black skirt over her sheer light gray tights. Grabbing her bag, she put on her heels and left her house, taking the train to Shibuya.

‘It’s been a while since I’ve visited Shiho-chan…’ She idly thought, gazing at the train car and it’s inhabitants. It was a bit emptier than usual with it being a Sunday. Most people would be at home enjoying their one day off, or even at church. Her eyes darkened at the thought, not wanting to remember the most miserable year of her life. ‘It wasn’t your fault. It wasn’t your fault…’ She repeated in her head, biting her lip. Could she really believe that?

“This is Shibuya. I repeat, this is Shibuya. The time is now 1:42PM, the next stop is…”

Getting off at her stop, she walked over to her job in the underground mall where Hanasaki greeted her in her usual apron. “Kimisawa-chan, you’re not working today.” Her boss remarked, looking at her curiously.

She shook her head. “I’m getting flowers for a friend.” She replied softly.

Hanasaki smiled sympathetically. “All right, feel free to arrange the bouquet yourself then. It’s on the house.”

“Thank you, Hanasaki-san.” Airi bowed deeply, grateful to her wonderful boss and friend. She had been kind enough to offer her a job, and always included extra wages when possible. Though she didn't know her boss very well, she knew she was very kind, especially in this city.

Picking out a few hydrangeas and daisies, she wrapped them up in a dotted paper before layering a plastic wrap on top. Bowing to her boss again, she walked above ground and to Ito Hospital.

Entering the antiseptic building, she bypassed the same blank faced receptionist and pressed the second floor in the elevator. The doors slid open, and she took a few steps, arriving in front of room 203. Taking a deep breath, she knocked twice.

“Come in!”

Wetting her dry lips, she slid the door open. Shiho was sitting up in her bed, a book in her hand and the duck plush on her lap. “Oh!” The black haired girl gasped, hugging her duck plush.

“Kimisawa-senpai! Please, come in.” She smiled softly, though the action was forced.

Bowing, Airi walked up to the bed, taking a seat. “Hi, Shiho-chan. Sorry I haven’t been around lately, things have been hectic.” She smiled apologetically, handing the bouquet to the patient.

“Here, these are for you.”

Accepting the bundle of flowers with her good hand, Shiho inhaled the sweet fragrance. “Thank you so much, these are very beautiful.” She placed them in the vase next to her. “And it’s all right...I heard from Ann that a lot has happened since...I arrived here.” She looked down at her lap.
Airi nodded. “Yeah...how are you, Shiho-chan?” She asked softly.

The ex-volleyball member gave her a small smile. “I’m OK...the doctors told me I’m recovering well, and I can start physical therapy in a month or two.” She assured. “They also assigned me a therapist, and I started sessions a couple days ago...”

She fiddled with her blanket nervously. "We...started talking about how this started, and...how K-Ka..." Her breath hitched. "Him. I...cried a lot...but they said that it's good. It means I'm...healing?"

Letting out a sigh of relief, Airi gently placed her hand on top of her's. “I’m so glad to hear that. If you need anything, let me know.” She smiled. “...I don’t know if you remember, but there was a bouquet of daisies here a couple weeks ago. Akira told me to give them to you as thanks.”

Shiho blinked in surprise. “Kurusu-kun did that..? I only spoke to him once though…”

Airi grinned. “He said that he really appreciated it. Ryuji-kun and I were the only people who talked to him, so I guess he was happy to know one other person wasn’t judging him.”

They sat in silence for a bit, the ECG monitor beeps filling the room. “Hey, Senpai…” Shiho began, Airi looking at her curiously. “I want to let you know that...I’m sorry.” She blurted out. “I’m sorry that it had to be you who tried to save me...Because I...wanted to j-jump, I...placed the burden on you…”

She gripped the thin linens, breathing shakily. “I hurt you too, didn’t I?...My mom told me you cried, asking for forgiveness...” She bowed her head. “I’m so sorry…”

Airi stared wide eyed at the girl in bed. “Shiho-chan…” She whispered. “You shouldn’t be apologizing to me...You went through something terrible. I’m the one who should be sorry for not being able to help you in time...I couldn’t pull you up…” She closed her eyes in anguish. “I failed you. You and Ann, and your mother. I wasn’t strong enough, and it hurt all of you in the end.”

She got on her knees and rested her forehead against the edge of the bed. “I’m so sorry.” She cried out, a tear dripping onto the linoleum floor.

Shiho covered her mouth with a hand in horror. “No no no no no…” She chanted. “Please, get up, Senpai!” She flipped the blanket with her good hand, swinging her legs over the edge. “Ugh!” She winced in pain, grabbing her still broken leg in its cast as the movement jarred the bone.

Airi shot up and gently lifted her legs back onto the bed. “Shiho-chan, please, your injuries..!” She worried.

Shiho shook her head. “No, my physical pain must be nothing compared to the pain you have inside yourself...” She voiced, looking up at the class president with tearful eyes. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“It’s not your fault. It was the priest’s fault, and Kamoshida’s fault.” He stated firmly.

Airi stilled. ‘Isn’t it my fault..? Why do they keep telling me it’s not…” She furrowed her brow. “But...I couldn’t help you. I had you in my hands...!”

Shiho shook her head. “It was my decision...You had nothing to do with it.” She reasoned. “You were trying to do the right thing...I’m probably alive right now because of you, so,” She smiled gratefully. “...Thank you.”

Slumping, Airi nodded timidly and sat back down. “If you say so…” She pursed her lips. If the
very person who she failed to save forgave her, was it really Ok..?

Shiho nodded, panting slightly as perspiration gleamed on her forehead in the harsh lighting. “Ugh, I went from being able to run for hours to being out of breath at every movement…” She groaned, covering her eyes with a bandaged arm.

Smiling tenderly, Airi picked up an apple from the fruit bowl. “You have to keep up your vitamins. I’ll cut this for you.” She offered, getting up to the bathroom. Washing the fruit under the water, she shook the extra moisture off and asked a passing nurse for a kitchen knife.

Receiving it a few minutes later, she sat back down in Shiho’s room and began peeling the fruit. “Here, Shiho-chan.” She held out a piece in front of her lips.

She opened her mouth obediently, and chewed on the sweet apple. “Thank you, Senpai…this is kind of embarrassing.” She confessed bashfully. “It’s like you’re my second mom or something…” She laughed a bit.

Airi choked. “You’re like the fourth person to call me mom. Am I really that much of a nag?” She raised an amused brow.

Shiho shook her head. “No…you’re just very caring. You treat me like I’m your own daughter…not that that’s a bad thing.” She smiled sheepishly.

Blushing, she cut another piece of the apple. “That’s…too kind of you to say.” She murmured, holding it out.

Teeth pierced the fruit, and Shiho chewed on it. “I don’t think so…I heard from some girls in your class that they all look up to you.”

Feeling her cheeks heat up, Airi smiled to herself. “I guess that means I can’t let any of you down, then.” They laughed together. “Now, eat up. You need to build back your strength!” Airi advised, holding out another piece. Rolling her eyes lightheartedly, Shiho chewed.

They spent a nice afternoon together, growing closer as friends.

Giving a wave to Shiho, Airi left the room and walked out of the hospital.

Taking a huge breath, she let it out, shoulders slumping. She tilted her head up, looking at the warm orange sky introspectively. ‘Is it really not my fault..?’ She frowned. She failed though. She failed Shiho. She failed Rui. She didn't save anyone.

“Such emotion…”

Tensing at the unfamiliar voice, she turned around, her eyes glancing at the passersby. ‘Who said that..?’ No one stopped to pay her any attention, or come up to her. Hunching her shoulders, she hurriedly walked to the station, swiping at the turnstile and stiffly waited for her train.

She bit her lip. The feeling of eyes on her back didn’t go away. In fact, it was getting more and more intense by the second. Taking a shaky breath, she clenched her hands against the strap of her purse. ‘Of all the days to be alone…’ She cursed. She had nothing to defend herself with and she didn't know any martial arts, only a few ballerina spins.
Feeling the floor under her feet begin to rumble, she looked out toward the tunnel. Relief filled her as the train slowly pulled up onto the platform. Gnawing on her lower lip, she waited impatiently for the doors to slide open. With a ding, the doors opened, and she walked inside as far as she could.

Clenching her jaw, she turned around, staring out at the crowd through the open gap. ‘Who are you...?’ She glanced at all the passengers. It wasn’t any of them. The doors slid closed, and slowly pulled away from the station.

Through one of the windows, she saw a glimpse of blue hair, before the darkness of the tunnel engulfed the view.

----5/9, MONDAY, EARLY MORNING, SUBWAYS.

Scrunching up her face, Airi struggled to hold in a sneeze. Usually her allergies were mild at worst, but it seemed there was a lot more pollen today. Pursing her lips in resignation, she took out a surgical mask and put it on, covering her nose and mouth with the white cotton.

Akira glanced over at her. “Allergies?” He asked quietly.

She nodded glumly. “Yeah. I’m usually OK, but I keep getting the urge to sneeze.” She murmured, voice slightly muffled by the cotton. “You don’t have any?”

Combing his hair with a hand, he smirked. “Nope.” He stated smugly.

Narrowing her eyes, she pouted. “Lucky asshole...” She muttered.

He choked, shoulders shaking as he laughed silently. She gripped his shoulder in the crowded train, balancing herself with him.

“What’s up with the goggles?” A salarywoman marveled at her companion. “You going snowboarding or something?”

“I hear the cedar’s blooming later than usual...Climate change and what have you.” The goggle wearing man replied, coughing. “Guh...Pollen allergies suck...I couldn’t go to the mountains even if I wanted to...My eyes and nose would gush like rivers.”

“That sounds awful...”

Morgana nuzzled his face out of the bag, humming as he overheard the conversation. “That’s right, the news said pollen season was starting later than usual this year. Looks like the pollen problems have only just begun. People are about to have some itchy eyes.” He looked over at Airi sympathetically.

She rolled her eyes. “It’s just today...” She sighed. “I only get an itchy nose.”

“This might affect Mementos the same way weather does.” Morgana added, shifting inside the bag.

Akira furrowed his brow. “Really? So if people feel terrible, their Shadows also feel terrible?”

Morgana nodded. “That’s how it usually is.”

Airi blinked. “Wow...I wonder what else affects them?”
“This is Shibuya. I repeat, this is Shibuya. The time is now 7:05AM, the next stop is…”

They got off the train and walked to the Ginza line for their transfer. Waiting for the train, they heard footsteps behind them. “Morning…” Ann greeted glumly.

Airi turned to greet her and furrowed her brow in concern. “Are you OK, Ann-chan?” She asked quietly.

Grimacing, the model looked down. “Uhh…” She sighed heavily.

Akira shifted his stance, turning to look at her. “You have allergies, too?”

Ann blinked in confusion, before perking up. “...Allergies? Oh, uh, maybe! I do feel kind of dazed, and everything feels weird!” She blurted.

The two Yongenjaya residents gave her odd looks. “I don’t remember you ever having allergies…” Airi remarked hesitantly. In fact, Ann was the exemplary figure of health, never having a sick day in middle school til now.

After a moment, Ann slumped. “Actually…I’ve been feeling someone watch me again…I hope I’m wrong.” She gnawed her bottom lip. “Maybe I just can’t shake off the feeling of infiltrating a Palace! At the Palace, we’re always cautious of not being noticed, you know! So it has to be my imagination...Yeah…” She laughed nervously.

Morgana popped out of his bag, standing his front paws against Akira’s shoulder. “Someone’s stalking you, Lady Ann?!” He asked worriedly.

She shook her head weakly. “No…?”

Airi grimaced. “I would have believed you if I hadn’t been feeling the same. In fact, yesterday…” She trailed off.

Akira furrowed his brow. “Yesterday? Did something happen..?” He asked worriedly.

Ann fretted. “Did they do something to you?”

Airi held up her hands in a placating manner. “Uhh...I heard them say something to me,” She bit her lip. "But when I turned around, they weren’t there…”

Gray eyes darkened. “That’s way too close.” Akira stated grimly. “Someone should be with you guys.” He turned to the model. “Ann, you should make sure you have staff with you if you’re modeling.”

The two girls nodded hesitantly. “Be careful, Lady Ann…” Morgana fretted quietly, going back inside the bag.

Entering the school building, they walked to their class.

“One heard Kamoshida-sensei was fired…”

“He got what he deserved…”

They glanced at their fellow students they passed by. Not even two weeks ago, the very same
students who were badmouthing the gym teacher had looked up to him with shining eyes.

"You hear that weird rumor about Senpai?"

"No, what was it?"

"Wait...so, she let go?"

“I wonder who put up those postings…” A third year pondered, standing in front of the bulletin board.

“What’s his problem? Casting shame on the school like that…” A second year complained bitterly. “Your life is pretty much over if you do something like that.”

The thieves looked at each other with uncertainly. The entire school felt tense, as if they were all waiting for something big to happen again.

Walking up the stairs, they entered their classroom. “I’m going to see what Nijijima-senpai wants.” Airi announced, placing her bag on her desk. "Hopefully she’s in the council room right now…”

They nodded. “Be careful, Airi. She was a bit of a bitch to us.” Ann warned, a sneer painting her lips.

Airi nodded uncomfortably, and walked up to the third floor where the student council room is located. Taking a deep breath, she knocked on the door twice. “Nijijima-senpai? Are you there?” She called out.

“Yes, come in.”

Sliding the door open, she closed it behind her and walked up to take a seat at the table. Nijijima Makoto was sat at the head of the table, organizing the student budget.

Airi blinked. ‘She looks more stressed than usual…’ She noted.

She knew the upperclassman was a responsible young adult, but to see her so pressured brought a sense of worry. Makoto didn't usually let people see her vulnerable, hurrying from one place to another with so many responsibilities, but the rare occasions Airi had walked into the room without knocking, she knew that Makoto would sit in silence, staring into space with a frown. It wasn't something she wanted to bring up though, and it left them in an awkward situation.

“I heard that you wanted to see me?” She asked politely.

Makoto nodded. “Yes. I, and the rest of the student body, have noticed recently that you’ve been spending a lot of time with Sakamoto-kun, Takamaki-san, and most notably, Kurusu-kun.” She remarked evenly.

Airi nodded. “Sakamoto-kun and Takamaki-chan are both friends from middle school. We’re only reconnecting now... Kurusu-kun is a new transfer to my class, therefore my responsibility.” She explained with a small smile. “We’ve all become good friends.”

The student president linked her hands in front of her. “Are you not scared, or at the very least wary? He does have a criminal record, after all.” She asked. "I know the student body looks up to you, calling you "Senpai" even when they're of the same grade..." She grimaced. "Is it safe for you? For them?”
Airi frowned slightly. “Niijima-senpai, we’ve known each other for over a year now. You know I wouldn’t purposely put anyone in danger. Kurusu-kun is just a quiet individual. His circumstances shouldn’t define his person.” She stated disapprovingly. He’d been here for a month already, and people were still this afraid of him?

“His grades have been improving steadily, and he hasn’t committed any illegal activities since he’s gotten here.” She shifted a bit. "I'm hoping that if people look up to me like that, then they'd be able to understand my decisions in being friends with him..."

Makoto blinked in surprise. “Yes, well. I’m only being cautious.” She cleared her throat. “And what about Takamaki-san and Sakamoto-kun? If you were such good friends in middle school, why did you only reconnect now? Did they ask you for anything?” She narrowed her eyes slightly. "Are you being pressured by them?"

Red eyes locked with red eyes. “...You know my circumstances, Niijima-senpai.” Airi began quietly. “I was fighting for my emancipation two years ago, right after finishing middle school. I had to do everything on my own…” She pursed her lips, eyes darkening at the memories. It was days full of cheap ramen and tap water, trying to save up enough money for that court date. “I didn’t have time to socialize…”

Makoto bowed her head. “I...apologize. Of course you had your reasons, it’s just…” She tucked her hair behind an ear, a bit embarrassed. “There were a lot of witnesses that said Sakamoto-kun and Kurusu-kun were the last people to be in contact with Kamoshida. I was just...wondering if there was a connection between that and the calling cards.” She stated with a pause. “You’re the best person to ask about this.”

Airi nodded in understanding. That seemed possible when she thought about it. “They were both victims of him, but that’s really it…” She sighed. “It’s honestly horrible of me to not have noticed it earlier. I could have gone to you and we could have stopped this before someone had gotten seriously hurt.” She whispered morosely. But she had to do it herself. Her and the other phantom thieves. She wasn't going to wait for Kobayakawa to brush her off again and let Kamoshida hurt another person.

Her hands tightened, wrinkling her skirt. Never again.

Makoto clenched her hands. “...I should have noticed, too. It was remissed of me to not have paid attention to the vast amount of injuries.” She confessed quietly, frowning deeply. “...There’s another matter I wish to address with you. I have several witnesses that state that it was you who was up on the roof with Suzui-san, and that you tried to pull her up.” A muscle in her neck twitched as she tensed. “There were...rumors that you had intentionally let go.” She worded carefully.

Airi recoiled in shock and horror. “What..? There’s no way I would do that! I tried to pull her up!” She clenched her eyes at the memory. “I should’ve been stronger. I shouldn’t have let go when she scratched me…”

Makoto’s eyes sharpened. “She scratched you?”

She nodded slightly. “Yeah...She hit a vein. It hurt enough that I...accidentally let go. I should’ve tried to hold on…”

Makoto sighed. “I see. That clears things up a bit...I’ll be sure to be more vigilant with our student body. That will be all for now.” She inclined her head slightly. "Thank you for answering my questions.”
Airi nodded and stood up from her seat. Bowing to her upperclassman, she left back to her class, a few minutes before first period would start. Walking into the room, she was bombarded by her two friends. “So..?” Ann questioned, staring at her expectantly.

“Did she ask you anything weird?” Akira asked, adjusting his glasses.

Placing a hand on both their backs, Airi led them back to their desks. “She tried, but I didn’t let anything slip.” She answered, sitting down in her seat. “Hopefully she’ll lay off…” She frowned, feeling irritation claw up her back.

Sitting sideways on her chair, Ann looked at her curiously. “You seem a little angry, though.” She remarked.

Morgana snuck his head out of Akira’s desk. “Did she do something to you, Airi?” It asked angrily. Leaning against his desk, the transfer student frowned in concern.

Sighing, Airi slumped her upper body against her desk, closing her eyes. “She asked me why I started hanging out with you guys, and kind of implied you were using me.” She explained, her voice muffled by her sleeve. “I shut her down by reminding her of my circumstances last year. She knows what I went through so she can’t say I don’t have my reasons. Then she…” She paused, clenching her jaw.

Ann sneered. “She thinks we’re using you? She’s the one doing it!” She huffed, crossing her arms.

Sitting up in her seat, Airi shrugged. “I defended you guys of course. I wonder why she’s investigating this though…” She frowned thoughtfully. “She should be busy getting ready for entrance exams. Did staff ask her..?”

Morgana waved his tail lazily. “That could be a possibility. We already know from that fat principal’s reaction during the confession that he most likely knew. Perhaps he wants to cover it up by targeting the Phantom Thieves?”

They looked at each other worriedly. If the staff was suspecting them, how long before their cover was blown?

Akira looked over at her. “You said she did something else?”

Airi blinked in confusion, then slumped in her seat. “Yeah…” She whispered sullenly. “She said some people believe I purposely let Shiho-chan fall…”

Ann slammed her hand against the desk. “What?! There’s no way!” She shouted, ignoring how some of the other classmates were glancing their way. “Anyone with eyes saw that you tried your best! You were the only one who…!” Clenching her fist, she let out a muffled scream of frustration.

Airi nodded slightly, keeping her head down. “Yeah, she knows that. She just wanted to confirm it…”

The classroom door slid open, and Chouno-sensei walked in. “Good morning, class!” She sang out in English.

The students all got into their seats. Dispersing to their desks, the Persona users glanced at each other once more, before paying attention to the front of the room.

“Today, we’ll be learning the difference between Your and You’re.” She began the lesson.
Thank you to HanaHimus for this cute fanart of Airi with the other Aeon social links!! She's really inspiring me to start P3, and hopefully I can do that soon!
In the middle of her lecture on the difference between English and Japanese, three phones buzzed.

R: Hey, don’t you think the atmosphere at school’s kinda different now?
An: You mean with there being no Kamoshida?
R: Yeah, nobody ever talked about him out in the open like this before.
Ai: Everyone feels tense, like they’re waiting…
Ak: That’s true.
R: I wish someone’d just thank us for it or something…
Ai: Mishima does.
R: Besides him.
An: Yeah, everything has worked out for the best.
An: After all, Kamoshida’s actually been punished for his crimes.
An: That’s victory enough for me.
Ak: I agree.
R: I wonder what’s gonna happen to him now.
R: I mean, he’s a famous criminal at this point, right?
R: He’s gonna have to deal with people hating him forever…
Ai: He’ll rot in jail for the rest of his life.
An: Yeah, I don’t have any sympathy for him.
An: He got what he deserved.
R: For sure.

Right before the last bell rang, Airi went up to the front where Kawakami-sensei was rechecking her notes. “Sensei, is it all right if I use this room after school today and tomorrow?”

The older woman looked up from her book. “Oh, yeah sure.” She raised a brow. “Are you doing a study group?”

Airi nodded with a smile. She had to if she wanted to keep her class president status. No one else would volunteer for this, so she would help her class.

“Go ahead then, class is almost over anyway. Oh,” Kawakami-sensei paused. “I won’t be able to come visit this month, but I’ll write that I did. So if any agents come, just tell them you saw me do the inspection, OK?”


The teacher waved her away. “Don’t worry about it, I can handle my own business. You just focus on your schoolwork like a good student.” She smiled wryly before leaving the room.

Taking a deep breath, Airi turned toward the class and clapped her hands loudly. “May I have your attention?” She voiced. Her classmates turned to look at her curiously. “Since exams start this
Wednesday, I got permission from Kawakami-sensei to use this room after school for a last minute study group." She announced. "If anyone needs any help with studying, please do stay after school! I’ll be doing this from today and tomorrow from 4PM to 6PM."

The room burst out into chatter at the announcement. Fujiwara cried. “Yes! I thought I was going to fail…”

“Is that enough time to improve anything, though?” Tsukishima complained, slumping over his desk.

Matsumoto fretted. “I hope this will help me, I’m so bad at English…”

“I’ll stay with you then, and cancel work.” Namikawa assured her drowsily, sneezing into her surgical mask.

Ann snorted, leaning back in her seat as the room talked loudly. “We better tell Ryuji this, he needs it the most.” She looked behind her at Akira who nodded with amusement. “I guess we’ll all stay today.” He acquiesced.

The last bell rang and some of the class dispersed out into the hallways. Most of the students stayed behind to ask Airi questions, crowding around the class president. “Why didn’t you do this earlier, Senpai?” Ando drawled, twirling her black hair.

Airi smiled apologetically. “I wanted to, but I’ve been busy with my job.” And with the Phantom Thieves, but they didn't need to know that.

Tsukishima scrunched up his face. “Is uh...Sakamoto and Kurusu coming, too?” He asked uncomfortably.

At that, the group of students tensed, nervous at the mention of the two. "Ugh..." Otani pulled a face of discomfort.

Ando scowled. "Do we really have to keep tolerating them?"

Iida nodded in agreement. "They're dangerous, Senpai...I don't know why you keep hanging out with them."

Exhaling, Airi gave them a disappointed frown. “Listen. I know you guys are scared because Sakamoto-kun’s known to be loud and brash, and Kurusu-kun has all those rumors following him, but please...give them a chance.” She pleaded softly. “If you look past the rumors, you’ll see that they’re really nice. They wouldn’t hurt anybody without a good reason, and...I think I can say that for all of us, right?”

Fujiwara looked away awkwardly. “But...didn’t they threaten Kamoshida-sensei?”

Matsumoto crossed her arms, giving the classmate a soured look. “Weren’t you listening to that confession? Kamoshida did shitty things to a lot of people. And wasn’t he targeting them too? Why wouldn’t they fight back?”

Giving the tall student a grateful smile, Airi nodded. “Them fighting back led to Kamoshida getting arrested. No more abuse,” She glanced at Tsukishima, who lowered his head. “And no more sexual harassment.” She grimaced. “Just give them a chance, OK? Akira-kun at the very least. He’s our classmate and one of us.”

Grumbling, they nodded reluctantly.
Leaning against his desk, Akira browsed through his phone. In the middle of reading a news article, a text message popped up from Mishima. Furrowing his brow slightly, he slowly looked up at him from across the room.

Black eyes glanced at him before darting away, fiddling with his phone as he sat at his desk innocently.

Bemused, he slid the text chat open.

M: **Hey, I have some info for you!**
M: I saw it on the Phan-Site, but I’ve heard about it at school too.
M: Anyway, there’s a guy at school whose bullying has gone too far.
M: I want to help the victim, but that’s impossible for me…
M: I went ahead and posted on the forum that the Phantom Thieves are coming for him though.
M: I mean you already changed the heart of that stalker, so this should be a breeze, right?
Ak: Piece of cake.
M: You’re amazing!
M: The bully is a brown-haired guy frequently seen standing out front of the school entrance.
M: And from what I can tell, his name is Takanashi Daisuke.
M: Just make sure nobody knows I told you the name!
Ak: Got it.

“Ooh, what good timing!” Morgana purred, reading the screen. “I know this is a small case, but we have a name, so we should be able to consider him a target. Let’s go gather at the hideout and discuss!”

Pursing his lips, he looked up toward the front of the class. “Airi’s holding a study session soon.” He argued quietly.

“Time passes differently in the Metaverse, remember?” Morgana reasoned. "It’ll only be a couple minutes in the real world."

Exhaling softly, he nodded. Silently signalling Ann with a jerk of his chin, he sent a text message to Airi and Ryuji to meet at the roof. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her take her phone out and nodding. He pushed himself off the desk and began walking to the rooftop, Ann following after.

Sitting down on a chair, Ryuji grinned. “If we’re here...you wanna go to Mementos, right?” He looked over at Akira who nodded.

Ann gave him an odd look. “What are you talking about? Don’t we need to study for exams?” She argued, slamming her hand against the desk she sat on.

Ryuji waved her away. “Eh, don’t worry ‘bout that stuff. Let’s ignore the details and just go chargin’ in head-first!”
She sweatdropped. “That’s easy for you to say...but we don’t even have a target.” She commented weakly.

The rooftop door screeched open and Airi walked up to the four. “Sorry I’m late, I had to explain to some of our classmates the study group doesn’t start until later. They’re worrying really badly...” She sighed, taking a seat on a desk between Akira and Ann.

“Study group?” Ryuji repeated, giving her a look of confusion.

Airi nodded. “I’m doing it in school for two hours today and tomorrow. You should come too.” She suggested.

He hung his head. “‘Kay…” He groaned.

Airi snorted. “It won’t be any different from two days ago.” He consoled.

“Anyway, we do have a target. Some intel has come in from Mishima.” Morgana revealed, jumping into Airi’s lap.

The ex-runner perked up. “Ooh, perfect timin’! Let’s just go in right now then!” He pumped his fist excitedly.

Ann looked at him exasperatedly. “You’ll really do anything to avoid studying, huh..?”

“Mementos is really interesting though.” Airi remarked. “It’s a lot different than dealing with one person’s Palace.” She scratched Morgana’s ear. "I wonder if other Palaces are different..."

The other teens looked at her questioningly. “Whaddya mean?” Ryuji shifted in his seat.

Purring, Morgana looked at him. “Well, think back to Kamoshida. There was something vital we did before we stole his Treasure, yes?” He asked, licking a paw.

Ryuji gestured at the feline. “C’mon, just tell us…” He nudged.

Akira tapped his chin, thinking back to three weeks ago. ‘Too much happened, I can’t differentiate…’

Ann perked up. “Oh...do you mean the calling card?!” She exclaimed. “But wait a sec...” She furrowed her eyebrows in confusion. "Did we send one the last time?"

Akira shook his head. “We didn’t.”

Morgana got up, padding to another desk. “The Treasure materializes when we change the target’s subconscious with a calling card. That’s the rule when dealing with a Palace." He explained to the teenagers. "But in Mementos, it seems like we can just go for the target immediately.”

Ryuji sputtered, rubbing his head. “Wait, what? We don’t need a calling card or nothing?"

The feline shook his head. “Something else already exists that fulfills that role. Fortunately for us, Mishima put a comment up in the forum saying the Phantom Thieves are coming.” He smiled. “For a small target, that’s enough of a calling card. That alone will put some fear in them for a while. Even that Nakanohara must have seen Mishima’s comments about him on the Phan-Site and that’s why the Nav picked up on him.” He licked a paw.

Ann leaned forward. “...Can we really leave something that important to someone else?” She asked.
Airi hummed. “Maybe it’s also because the target themselves are their Treasures. If they register in the Nav, then the Treasure exists to be taken..?” She looked down at the cat.

Morgana nodded. “That could be why. The desires of the Mementos Shadows are nothing compared to those of the Palace rulers. Still, we need to unanimously agree on our target.” He grinned. "No ignoring the rules, even for smaller ones.”

Akira nodded, crossing his arms. “Let’s discuss the intel then.” He commanded, leaning against the AC unit.

Morgana nodded. “This intel is on an arrogant brown-haired bully. He’s a student at Shujin Academy. Things have gone a little too far for just bullying though." He stated. "He’s abusing and blackmailing kids.”

Ryuji scrunched up his face in anger. “He’s the perfect target! C’mon, let’s take him down!” He punched his palm.

Ann scoffed. “Are you sure you aren’t just excited to go to Mementos?” She paused. “Then again, we can’t really leave a guy like that be...We should go.”

Akira nodded, then looked over at Airi. “Are you going to be OK? You said you felt sick in Mementos.” He asked concernedly.

Airi nodded. “I’ll be fine. What’s a little nausea compared to helping others?”

Morgana looked at each of the teenagers. “No objections? Mm...we’re good to go then. That’s a unanimous decision! OK, all that’s left now is to take down the target in Mementos!” It stated firmly.

Akira took out his phone and activated the Nav.

As always, the air around them fizzed like TV static, the air pulsing with energy. With a feeling of weightlessness, they transitioned into Mementos, ending up in the opening of the train platforms. The sun disappeared, replaced with the dark and oppressive Tokyo underground. Even the air smelled stale somehow, as if light hadn’t penetrated this place in a long time.

Elegant flinched, immediately hit with a minuscule sense of nausea. ‘Is this going to happen every time..?’ She furrowed her brow worriedly. Why was she the only one who felt sick?

Joker still had his phone out, checking the Nav. “It says we can teleport to each rest area we discover, and back to the entrance.” He read the screen.

“That app is so mysterious.” Panther remarked, crossing her arms thoughtfully.

Skull grinned. “Who cares, we’re here to kick ass!”

Mona took out two vials out of his utility belt. “I have something for you before we head in there.” He handed them to Joker. “They’re Goho-Ms, which transport you to the very beginning of a Palace. Those were the last I had. You’re on your own now, OK?” He pointed his paw at the leader with a grin.

Joker nodded, pocketing the items. That could come in handy if they were escaping.
“The target’s really here then?” Panther asked.

Mona nodded. “Definitely. I’m sensing them deeper than before, but their presence is certainly here.” He sneezed. “The pollen’s out of control today...It’ll definitely have an impact on Mementos...”

Elegant nodded. “Right, you mentioned this earlier. When the weather affects people, Mementos is affected as well.” She recalled, wiggling her nose a bit.

Mona nodded. “The type of change will depend on what kind of weather it is. This might turn out to be useful.” He rubbed his paws satisfactorily.

Skull scratched his head. “So what’s a ton of pollen gonna do?”

“I’m not too sure...” He rubbed his paws. ”But the impact on Mementos is determined by how the public is feeling. How have other people been seeming to you?” Mona asked, tilting his large head.

Panther tapped her chin. “Come to think of it, some of the kids in our class have bad allergies. They all seem really out of it. Apparently the medicine makes them feel sleepy…”

“I see...” Mona nodded. ”There might be a similar effect in Mementos then.”

Skull rolled his shoulder. “So it’ll prolly be easier to beat Shadows or ignore ’em completely. C’mon, let’s go find out.” He gestured with his hand.

They walked up to the gates. Joker took out his phone and selected Area two of Qimranut. In a flash of blue fire, they appeared at the next platform.

“Hey, this is where we left off last time, right?” Skull questioned.

“Yeah, and just as I expected, the path ahead is still open. All right, time to check it out!” Mona reached a paw out.

Running forward, they descended the escalators down to the next level. The phone in Joker’s pocket chimed. “Now in the Path of Ayatsbus.” The atmosphere completely changed, now lit with a dark blue light instead of just red. Cracks began to line the walls and tiles, as if the further down they went, the more disarray it became.

Elegant swallowed, the nausea getting a bit stronger.

“All right, we dunno what to expect from here on. We better watch out backs!” Skull advised.

Mona jumped forward and transformed into his car self. “Oh...Cautiousness is good, but let’s not linger in one area for too long, OK?” He warned.

Walking up to the bus, Elegant tilted her head. “Why? Does something happen?” She asked, getting into the driver’s seat. The others got on as well.

The bus rumbled. “In Mementos, there’s a certain Shadow that’s far stronger than the rest...We’d have no chance against it.” He stated grimly.

Skull jumped in his seat. “Wha-?! Are you for real?! You shoulda told us that from the start!” He yelled, staring out the window warily as if it would appear right outside in a second.

“We’ll have to be careful driving around then.” Joker added.
Elegant started the engine and the car rumbled underneath their seats. “Whose Shadow is it..?” She wondered uncomfortably. “Or is it some sort of overseer..?” Maybe a culmination of distortions made into a single being? She didn't really know...

They stilled at the question. “…I don’t know. But if you hear chains, we have to run.” Mona confessed gravely.

Taking a deep breath, Elegant began driving down the tunnels, checking every connecting hall. The first Shadow they encountered appeared to be sleeping as it stood completely still. “It’s sleeping! Let’s get it!” Panther urged.

Elegant slammed the pedal, ramming the bus into the Shadow. After the battle, Joker acquired a new Shadow, a Kodama. Smirking triumphantly, he leaped back inside and they continued on their way.

Driving down the tunnel, Elegant slammed the bus against a chain door, revealing a train platform. “All right! Let’s keep going!” Mona cheered.

They descended another level, the air becoming more stale and dark with every floor they traverse. The escalators they walked down were rusted over and looked to have never been in use, leaving this place to rot.

“You know, this Palace’s security level doesn’t seem to change, even if the enemies spot you.” Panther remarked as she looked around the station.

“Mementos is different.” Mona answered. “While other Palaces exist because of just one person, this one’s from the public. From that perspective, it’d take more than a few intruders to make a mark on the security level.”

Elegant hummed. “So we’d have to do something drastic, like if everyone in the city viewed us as a threat.”

The feline snickered. “Exactly. So be careful, OK Skull?”

“Hey, shut up!” Skull defended himself with a pout.

They walked toward the end of the platform, peering down the dark and windy tunnel. “I can sense our target somewhere in this area!” Mona confirmed, transforming back into a bus. “Let’s go then.” Joker commanded.

They climbed into the vehicle and began their journey. Seeing a sleeping Shadow, Elegant rammed into its back, sending it careening in the air. Falling down on the floor, it transformed into four Slimes, its green toxic waste-like flesh jiggling about. “I’ve got this!” Panther exclaimed, summoning Carmen. “Agi!” She shouted, sending out a ball of flame at each enemy, killing them.

“Amazing, Panther!” Mona complimented as she got back into the bus, handing over the pile of cash to Joker. “No biggie.” She preened, flipping a ponytail.

Starting the bus again, they kept driving. As they turned a corner, they saw a swirling red vortex, encompassing the entire tunnel it was in as well as sucking in the train tracks. “There it is.” Joker pointed. They drove in, getting out of the car on the other side.

“That’s Takanashi’s Shadow, huh?” Mona gestured.
In the center of the room was a male teenager wearing the Shujin Academy uniform, enshrouded in darkness. Like the first target room, there were red vein like tubes coming out of the walls, twisting away through a small path in the back.

Elegant frowned, feeling a sense of wrongness on top of her nausea. ‘Why does it only affect me..?’

Skull nodded. “This guy’s bullyin’ is really bad. From what I hear, it’s mostly blackmail, takin’ money from people, that kinda thing.” He explained.

Panther glared at their target. “If we don’t make him have a change of heart, his bullying might get even worse.” She stated.

Joker nodded. “Let’s go.” They ran up to their fellow student.

Menacing yellow eyes spotted them, and Takanashi’s face twisted into a sneer. “It’s not my fault! It’s theirs for not standing up for themselves!” He exclaimed.

“That’s no reason! How’s it their fault when you don’t give ‘em any choice, huh?” Skull retorted, clenching a yellow gloved fist.

“You’re the lowest of the low. Bullying people weaker than you, knowing they can’t fight back!” Panther added, legs spread evenly in a ready stance.

“I’m disappointed, Takanashi-kun.” Elegant stated solemnly. “You’re no better than scum.”

Takanashi took a step back. “The hell?! You’re all ganging up on me, too! Are you phantom thieves some kind of gang?!” He shouted, slashing his arm in the air. “Protectors of justice, my ass! Don’t act high and mighty with me when you don’t know anything!” With a rumble, he burst out into black tar, transforming into a Jack Frost.

“You’re the one who doesn’t know anything! Let’s get ‘em!” Skull shouted, readying his metal pipe.

“I already told you, I didn’t do anything wrong...Listen to me, dammit!” Takanashi screamed, jumping around. With a wave of its arm, it used Evil Touch on Elegant, inflicting her with fear.

“I’m so scared…” She whimpered, dropping her scythe and hugging herself. What was this feeling? It was as if everyone was out to get her, just like that time. She couldn't breathe, she couldn't see, she couldn't hear anything but her own fear welling up inside her.

“Elegant!” Joker yelled, running up to slash the Shadow. “Do we have any fear cures?” He asked the others.

“Gimme a sec!” Skull yelled, digging into his pockets.

“Carmen!” Panther summoned her Persona. “Agi!” She sent a ball of fire, burning it with a critical strike. Takanashi fell to the ground, dizzy. They rushed up and performed an all-out attack, damaging it greatly with every strike of their weapons. It couldn't finish the job however, as soon enough Takanashi rose from the floor and began bouncing about again.

“Here!” Skull took out a pill bottle and threw it to Joker. Catching it, the leader ran up to his immobile teammate, shoving a pill in her mouth.

Swallowing instinctively, Elegant blinked, straightening up from her crouch. “Thank you!” She smiled gratefully, picking up her scythe.
Nodding, Joker jumped back into the fray. They made quick work of the enemy now that they had a complete team, with Elegant landing from her spin and giving their target a peaceful smile. "Rest in peace."

Bursting into a splash of black liquid, the Jack Frost turned back into Takanashi, his confidence from before replaced by defeat. "B-But if I don’t do it, they’re gonna hurt me." He cried, bowing his head in shame. "I don’t want people taking my money from me anymore!"

Skull scrunched his face in confusion. "What are you talkin’ about?" He questioned.

Takanashi sobbed, gripping his head. "If I don’t go after him, I’m the one who’s gonna get bullied! I can’t take it, I just can’t!"

"Oh, I get it now." Panther realized. "There’s an even bigger bully—ordering this guy around—who’s behind all this."

Skull turned back to the student in disgust. "Hey! Didn’t you just say it’s people’s own fault for not standin’ up for themselves?" He argued.

The student took a step back. "That’s...er...Please, help me!" He pleaded, clenching his hands together.

Joker rolled his eyes. "All right." He replied shortly.

"Don’t bully anyone anymore, Takanashi-kun." Elegant scolded.

Takanashi cried in joy. "Thank you! Oh, thank you, you wonderful phantom thieves!"


"I’m counting on you..." The male student pressed. "You guys promised."

Skull rubbed his head. "Fine, but you better apologize to those people you bullied!" He exclaimed.

In a gulf of blue light, Takanashi disappeared, replaced with a glowing blue ball that hovered peacefully in the air. "The Treasure!" Mona cheered, jumping up in joy.

“All right, we got the Treasure. Let’s go back!” Skull suggested, already turning toward the vortex.

Joker nodded, taking out his phone to transport them back to the entrance.

Walking out the door, they found themselves back at the rooftop, ten minutes later than when they entered. They all took a seat this time, sighing tiredly. "Ryuji-kun, come to the study group, OK? I want you to do well on the exams." Airi pleaded quietly, rubbing her temples.

Akira looked over at her in concern. "You have another headache?" He asked quietly.

She nodded, biting her lip as the action made it worse.

“I don’t think going into Mementos is good for you.” Ann began, looking at her with worry. “This is the second time you’ve gotten a headache, and didn’t you say you were nauseous?” She reached
over and rubbed her hand against the cellist's back.

“Yeah, if it’s too much, just leave it to us!” Ryuji assured, leaning forward in his seat.

Airi shook her head slightly. “Don’t worry, guys...It’s only a little discomfort. I can handle it.” She didn’t want to be left behind. She never realized just how lonely she was until she had them. She wanted to help them no matter what, even if she got headaches and nausea in return.

“I wonder why you’re the only one experiencing adverse effects from Mementos...” Morgana frowned, flicking an ear. “You were fine in Kamoshida’s Palace, so it’s Mementos that’s affecting you.”

Sighing heavily, Airi leaned against Akira’s arm, closing her eyes in exhaustion “I don’t think it’s a fever...I’ll be fine in a couple minutes.” She murmured.

Pursing his lips, the bespectacled teenager placed the back of his hand against her forehead. Her skin was smooth and cool to touch, so it wasn't a fever. “...You feel OK.” He voiced out, letting his hand fall.

She breathed out, relaxing her head on his shoulder. Morgana laid in her lap, trying to comfort her.

Giving her another worried look, Akira turned to their other friends and stilled.

Ryuji and Ann stared unblinkingly at them. The former gaped, while the latter gave him a shit eating grin, her eyes darting from him to the class president resting on him, raising her eyebrows up and down.

Blushing at what she was insinuating, he glared at them lightly. “Ryuji, get her a water bottle.” He commanded quietly.

Closing his mouth with a snap, the ex-runner nodded slowly. “Aye aye, leader.” He replied, getting up from his seat and walking down the stairs.

Rolling his eyes, Akira shifted his arm around Airi, letting her rest against his chest. He stared at Ann, silently challenging her to say something.

The model raised her hands in a placating manner, still grinning widely. ‘Cute.’ She mouthed, winking at him.

Feeling his cheeks burn with embarrassment, he looked away, tucking Airi’s head under his chin.

Was it cute? He just...wanted to help her like she did helped him.

The rooftop door opened again and Ryuji sauntered over, idly throwing a water bottle up and down in his hand. He stopped and stared at the new closeness. “Here.” He voiced after a moment, throwing the water to the transfer student.

Catching it mid air, Akira looked down at the cellist who appeared to have fallen asleep, face lax in comparison to earlier. “Airi.” He called out, gently shaking her with a hand.

With a quiet groan, she opened her eyes, hazy with exhaustion. “Huh..? Is it time for the study group?” She yawned, covering her mouth.

He silently held out the water bottle.

“Oh, thank you.” She smiled, sitting up and taking a long swig of the cold liquid. Capping it, she
placed it against her forehead. “Oh, that feels good.” She moaned quietly.

Blushing at the noise, Akira turned away. His eyes caught Ryuji’s, whose eyes darted back and forth between him and the cellist before raising an eyebrow. Akira shrugged slightly. He didn’t know what this was either. He hoped though…

Taking a deep breath, Airi checked her phone. “Ah, it’s almost 4PM… I should go now.” She patted Morgana’s butt, telling him to get off. She stood up and grabbed her bag. Turning back to her friends, she placed her hands on her hips with a frown. “You guys are coming… right?” She raised a brow. “You could all work on your grades.”

With a groan, Ryuji got up as well, dragging himself to the door. “Fine…” He muttered petulantly.

Ann and Akira got up as well, with Morgana in his bag, and the four students walked down to class 2-D.

I drew this when I drew Airi’s first caricatures but was waiting for a good chapter for it accompany. This seems OK right LOL
The classroom of 2-D was crowded with students, some from other classes and grades as well. Hesitantly, Airi opened the door and stood in front of the class, befuddled at the sheer amount of people who showed up. Had her classmates told the other classes about this?

The other phantom thieves took a seat near the back, silently supporting her with their smiles with Ryuji giving her a thumbs up.

Taking a deep breath, she clapped her hands, the room silencing almost immediately. “Hi, everyone! Thank you for coming to this study group! I hope that I can help you all improve your chances on the exams.” She smiled, slightly overwhelmed by the crowd. “This will mostly focus on the second year’s version, but I can help first years as well. If you’re an upperclassman, please help out if you can.”

The students all nodded in understanding, taking out their books.

“Well...Let’s get started then.”

“Thank you, senpai!” The last group of students bowed, before leaving the room.

Airi sighed, shoulders slumping. Today had been a long day. If she was being honest, there was no way everyone was going to improve. There was too little time to help out every single person, though she and the upperclassmen did their best. Going into Mementos took most of her energy as well, and the remnants of her earlier headache had remained, though subsided enough for her to concentrate.

She packed up her books into her bag before shouldering the straps.

Akira walked up to her with a small smile. “Wanna go home?”

Airi smiled and nodded. They walked out of the school together, Ann and Ryuji having left earlier. “Did the study group help you?”

He nodded. “I remember a lot of things better now. You’re really good at teaching.” He complimented, idly tweaking a strand of hair.

They swiped their wallets against the turnstiles, walking to their train platform. “You think you’ll do well on the exams?” She asked, eyes darting between the other passengers.

Noticing her surveying their surroundings, he inched closer to her. “With a little more studying, definitely.” He smirked lightly.

The train pulled up, doors sliding open, and they walked in. It was early evening so it was half empty, leaving plenty of seats available. They sat down in a corner with a sigh.

“...Was he here?” He asked quietly, glancing at the nearby people. She shook her head.
They stared up at the train TVs, the news broadcasting Kamoshida’s mugshot all over the car. Morgana weaseled his face out of the bag, watching avidly. “Last weekend, the police visited the school where Kamoshida-sensei taught for questioning.” The newscaster droned. "The students found it hard to hide their bewilderment at the scandal surrounding a popular teacher. The police plan to finalize the arrest once they collect more evidence and finish investigating.”

“Everyone keeps talking about it…” Airi remarked somberly.

“It’s the end of that case, at least.” Morgana piped up.

Akira nodded grimly. “The school was swarming with police these past few weeks.”

“Well…I hope they’ll let us take our exams in peace.” Airi huffed. “We don’t need the police to make everyone even more nervous.”

“This is Shibuya. I repeat, this is Shibuya. The time is now 7:02PM, the next stop is…”

They got up from their seats and off the train, walking down the steps to their transfer. Shoulders tensing, Airi looked behind her. The feeling was back. ‘They had blue hair, right..?’ Her eyes roamed around the station square.

Not a single person around had blue hair.

She grimaced, moving closer to Akira, gripping his sleeve. He looked down at her questioningly. “He’s here…” She whispered.

His eyes sharpened, and he looked around cautiously. Wrapping an arm around her shoulders, he escorted her to their transfer line, never taking his hand away.

Airi blushed at the close contact, feeling the warmth of his palm permeate through her blazer. This seemed to be happening more and more often now. She peered up at him, the guarded expression on his face reminiscent of when he was Joker. He was so protective…

She fought back a shy smile.

Their train to Yongenjaya pulled up, doors opening, and they entered the train, going in as far as they could.

Holding her in her spot, Akira turned his head to glance back through the closing gates. Gray eyes met gray eyes right before the doors sealed, the train pulling away from the station.

“Akira..?” Airi called out, looking up at him nervously.

“He’s gone.” He stated, retracting his arm and resting his hands in his pockets.

She sighed, shoulders slumping in relief. “I wonder what he wants…” She murmured, grabbing onto the safety bar.

“This stalking thing is getting out of hand…” Morgana whispered grimly, sticking his face out of the bag.

They spent the train ride in uneasy silence. Akira’s phone rang out, and he took it out of his pocket.

An: I’m already bummed about the tests coming up…
An: The studying helped, but I’m really only confident in English…
An: Is Airi with you? Can we study some more?

“You wanna keep studying?” Akira asked quietly, glancing up from the screen.

Airi nodded. “I’m all right with that. Let’s do it at Leblanc? I need a coffee…” She yawned, covering her mouth. He nodded.

Ak: Let’s do it.
Ak: Airi asks if we can do it at Leblanc.
An: Oh, I’m at the diner in Shibuya…
An: Can you come here?

They sweatdropped at the screen. “Back to Shibuya then.” Airi sighed.

They got off at the next stop and transferred to the other side, riding the train back to Shibuya. Getting off the train, Akira wrapped an arm around the her shoulders again, looking around to see if that guy was still here.

She pouted but stayed silent, acknowledging his need to be vigilant.

Walking aboveground and into crowded Shibuya, his hand slid from her shoulder to her hand, grasping it tightly as they made their way through pedestrians. Making it to the Diner, they walked up the stairs and looked deeper into the restaurant.

Ann was already waiting at a booth. The model already had a bunch of her books out, a cup of coffee and a parfait next to her. She perked up when she noticed them. “Hey guys!” She smiled gratefully. “Thanks for coming.” She blinked, eyes zeroing on their linked hands. “Oh? Was I interrupting a date…?” She grinned widely.

Looking down at their connected hands, the two Yongenjaya residents let go, blushes covering their cheeks. “A-Anyway, what else do you need help with?” Airi asked, sitting down.

Akira sat down next to her, unzipping his bag fully for Morgana.

The waitress came over and asked for their orders. Airi held up two fingers for a coffee, while Akira ordered a Nostalgic Steak. Bowing unenthusiastically, the waitress left to put in their orders with the kitchen.

Taking out their books, they began another studying session. “That long sentence is tough...Try to think about what the underlined section means.” Ann advised, pointing toward the English paragraph.

Akira nodded, circling the keywords.

“How’s your English, Airi?” She asked the class president.

Taking a long sip from her coffee, Airi shrugged. “I can read and write it just fine. My speaking is a little shaky, I don’t have a lot of opportunity to practice.” She scratched her cheek bashfully.

Ann blinked “Do you understand what I’m saying?” She spoke in English.

Giggling, she nodded. “I understand perfectly.” She replied, slightly rolling her “L”.

Furrowing his brow, Akira hesitantly opened his mouth. “Y-Yes…I understand...” He stated shakily, his accent heavy with inexperience.
Her eyebrows shot up and Ann clapped her hands. “Good job, guys!” She cheered. “I guess you don’t really need my help with English then.”

Sighing, Akira hunched over his notes. “I guess so.” He rubbed the back of his head.

Morgana hissed quietly. Akira gave the feline an odd look, the girls not noticing. “I’m so jealous you get to study with both Lady Ann and Airi, Akira.” Morgana pouted, glancing over at Ann endearingly. “At least you’re making progress.” He slumped into the bag.

Akira snorted and grasped the handles of the bag, Morgana yelping at the sudden motion. Leaning over the table, he placed it next to Ann. “There.” He smirked lightly, sitting back down.

The model looked down at the feline curiously. “Hey, Morgana.” She greeted, petting his head.

Purring contently, he looked up at Akira, gratefulness sprinkled in his unshed tears. The bespectacled teen nodded slightly, giving the cat an amused expression. He certainly liked the ladies.

“I’m actually not so good at this because of my time abroad.” Ann confessed sheepishly.

Airi tilted her head. “The education system must be very different in Finland.” She twirled her mechanical pencil. Was it easier?” Akira looked up as well, curious about her other nationality.

Ann nodded. “Yeah, much easier. They do things a lot differently there. That’s why when I came back to Japan for middle school, my grades weren’t very good...They still aren’t now.” She sweatdropped. “Anyway, let’s keep going!”

They continued studying for a while, working on English and History.

“So the magistrate’s patronage was Minamoto no Yoshitsune, and he helped defeat the Taira…” Ann frowned thoughtfully. Akira finished his steak, wiping his mouth with a napkin.

“Do you think you could help me with math next?” Ann asked, holding her hands pleadingly at Airi.

“Yeah, of course. Is it the quadratic curve giving you trouble?” She opened her math textbook.

---5/10, TUESDAY, EARLY MORNING, SUBWAYS.

Getting off the train, Airi and Akira walked over to the Ginza line, waiting in the crowd of people. While perusing his phone, Akira heard footsteps walking up behind them.

“Good morning. It looks like you’re attending school seriously.” Makoto remarked, a polite smile on her face.

Airi bowed slightly. “Good morning, Niijima-senpai.” She gave the brunette a small smile, Akira nodding behind her.

“You two seem pretty close if you’re both coming to school together everyday.” Makoto commented, brushing some hair behind an ear. ”You just transferred here though...I guess you two really click.”
Akira adjusted his glasses. “We’re in the same class.” He answered coolly.

The council president grasped her chin speculatively. “...I see. You seem a lot closer than that though.” She observed, smiling thinly.

Biting her lip, Airi looked away, embarrassed. Frowning slightly, Akira shifted in front of her, shielding her from the brunette’s gaze.

Bemused, Makoto continued. “Isn’t Takamaki-san also your friend? Kimisawa-kouhai told me she was a victim of Kamoshida, but was that all there was to it...? Either way, closer inspection should clear everything up...Goodbye.” She inclined her head and walked away.

Airi frowned, watching the upperclassman’s retreating back. “I thought she would back off…” She sighed in disappointment.

Akira closed his eyes, resigned. She was sharp.

The train arrived at the platform, doors sliding open, and they got onto the crowded car.

“You have exams starting tomorrow. It’s too late to cram, so don’t even try it.” Inui-sensei droned. He was a tall man with a stern face, perfectly coiffed hair and a gray suit. Everything about him seemed to abide by the rules.

Airi idly wondered if she ever saw him smile, even a little bit.

“Now then, picking up from last time…” Inui-sensei began. “The end of the Heian period marks the rise of the samurai, which I’m sure you’ve all been waiting for. As described in “The Tale of the Heike,” it was a time when all that was great would fall from grace.” He crossed his arms stoically. “It wasn’t unusual for the heroes of yesterday to be struck down as rebels of the present day.” He paused. “By the way, sympathizing with the loser or the weak is called “magistrate’s patronage.” That term came from the name of the position that a certain hero held.”

He surveyed the class, sharp eyes boring into each student. “Now then, Kurusu-kun.” He called out, stopping on the student.

Blinking, Akira sat up in his seat.

“Who do you think is the origin of the term ”magistrate’s patronage”? Inui-sensei asked.

He perked up. ‘We went over this last night at the diner.’ He thought. “Minamoto no Yoshitsune.” Akira answered confidently.

Eyebrows raised, Inui-sensei clapped. “Exactly. “Magistrate” was Minamoto no Yoshitsune’s title, which later became his nickname. Although Yoshitsune helped defeat the Taira, he was driven out by his brother and killed himself.” He explained. "However, in the centuries that followed, Yoshitsune became more popular as a tragic hero.”

The class “ooh”ed, gossipping with each other. “Wow, really?”

“Kurusu seems kind of smart, doesn’t he?”

“He did attend yesterday’s study group...”
“This proves Senpai can teach even a delinquent!”

“Wow, you must be really smart to be able to answer a question like that!” Morgana applauded, flicking his tail against his thigh. Smirking, Akira ran a hand through his hair in a suave manner.

“Rather than siding with the one who has overwhelming power, people prefer the underdog opposing them.” Inui-sensei speculated. "It’s sort of like rooting for a minor-league baseball team instead of an all-star, major-league one.”

Morgana hummed quietly, glancing up at his carrier. “I can understand that. It’s like, if I don’t root for them, then who will?” He described.

Pursing his lips, Akira nodded in agreement.

The class continued.

The last bell rang out, and most of the class dispersed out into the hallways, going home for the day. Airi organized her notes, trying to make sure she had all the materials ready for the study group. Akira had left earlier, saying he was going to hang with Ryuji for a bit.

Grabbing her bag, she made to leave the room, making her way downstairs to the first floor snack store. “Oh, hello!” The cashier greeted, leaning on her palm. “What would you like?”

Airi hummed, browsing the different breads wrapped in clear plastic. “Do you have any yakisoba-pan left?” She asked.

The cashier held it up for her to see. “Just one!”

“I’ll take it.” She took out a couple of yen from her wallet, placing it on the cash tray.

“Thank you!” The woman smiled, handing her a bag of her purchase.

Smiling a thanks, Airi took it and also bought a water bottle from a nearby vending machine. This would be her lunch for today.

She made her way back to the classroom, going up the stairs. Turning the corner, she spotted a certain brunette questioning her classmate. Ducking behind the wall, she peeked out.

“...Was there anything else that caught your attention?” Makoto asked. “Was he acting any different after that strange posting went up?”

Tsukishima scratched his head. “Umm...I think he was the same as always, but I’m not sure...Listen, I respect you, but Kimisawa-senpai’s friends with him, and I don’t want to go against her...” He trailed off awkwardly, looking a bit scared.

“I see...Thank you for answering.” Makoto pursed her lips and walked away.

“Phew...She’s scary.” Tsukishima muttered, turning to head to the gym.

Airi narrowed her eyes. ‘So now she’s questioning our classmates...’ Her lips tightened in frustration. ‘Thank you Tsukishima-kun, for defending him for me...’ She sighed heavily and walked into the classroom.
Sitting at her desk, she unwrapped her sandwich and began eating. ‘Is senpai going to keep doing this…?’

Walking out of the classroom, Akira spotted Ryuji waiting for him near the staircase. “Yo.” Ryuji greeted.

Nodding, he walked over and they headed down the hall. The school was pretty empty, most students going out to study for the exams.

The ex-runner laced his hands behind his head as they walked down the stairs to the first floor. “Looks like they’re really gonna bring back the track team...The coach is gonna be Yamauchi too…” He frowned agitatedly, letting his arms fall limp. “That guy’s basically Kamoshida Junior. I swear he’s scheming something.” He clenched his fists before letting out a sigh. “Anyway, what’re your thoughts on training today?”

Akira shrugged. “I’m up for it, but we still have to go to the study group.”

He sighed. “Right, right...Well, listen to this.” They stopped in a corner. Inching closer, Ryuji whispered into his ear. “I heard this rumor about Yamauchi...Apparently he’s got in trouble at school before with his drinkin’...but that hasn’t kept him from goin’ out. I was thinkin’, maybe he’d let some shit slip when he’s drunk.” He moved back.

Akira blinked. “You wanna tail him for answers?” He idly tweaked a strand of his hair.

Ryuji nodded. “We should totally try. I’ll look into where he goes to drink.” He crossed his arms. “What’s the plan for today though? Should we try to train a bit before the study group?”

Akira nodded. “We’ll have to be quick about it.”

“Let’s get changed then. We can meet at, uh...Hmm.” He scratched his head. “Somewhere’s gotta be open. Let’s try lookin’ around at school.”

They went to the locker rooms to change into their gym uniforms and then roamed the school. Morgana jumped out of his bag as he pushed open the door. “I’m gonna go take a walk while you’re busy. Let me know when you’re ready to leave.” He voiced, darting out of the room.

They walked through the courtyard, passing by the occasional student trying to get home. “Man, we really don’t got a good place to train, huh…” Ryuji sighed with defeat. “I mean, we’d prolly run into Nakaoka and them if we stuck around here...You got any ideas?” He looked over at Akira.

He shrugged. “We can train at my place?”

Ryuji huffed. “You seriously think we’d get any trainin’ done there? I bet we’d just end up eatin’ ice cream and playin’ video games all day long. Besides, we have to be here for the…” He winced. “Study group, ugh…” He shifted in place. “...Eh, I guess it won’t hurt to peek ‘around the gym. If they ain’t there, maybe we can.” “Hrgh...!”

They snapped their heads at the sound, looking out onto the grass. “...Nakaoka?” Ryuji whispered, staring with wide eyes. The tanned runner was surrounded by the other ex-track team members, all standing aggressively at each other.

Furrowing their brows, they ran up to the group. “Takeishi? The hell you guy’s doin’..?” Ryuji
questioned, narrowing his eyes.

With a roll of his eyes, Takeishi turned around to look at them. “We just have a few questions for Nakaoka here.” He spat. "It’s none of your business.”

Glaring at him, Ryuji frowned. “So what, you gonna ask him questions with your fists?” He retorted. "And anyways, ain’t a three-on-one kinda cowardly?”

The other ex-track team members turned to watch. Akira placed his hands in his pockets, watching them carefully. He didn't know if this was going to turn into a fight, but if it did, he would have his friend's back. They were a team.

“The only coward here is Nakaoka! All the shit Kamoshida put us through is his fault…” Takeishi shouted angrily. “He was telling that bastard secrets about us the whole time..!”

Taken aback, Ryuji scrunched up his face in bewilderment. “Huh? That’s a load of bull!” He stomped his foot.

Akira nodded in agreement. “You guys should trust Nakaoka. He’s your teammate.” Wasn't that the point of being a team? To be able to trust each other?

Ryuji nodded hastily. “That’s right! You’ve been trainin’ together for freakin’ forever!” He argued. "Plus, ain’t the track team comin’ back? You don’t gotta fight!”

Flabbergasted at his logic, Takeishi took a step back. “...Sh-Shut up! I’m telling you, this piece of shit sold us out! How do you think Kamoshida found out about your parents, Sakamoto?”

“He’s gotta be a snitch!” Another track member added, standing intimidatingly in front of their target.

Scrunching his face, Ryuji held up his hands. “H-Hold up!” He yelled, moving to stand in front of Nakaoka.

Takeishi glared, taking a step forward. “Out of the way, Sakamoto. We’ll beat the shit outta you too if we need to.”

Ryuji squared his shoulders, staring him down resolutely. “If you think that’s gonna make you feel better, go for it.” He stated quietly. “...But you’re gonna wish you didn’t. Trust me, it feels real bad lookin’ back on shitty stuff you’ve done.”

“Huh?” A track member looked at him in confusion.

“Look…” He sighed. “Even if Nakaoka was workin’ with Kamoshida...ain’t it fine now? The bastard’s gone, so you guys can just put this crap behind you.” He reasoned. "There’s no reason to fight, yeah..?”

Takeishi scrunched up his face. “We can’t keep people around who’re gonna try and undermine our team.” He stated firmly.

Behind Ryuji, Nakaoka shook his head. “But...I didn’t do anything. I wasn’t working with Kamoshida.” He looked down. "No matter how much you hit me, my answer’s gonna stay the same.”

“Oh yeah..? We’ve got proof.” Takeishi voiced out. “Yamauchi told us all about it.”
Ryuji looked at him in surprise. “...Yamauchi?” He repeated quietly.

“C’mon Takeishi, we gotta get out of here.” A track member urged. "It’d be real bad if anyone else showed up.”

"Yeah," The other track member nodded. "What if Niijima or Kimisawa shows up? We'd get in trouble..."

Nodding, Takeishi turned to glare at Nakaoka. “...Nakaoka. Shit like you isn’t welcome on our new track team. You’d better remember that.” He declared. The group turned to leave, Takeishi purposely bumping shoulders with Akira.

Gray eyes stared down at him coldly, and they rushed away, sweating in fear at the transfer student.

Sighing heavily, Ryuji turned to look at the remaining track runner. “...You OK?” He rubbed the back of his head. “What the hell was all that?”

Nakaoka grimaced, looking away. “Just stay out of this, Sakamoto. It has nothing to do with you.”

“But…” Ryuji frowned sadly.

Clenching his fists, Nakaoka glared at him. “When you hit Kamoshida, you were really hitting all of us who tried so hard to endure his bullshit. You might’ve felt relieved, but it only made life harder for us…” He frowned bitterly. “Cause of you, we lost the one place we could vent our frustrations...the one place we could really belong. Tensions got pretty high after that...and things’ve just been kinda rough from then on.” He admitted quietly.

“...You really think it’s all fine now, huh? Well what if I told you they’re right about me..? Would you still think it’s “fine” if I was the one who told Kamoshida about your parents?”

Furrowing his brow deeply, Ryuji crossed his arms, lips tightening at the question. “Yeah.” He stated resolutely after a moment. “If you told him, you told him. I’m over all that stuff with my parents anyways.” He brushed off. “Besides...I’ve realized something, Nakaoka. I might’ve messed up with Kamoshida back then, but hangin’ on to the past ain’t gonna help anythin’. I’m just gonna focus on bein’ myself now...on bein’ free.”

Shifting his foot, Akira smiled slightly at his back, proud of his friend and teammate. He'd gone from someone who would almost immediately resort to yelling and violence to someone with a calmer head.

“What’re you talking about..?” Nakaoka looked at his former teammate in confusion. “Free, huh? Haha…” He laughed bitterly, stepping around him and walking away.

They turned to watch the ex-track runner leave. “Akira…” Ryuji whispered. “You get what I’m tryin’ to say, yeah?” He looked at him uncertainly.

Akira nodded. “More or less.” He smirked lightly.

“Right? Wait,” He scrunched up his face. “Whaddya mean “more or less?” You’re s’posed to know…” He pouted. “I guess bein’ free is like...” He grinned. "It’s like how I feel when I’m talkin’ to you, man.”

Akira looked at him in amusement. Was this bromance or was he confessing? “Can you explain that? I'm not judging you, but I'm straight.”
He sputtered, face red from embarrassment. “Dude! Not like that! I just meant... I don’t know how else to explain it.” He voiced quietly. “I just feel...free.”

Akira snickered. “I really don’t understand.”

Ryuji burst out into laughter. “What, we stuck on repeat or something?”

They laughed together, feeling free of responsibilities and worries, if only for a little bit.

Chuckling now, Ryuji grinned. “Mannn, that was some funny shit...So much for trainin’ though, huh? C’mon, let’s get outta here.” He waved his hand, heading toward the locker room.

Akira made to follow him, putting his hands in his pockets. It was time to study.

Chapter End Notes

Ryuji rank 6
Chapter 62

Chapter Notes

Thank you for 11.1k hits and 362 kudos!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“All right, guys.” Airi began, standing at the front.

The classroom was completely filled with students from all three years. Most were nervously biting their lips, fiddling with their pencils, and sweating profusely. Ann, Akira, and Ryuji were sitting near the back, away from most of the student body. Even now, they were still considered the outcasts at the school.

“Tomorrow is the first day of exams. Please try your best to study as much as you can today. If you have any question, ask me or any of the upperclassmen present today.” Airi smiled comfortably, flipping open her book. “We’ll begin with biology. The human body has 206 bones, including your ears and nose…”

“It’s getting late.” Airi called out. Every desk was covered in textbooks and notes, everyone diligently studying as much as they could. “Please go home and get a full night’s rest. Make sure to eat a hearty breakfast! Good luck to all of us!” She bowed.

Packing up, the students began leaving for home, bowing when they exited.

“Ugh, finally…” Ryuji groaned, leaning back against his chair. “Just kill me already…” He looked blankly at Akira.

Akira huffed with amusement, finishing off his instant noodles. If he was honest, he was glad for these studying sessions. It meant he had a good chance to put good marks on his record.

Ann rolled her eyes, packing up her books. “C’mon, at least say you learned some things!”

Airi walked up to them, shouldering her bag. “Do you guys need any more tutoring?” She offered, smiling tiredly. “If you need, we can go over to the diner.”

Ann looked her over worriedly. “Are you sure? You look pretty tired...”

The class president sported slight dark circles under her dry eyes, her hair unraveling from her braided tail. She gave them a reassuring nod. “I’m sure. I’d rather you all get good marks, after all.”

“With all this studying, I better ace these exams!” Ryuji exclaimed, shooting up from his seat and running out the door.

With a sigh, they followed after the ex-runner at a more sedate pace, Morgana joining up with them at the school gates.
“...And this is how you solve that.” Airi tapped on the page.

They were sat at their usual table in the Diner at Shibuya, surrounded by cups of coffee and empty dishes of food. It was rather late, so the restaurant was mostly empty. The only other patrons were also students, cramming for tomorrow.

“Ooh...I think I’m gettin’ it now!” Ryuji proclaimed, solving the rest of the problem by himself. “So I guess that’s what I do with this one too…” He muttered, the tip of his tongue sticking out of the corner of his lips as he tried out the next question. “Wait, that’s no good.” He frowned with frustration. “Dammit, what’d I mess up on?”

“Try starting over.” Akira advised, working on his own calculus question across from him.

Doing as he was instructed, Ryuji tapped his pencil against his forehead. “Hmm...Oh! Problem solved!” He grinned victoriously. “You’re freakin’ amazin’, dude!” He pumped his fist. “Solvin’ that question’s got me real pumped up.”

Morgana yawned inside the bag. “It’s kind of boring seeing you guys just study.”

Giving him a few scritches, Airi flipped her book. “OK, so remember. Minamoto no Yoshitsune was known as the magistrate’s patronage and fought against the Taira. Seeing lines connect when they actually don’t is an optical illusion. People see the same thing differently due to different cognitions.” She stated. “I know they were just random questions the teachers asked, but you never know when it’ll show up.”

Ann nodded. “Got it. I think all this studying really helped me!” She cheered. “Thanks so much, Airi.”

Akira nodded in agreement. “Yeah, we all know you’re probably exhausted….” He pursed his lips, looking away guiltily. Her dark circles were back and it was because of them. The only way to pay her back that he could think of was just to protect her from that stalker. Whoever he was, he'd better stay away.

Airi shook her head. “Don’t worry, I’ll be fine by Sunday. Anyway,” Her eyes hardened. “You guys better score well on the exams... If I find out you failed, I will find you, and I will let you know how disappointed I’ll be.” She smiled serenely. Even though the action seemed kind and motherly, there was an undertone of a threat that sent a shiver down their spines.


Ann laughed nervously. “We’ll do our best, mom….”

Akira coughed awkwardly, leaning away from the class president. Maybe she didn't need his protection. “It’s late, we should go home.” He waved over the waitress to pay the bill.

----5/11, WEDNESDAY, EARLY MORNING, SHUJIN ACADEMY.

Entering the classroom, Airi, Ann, and Akira sat down at their seats. The entire school felt tense, all the students dreading the exams. Class 2-D had full attendance today, sitting nervously at their desks as the clock ticked down.

Taking out her pencils, Airi took a deep breath, squaring her shoulders. She was ready to prove she
worked hard for this. If she didn't do well, her attending Shujin could be revoked and then she'd be separated from her friends and her guardian. This was a fight she couldn't lose.

Akira discreetly put Morgana in his desk and glanced over at his neighbor, fingers twitching from his frayed nerves. ‘She looks like she’s ready for war…’ He sweatdropped.

The door to the room slid open with a bang, silencing the room.

Inui-sensei walked in in his usual gray suit, staring out at the students impassively. He handed the exam booklets out. “Now then, let the first day of exams begin!” He declared.

They all immediately flipped open their books, answering question after question. ‘Although the line connects A to C, it looks like it leads to B instead. What is this phenomenon called?’ Akira read, furrowing his brow. ‘Optical Illusion.’ He answered, the lead scratching against the paper. “That sounds about right.” Morgana whispered encouragingly.

‘What is the reason why people will see the same thing differently?’ Airi read, her pencil flying over the page. ‘Visual information registers through a person’s eyes, and the brain receives the final revision. Due to different cognitions, every person perceives things in their own unique ways.’ She answered, moving on to the next page.

“Time is up. Put down your pencils and put your hands under your desks.” Inui-sensei announced. Snapping their hands away, the students placed their hands in their laps as he walked around to collect the booklets. “You are free to leave now. Tomorrow will be the second day of exams. Prepare accordingly.” He droned before leaving the room.

The class emptied out immediately into the halls, gossiping about their answers. Sighing, Airi turned to her fellow thieves. “How was the test for you?” She asked.

Ann turned around in her seat to face her. “Great, actually! I feel like I answered a lot of them correctly!” She smiled giddily, leaning against the back of her chair.

Akira leaned back in his seat. “Perfect score.” He stated coolly, smirking.

Airi narrowed her eyes playfully at him. “You sure Morgana wasn’t feeding you answers?”

Ann turned to look at him as well. “Yeah, what the hell!” She grinned. “Morgana, stay in my desk and help me!”

The feline’s eyes shined at the thought of being closer to her. “Yes...I mean, no!” He shook his head. “Cheating won’t do you any favors, Lady Ann.” He lectured reluctantly.

Smiling, Airi got up. “Let’s go find Ryuji-kun and do some more studying for tomorrow.” She suggested.

Nodding, the other two got up to leave the class. They met up with Ryuji in the hall who was leaning against the wall next to the staircase. “Yo!” He grinned sheepishly.

“How was your exam, Ryuji-kun?” Airi inquired, looking at him expectantly.

“Ehh..” He gave her a shaky thumbs up. “I’m pretty sure I got most of the questions correct…” He sighed tiredly. "Whatever."
Akira raised his eyebrows. “I’m impressed, Ryuji. You gonna ace tomorrow then?”

Groaning, the ex-runner dragged a hand over his face. “Fuck…” He whispered, clenching his eyes in anguish.

Ann huffed. “Get over it. You’re not the only one who has to go through this.”

They left the school to the Diner, spending another evening studying.

----5/12, THURSDAY, EARLY MORNING, SHUJIN ACADEMY.

“Today is the second day of exams.” Hiruta-sensei began, smoothly brushing his hair out of his eyes. “You may begin.” He smiled indulgently.

They flipped their booklets open, and the room was filled with the sound of lead scratching against paper. ‘Which of the following expressions came from the name of the position that Minamoto no Yoshitsune held?’ Akira read. ‘Magistrate’s Patronage.’ He answered immediately.

On page four, Airi read the question. ‘What is the origin of the English word “talent”?’ She pressed the tip of her pencil against the sheet. ‘It originated from the bible and was a word describing a sum of currency. The more currency a person had, the more wealth and therefore talent, they had.’ She wrote down neatly.

The exam continued on for another hour before Hiruta-sensei clapped his hands. “Time’s up!” He sang.

----5/13, FRIDAY, EARLY MORNING, SHUJIN ACADEMY.

“Today’s the third day of exams. Go ahead and get started.” Chouno-sensei smiled, her garish red lipstick shining in the fluorescent lighting.

They flipped their exam books open and began. ‘What did the Greek philosopher Socrates say that evil is born from?’ Airi read. ‘Ignorance.’ She filled in the choice bubble.

‘What’s the least number of colors needed to paint Japan so no two adjacent areas are the same color…?’ Akira read, furrowing his brow. Did we go over this? Pursing his lips, he quickly sketched out a diagram, numbering each box with a color. ‘Four then…’ He answered, erasing his picture.

The exam continued in a similar fashion. Ann gripped her hair a few times in frustration, but powered through.

“All right, all pencils down!” Chouno-sensei voiced out. Putting their writing utensils down, the teacher collected the exams from all the students and left the room.

Packing up her bag, Airi noticed a few shadows looming over her desk. Looking up, she saw she was surrounded by some of the class.

“Senpai,” Matsumoto began. “I want to thank you for the study sessions.” She smiled gratefully. "It really helped me out a lot!”
Airi waved her hands in front of her. “Oh, it was no problem! I'm glad you guys did well!”

Namikawa shook her head, her dark brown hair flying. “No senpai, we know it was hard on you to take time out of your busy schedule to tutor us…” She smiled shyly.

Tsukishima nodded in agreement. “Yeah, it was really nice of you to do that…” He rubbed the back of his black hair sheepishly. “Sorry for…complaining in the beginning.”

Airi giggled. “It’s all right. No one actually likes studying.” She consoled. “It was a good use of my time if you guys get better marks, so do your best tomorrow too, OK?”

They nodded eagerly before leaving the room.

“Um…” Mishima played with his suspenders nervously, staying behind. “Thanks a lot for the tutoring, Senpai…” He blushed, looking down shyly.

Airi smiled. “Of course, Mishima-kun. You do a lot for me too.” She replied kindly.

Surprised, he shot his head up to look at her, face red with embarrassment. “O-Of course, Senpai! It’s because you guys saved me and...Iwoulddoanythingforyou!” He confessed, clenching his eyes.

She blinked. “Um sorry, I didn't catch that. Can you repeat that?” She tilted her head, waiting patiently.

Gulping, Mishima wrung his hands nervously in front of him. “I said...I would do anything for-” He stopped, staring wide eyed at something behind her.

Confused, she turned her head and looked up.

Boring down intensely at the Phanboy with steely gray eyes was Akira, his glasses shining with an ominous glint. He stood there silently, never looking away.

“...For the Phantom Thieves!” Mishima finished, breaking out into a cold sweat.

“Oh, OK. You should let them know that.” Airi smiled, not noticing the testosterone filled stare down happening in front of her.

“...I'll just...go now.” The ex-volleyball member uttered, backing away slowly before running out of the room in a dead sprint.

Airi blinked at the dust trail he left behind. “I wonder what that was about..?” She shrugged, grabbing her bag.

“Who knows.” Akira replied flatly, standing close to her.

Ann snorted, walking up to them with her own bag. “Good job, Akira. Scare away the competition.” She grinned, her lips growing wider at the slight glare she received.

“Huh…?” Airi tilted her head, looking between the two curiously. What did she mean?

“Don’t worry about it, Airi.” Ann waved her away with a knowing smile. "Why don’t we go get Ryuji and do some more studying for tomorrow?”

“OK…?” Airi answered, looking befuddled. Was she missing something..?

----5/14, SATURDAY, EARLY MORNING, YONGENJAYA BACKSTREETS.
In the midst of brushing her teeth, her phone rang. Rinsing out her mouth, she accepted the call. “Hello?” Airi voiced.

“Yes, hello! Is this Kimisawa Airi-chan? It’s Principal Kobayakawa.” The caller spoke. “I’m sorry for the short notice, but I need you to come in earlier today to my office. There’s something I’d like to speak to you about.”

Her eyes flew wide open. “O-Of course, Principal! I will go straight away.” She answered hurriedly, rushing around her room to get ready.

“Good! I’ll see you in my office. Good bye.” He hung up.

‘Shit! Why today?!’ She screamed in her mind, throwing her phone on the bed. Quickly changing into her uniform, she forgot to braid her hair and just grabbed her bag, phone, and keys, flying down the stairs. Grabbing a piece of bread from the kitchen, she yanked the front door open and slammed it behind her.

Munching on the baked dough, she ran down the streets to the station, avoiding people along the way. The dog that belonged to the little girl she would see sometimes barked at her when she zoomed past, but she couldn't stop to apologize. Digging her wallet out, she swiped it at the turnstile at the station and ran down the stairs, just in time to catch a train.

Running in as the doors slid open, she collapsed on a free seat, panting. The passengers looked at her oddly, but didn’t say anything before turning away. The train pulled out of the station, engulfing the windows in darkness.

Leaning her head against the glass, Airi exhaled, closing her eyes. Just for a bit...

“This is Shibuya. I repeat, this is Shibuya. The time is now 6:38AM, the next stop is…”

With a gasp, her eyes flew open. ‘I’m at Shibuya already?’ She quickly got up and left the train, her hair whipping into her face as she ran to the Ginza line. Running up the stairs, she quickly swiped her wallet at the gate and sprinting into the train car, bumping into another student. “Sorry!” She apologized, backing up a little. The teenager ignored her, hunching into them self.

Breathing out, she felt her phone vibrate in her coat pocket.

Ak: Where are you?
Ak: I’m still outside the cafe.

Her eyes widened. ‘Shit! I forgot to tell Akira!’ She cursed herself, gnawing her lower lip. She quickly typed in a reply, feeling the guilt swallow her up.

Ai: I’m so sorry!
Ai: I’m already on the Ginza line.
Ai: Principal Kobayakawa called me in.
Ai: I’m so so so sorry!
Ak: Don’t worry about it.
Ak: I thought something had happened. I’m glad you’re safe.
Ak: I’ll see you at school.

‘I can never tell if he’s angry or not when texting…’ She bit her lip. He was still a pretty mysterious guy even after knowing him for a month.
Putting her phone back in her pocket, she gripped the safety bar as the train pulled out of the station. The train wasn’t as crowded as it would be if this was thirty minutes later, but crowded enough that there weren’t any seats available.

Sighing, she looked around, noting the occasional Shujin student. ‘What does the principal want..?'

“This is Aoyama-Itchome. I repeat, this is Aoyama-Itchome. The time is now 6:56AM, the next stop is...”

The doors slid open, and she darted out of the station and down the main street toward the school. Turning at the gate, she ran up the stairs into the entrance of the building and up the flight of stairs.

Stopping at the third floor, she panted, trying to compose herself. Straightening up, she took a deep breath and knocked on the main office door. “Come in.” She heard.

Opening the door, she slid it behind her. Walking up to the desk, she bowed. “Good morning, Principal Kobayakawa. You wanted to see me?” She asked politely.

The grossly rotund man smiled in his usual mustard yellow suit that barely fit him, the corners of his eyes wrinkling. “Ah, Kimisawa-chan! Yes yes. I apologize again for the early call, but I felt it was too important to delay.” He shuffled some papers on his desk. “First, I’d like to ask: You still have a part time job, correct? It’s noted in your file you have permission to work from Kawakami-sensei who is your...guardian.” He held up a folder.

She nodded hesitantly. “Yes, sir. She signed as my legal guardian the beginning of last year…” She answered slowly.

He hummed. “Rather strange for your teacher to be your guardian, but as long as it doesn’t interfere with your school lives, then it’s fine. Your scholarship is still in effect. However, do you really need this job?” He asked nonchalantly. “With the...scandal concerning Kamoshida-sensei, I had thought about restricting student movements outside of school, which would mean no student would be allowed to work.”

Her eyes widened, feeling her heart stop at that declaration. What..?

“Sir, please…” She pleaded quietly, dread filling her. “I really need this job. Kawakami-sensei is my legal guardian in name only. All the bills are paid by myself. If-If you revoke this, I won’t be able to keep my house...” She wetted her lips nervously. “A lot of students also work after school for personal reasons. I know Namikawa-chan in my class needs her job to support her sick mother. Please reconsider…” She trailed off, wringing her hands, her nails digging into her skin.

Kobayakawa listened silently, frowning.

She bit her lip. If he went through with this, she would starve. She would lose her house. She would be homeless. The all-too familiar pain of her stomach growling for food, a place where the adults scoffed at her existence, suffering alongside others who had lost their place in society. She wasn't going to go back to that.

Sighing heavily, he acquiesced. “All right. I won’t go through with it. You are one of my top students, after all. I’ll just have to tell the students to be careful while they’re out.”

Airi nodded, silently sighing in relief. She came this close to losing everything again.

He cleared his throat. “Moving on, how is Kurusu-kun adjusting?” He asked sternly. "You're the class representative in charge of his class so there is no one better to ask.”
She straightened up. “He’s adjusting just fine, sir. In fact, I’d say he’s flourishing.” She answered calmly, folding her hands in front of her. "His grades are steadily improving, and he has not taken any illegal actions in the month he has been here."

“Hmm, I see…” The principal hummed, adjusting his collar against his nonexistent neck. “And how has the class treated him?” He raised a brow.

A muscle in her neck twitched. “Most are still scared of him due to the rumors that are still circulating, but they’re slowly warming up to him and vice versa.” She replied, inclining her head respectfully.

He leaned back against his chair, the metal groaning under the weight. “Well, it seems our school has certainly had a positive influence on the young man. It’s good to know he’s taking his education here seriously.” He cleared his throat. “Now, moving on. I’d like to ask you if you had noticed any...dubious interactions with Kamoshida-sensei before his er, change in behavior. Did you notice anything happening that could have triggered such a change? Or rather...someone?” He hinted.

She furrowed her brow slightly. “No, sir...He focused most of his attention on the volleyball team, and Takamaki-chan occasionally...and Suzui-chan…” She whispered, looking down morosely at her oxfords.

Taken aback, Kobayakawa coughed awkwardly. “Yes, it was certainly tragic that a student decided to go to such extremes. My condolences to the girl and family, of course...” He pursed his lips. Leaning forward, he rested his elbows on his desk, the buttons on his shirt looking like they were about to pop. “Are you sure you didn’t see anyone do something to Kamoshida-sensei?” He stressed, frowning solemnly. “…I do need to tell the hounding media something, after all. It is just far too suspicious,” He scowled with displeasure. "Especially with this Phantom Thieves business going around the school."

Airi looked at him blankly. “No, sir. I didn’t notice anything. I apologize if I’ve disappointed you.” She bowed politely. ‘This asshole…’ She seethed in her mind. He seemed more concerned about the school’s image than the students who were being abused.

He sighed. “I see...well, I’ve kept you long enough. Today is the last day of exams. You’re dismissed, Kimisawa-chan. Good luck.”

Bowing again, she left the office and headed to her class. ‘That scared me so badly...At least now I know he’s the most likely reason why Nijima-senpai is investigating us…’

She frowned. This wasn’t good.

Chapter End Notes

HMM I WONDER WHO’S GOING TO SHOW UP NEXT CHAPTER
He waited outside the cafe for Airi, the sun shining palely on the old buildings. It was nearing 7:09AM and she still wasn't here. They would usually meet up ten minutes prior to 7AM so they'd have plenty of time for the commute.

Checking the time on his phone, he frowned softly. ‘Where is she..? It’s getting late…’ Pursing his lips, he sent her a text. He didn’t want to just show up at her house without an invitation. ‘Did something happen…?’ He wondered, beginning to worry.

Feeling his bag shift, he looked over his shoulder. “Where is Airi..?” Morgana inquired, looking around curiously. He shrugged.

Ak: Where are you?
Ak: I’m still outside the cafe.
Ai: I’m so sorry!
Ai: I’m already on the Ginza line.
Ai: Principal Kobayakawa called me in.
Ai: I’m so so so sorry!

He furrowed his brow. What? Why would the principal call her in so early, especially on an exam day? He exhaled.

Ak: Don’t worry about it.
Ak: I thought something had happened. I’m glad you’re safe.
Ak: I’ll see you at school.

Pocketing his phone, he made his way to the station without her for the first time in weeks. He frowned to himself. It felt kind of lonely without her kind disposition next to him. Almost like when the sun would hide behind the clouds, shying away. He could do without, but he'd rather not.

He got on the crowded train, making sure to hug his bag to himself. He spent the train ride in silence, Morgana for once not saying anything. ‘He’s also feeling the difference, huh…’

“This is Shibuya. I repeat, this is Shibuya. The time is now 7:20AM, the next stop is…”

Getting off as soon as the doors slid open, he shouldered his bag again and walked over to the Ginza line. Waiting for the train, he checked his phone for any new updates from Airi. None.

He exhaled through his nostrils, feeling a little disappointed that she hadn't contacted him again. Maybe he was too attached. It would be good to be a little independent for once. “So sleepy…” He heard behind him.

He turned around and saw Ryuji walking up to him, mouth wide open in a yawn. “I ended up pullin’ an all-nighter once I realized today’s the last day of exams.” He rubbed the back of his head.

Morgana leaned against his shoulder. “You? Staying up studying?” He asked skeptically.
Ryuji waved his hand back and forth. “Sorta...I did do some studyin’ ‘cause I’m scared of how Airi’s gonna give me that disappointed face if I don’t do well, but then I just moved to playin’ some games.” He sighed, slumping his back. “Before I knew it, it was morning.”

Akira gave him a sympathetic look. “I know the feeling...but you’re gonna fail.” He stated matter of factly.

Ryuji gave him the stink eye. "Bullshit, I studied enough! You prolly spent the whole night studyin’ too.” He retorted, looking around the vicinity. “Hey, where’s Airi? You two are usually stuck together like glue…”

Akira glared at him slightly at the dig. So what if they were close? Was it a crime to want to spend time with her? “The principal called her in early...She didn’t tell me why.”

“Morning…”

They turned to see Ann walk up to them, covering her mouth as she yawned. Ryuji huffed in amusement. “Yo, look who else is yawnin’.” He remarked with a grin.

“Exams are almost over, so I thought I’d make one last effort across the finish line." Ann rubbed her eyes. "I think I’ll really ace today’s exam!” She voiced optimistically. "I did so much studying, there's no way I could fail!"

“Impressive, Lady Ann.” Morgana admired, waving his tail in the air. "You’re quite different from this stupid monkey I know.”

Ryuji glared at the feline. “Huh? Don’t gimme that crap. Your brain’s tiny compared to mine.”

“Size is meaningless if there’s nothing inside, you know.” Morgana said matter of factly, giving him a curly grin.

“What was that?!” Ryuji growled, stomping closer. Akira winced at the loud volume, moving his head away from the two’s argument. Can they not do this right next to his ears?

Ann rolled her eyes at their antics. “Ugh, will you please shut up?! You’re gonna make me forget everything I memo-” She stopped, shoulders stiffening. Slightly turning her head, her eyes darted around the busy train platform. “Am I imagining things..?” She whispered, furrowing her brow.

“What’s wrong?” Akira asked, resting his hands in his pockets and narrowing his gaze. “Is it him..?” He asked quietly.

She bit her lip. “I don’t know…”

Ryuji blinked. “What, you see a groper or something?” He rested his thumbs in his pockets as he looked around the train platform as well. All around them were just adults impatiently waiting for their commute to work and other students chatting quietly to each other.

Ann shook her head. “No, that’s not it. It’s...” She hesitated. "Nothing.”

Morgana frowned, not saying anything.

The train arrived, and they got on. The doors slid close, but Ann didn’t relax. In fact, she tensed up even further, keeping her head down. Akira glanced at her, feeling a little concerned. ‘It must be him then…’ He noted. Who could it be? Was it the same guy who had followed Airi?
“This is Aoyama-Itchome, I repeat, this is Aoyama-Itchome. The time is now 7:16AM, the next stop is...”

The doors slid open, and they began walking out with the crowd of people. Akira glanced back, trying to find the stalker.

Getting on the escalator, Ann turned around and gasped. “Oh my god, that guy got off!” She clenched her hands near her chest. Akira turned around, eyes surveying the crowd of people. There were too many for him to spot the stalker.

“Isn’t this bad..?” She whispered, looking at him for help.

Yawning, Ryuji stretched his arms in the air, looking bored.

Ann glared at him. “Hey, at least act like you care!” She complained, placing her hands on her hips. Akira smiled with amusement. Guess Ryuji wasn't really wary of whoever was following her. Probably because he had the muscles to punch their lights out if need be.

Rubbing his head, the ex-runner acquiesced. “Fine...” He groaned, walking up the escalator. “Come on.”

Ann looked at him questioningly, but followed. Blinking, Akira made his way after them.

They walked out of the station and onto the street, stopping just a few steps away. “Kay, so just stand there until the pervert gets close.” Ryuji explained, pointing to the tiled sidewalk. “Then we’ll stop him.” He laced his hands behind his head.

Raising a brow at his plan, Akira nodded. “We should confront him.” He suggested, adjusting his glasses.


They then walked to the side, watching from under the awning of a nearby store. Ann stood with her back in front of the station stairs, standing stiffly.

Hearing footsteps coming up behind her, her eyes darted to the side, her heart beating quickly in her chest. The footsteps came closer, the person near enough to touch her, and she turned around.

Before he could make contact, both Ryuji and Akira intercepted him with a glare, standing in between them.

He stopped, keys jingling against his thigh, and stared at them monotonously. He was a male teenager in a white uniform shirt from a different school, black slacks enveloping his long slim legs. His blue hair was cut into a stylish bob, framing his slim jaw. His hooded gray eyes were accentuated with thick lashes, enhancing his rather feminine face.

The thieves blinked, looking the stranger up and down in confusion. Ryuji turned to Ann. “Hey, uh...are you sure it’s him? Or are you just that self-conscious.” He questioned quietly.

Akira narrowed his eyes at the stranger, recognizing those similar gray eyes. ‘It is him.’ He confirmed to himself. This was the same person who was stalking Airi that day, and all those other days as well.

Ann sputtered at his accusation, blushing. “Rgh, I’m not that-”
“Is there something you want?” The stranger asked politely, voice deep and smooth for his age.

Glaring, Ann shoved her finger in front of the effeminate man’s face, moving in front of her two friends. “That’s *my* line! You were the one stalking me!” She shouted indignantly.

Blinking, the stranger gave her an unimpressed look. “Stalking you…? That’s outrageous.” He scoffed, brushing his bangs to the side.

Glowering, Ann took a step closer, hand still outstretched. “I know you’ve been following me!” She yelled. “Ever since the train!”

Ryuji and Akira stood behind her, glaring at the stranger as well. No one messed with their friends. “You were also following our other friend, weren’t you.” Akira stated coldly.

“Right!” Ann added heatedly. “It was you, wasn’t it?! Even before today!”

Hesitant, the stranger looked away. “That’s because…” He trailed off.

A car honk interrupted them, and a black luxury car rolled up next to them on the road. The tinted window slowly rolled down, revealing an elderly man with his gray hair pulled into a low ponytail, clothed a homely looking kimono. “My goodness… I had wondered why you left the car. So this is where your passion lead.” He remarked, giving them a natural smile. “All is well that ends well.” He laughed heartily.

Akira blinked at the arrival of another stranger. ‘He looks familiar…’

The strange stalker held a loosely clenched hand near his chest. “I saw you from the car…and I couldn’t help myself from chasing after you.” He confessed, looking away guiltily. “I didn’t even notice the calls from Sensei…But thank goodness, I caught up to you.” He smiled, filled with relief.

Sweatdropping, Ann fiddled with a ponytail. “OK…” She voiced slowly, unsure of how to handle the situation.

“What?” Ryuji scrunched up his face in confusion, rubbing his head.

Clenching his fists, the unknown student stared determinedly at her. “You’re the woman I’ve been searching for all this time!” Ann’s eyes widened at the statement, blushing furiously. “Please, won’t you-”

“W-Wait a minute, I-” She stammered, taking a step back.

The unforeseen teenager swept his arm out dramatically. “-Be the model for my next art piece?!”

Akira stared blankly. What. They looked at each other awkwardly. “…Model?” Ann uttered, blinking in surprise.

“All that I’ve drawn till now has been lacking, but I feel a passion from you unlike anything else.” He explained, looking at her pleadingly.

“This man’s highly suspicious!” Morgana hissed as he peered over Akira’s shoulder, glaring at the newcomer.

Ryuji scrunched up his face. “Ain’t this a recruit for some shady business?” He remarked, glancing over at him with suspicion.

The blunet held a hand out theatrically. “Will you cooperate with me? What do you say?” He
pleaded.

Ryuji stepped in, intercepting the newcomer. “Hold your horses!” He shouted, narrowing his eyes. “Who’re you anyways?”

Blinking, the teenager straightened his posture. “Oh, where are my manners? I’m a second-year at Kosei High’s fine-arts division. My name is Kitagawa Yusuke.” He introduced himself. Taking a step forward, he pushed Ryuji out of the way, focusing on the half foreigner.

Stumbling, the punk glared at him.

“I’m Madarame-sensei’s pupil, and I am being allowed residence at his place.” Yusuke explained himself. “I’m striving to become an artist.”

Their eyes widened. “Huh?! Do you mean THAT Madarame?” Ann questioned fervently. “The one who was on “Good Morning Japan” the other day?”

Akira narrowed his eyes slightly, locking eyes with Ryuji who nodded. ‘It’s that Madarame…’ He noted, glancing at the elderly man waiting in the car. The one their first Mementos target mentioned. Could this all be connected…?

Yusuke nodded. “The very same.” He answered cordially.

The model glanced away toward her two companions. “But that’s the name we heard in Mementos the other day…” She murmured quietly.

Yusuke blinked, not hearing what she said.

“Yusuke!” Madarame called out, the car still waiting for them next to the sidewalk.

Yusuke gasped and held a hand to his chest. “I’m sorry, Sensei. I’ll be right there!” He assured before turning back to the Shujin students. “Madarame-sensei’s exhibition will begin at the department store near the station tomorrow. I’ll be there to help out on opening day. Please come by. It’d be great if you could give me your answer in regard to being a model then…Oh!” He perked up. “You mentioned you had another friend. Might you be talking about that beautiful rose? The emotions shown on her face last Sunday were so raw in expression…” He remarked dreamily.

“Whoa, are you talkin’ ‘bout Airi?! Dude!” Ryuji sputtered, glancing over at their leader and flinching at the stormy expression on his face.

Akira glared darkly at the newcomer. “‘Beautiful rose’? This bastard…” He clenched his jaw. Who the hell did he think he was to comment on their friend like that? A person he had stalked and who he made feel uncomfortable.

Morgana swatted him on the head with a paw, silently reminding him to keep his cool.

“Her name is Airi? “Lovely Jasmine”…She would be a great model as well.” Yusuke smiled and took out four tickets from his bag. “Please, accept these tickets!” Turning his head, he glared over at Ryuji. “I bet you have no interest in the fine arts, but I’ll include your tickets as well.” He stated reluctantly, handing over them to Ann.

She hesitantly accepted them, pocketing them in her bag.

He bowed. “Well then, I hope to see you there tomorrow!” He turned and entered the car, closing the door with a click. It drove away down the road, leaving them in the dust.
“That guy’s as easy to read as a book...” Ryuji remarked, kicking the ground with a foot. “You’re not plannin’ on goin’, are you?” He looked over at Ann with a disgruntled expression. “I mean, he’s been stalkin’ you and Airi for how long? Weeks?” He looked at Akira, who nodded in confirmation, face set in stone.

Biting her lip, Ann looked down. “...I think I will.”

They turned to look at her in shock.

Sighing, she took out her phone. “Crap!” She cursed, panic setting in. “Look at the time! We’re gonna be late for our exam!” She ran off in the direction of their school, dodging other pedestrians.

Morgana stood fully on Akira’s shoulder, fur bristling from his anger. “How dare he go after Lady Ann...and to speak of Airi that way!” He hissed. “I’ve memorized that face of yours, Yusuke!”

Frowning, Akira began walking to school as well, Ryuji following after. ‘We should tell Airi...’ He noted to himself. So that she would know to be careful around this Kitagawa guy.

“That old guy was Madarame, right?” Ryuji whispered, furrowing his brow deeply.

He nodded, mouth set in a straight line. The person who could be their first official target as the Phantom Thieves.

They fell silent for the rest of their journey to school. Running up the stairs, they went into their own classrooms. Airi was already at her desk, sitting tensely. ‘Her hair is down.’ He blinked. It was...pretty, to see she could be disheveled. Taking a seat, he greeted her with a wave. “Hey.”

Her eyes glanced over at him and smiled slightly, though it looked strained. “Hey yourself.”

Ushimaru-sensei walked in, holding the last exam booklets, and they straightened up in their seats, prepared for this last battle.

They left the school as a group once they finished, taking the train to Shibuya. “Mmmmm, it’s over!” Ann groaned in relief, smiling happily.

Airi laughed. “Yeah, no more exams for a while!” She cheered. “I can sleep!”

They stopped right outside the Ginza Line entrance near one of the screens that displayed advertisements. Ryuji slumped, resting his thumbs in his pockets. “It’s over...” He whimpered. “How ‘bout you...?” He looked over at Akira.

“I’m feeling confident, thanks to Airi’s tutoring.” Akira replied cockily, running a hand through his hair. He at least answered most of the questions correctly.

“You traitor!” Ryuji hissed, betrayal written all over his face.

Airi turned sharply toward him. “Why do you say that, Ryuji-kun?” She smiled serenely. “Did you not do well today?”

Breaking out into a cold sweat, he waved his hands in front of him. “N-No! I mean yeah, I did fine! I think...” He whispered that last part.

Sighing, she looked at him with amusement. “Don’t worry, I know you must have scored well
enough to pass.” She consoled. “They’ll come back graded next week, so there’s no point in fretting now.”

Sighing in relief, Ryuji took out his phone, scrolling the screen.

“What are you looking at?” Ann asked, looking at him curiously.

“The usual site.” He replied, flipping the phone to show the screen, displaying the Phan-Site. “...It’s no use. There ain’t any useful info.” He frowned, disappointed. "The number of posts are gettin’ less and less, too…”

Struggling out the bag, Morgana stuck his head out of the zipper to glare at him. “I am not letting this end as a one-hit wonder, OK?”

“Speaking of info.” Akira began, remembering what had happened earlier with a grimace. “We had a little run in earlier.”

Airi blinked. “On the way to school? Did something happen..?” She looked at her friends curiously. What had she missed?

“Oh yeah, that freak…”Ryuji groaned, rolling his eyes. “We caught that stalker who’s been followin’ you and Ann.”

She looked at them, stunned. “Huh..?! Who was it? He had blue hair, right?”

Akira nodded, frowning deeply. “Apparently he’s an artist and wants you two as his models…His name is Kitagawa Yusuke.” Or The Stalker in his mind. There was no way he was going to let Airi go off to model for him. It was likely she’d say yes because she was too nice and who knew what he would do to her. She was a dear friend, probably his dearest friend, and he wanted nothing bad to happen to her.

Ryuji nodded in confirmation. “He called you “That lovely rose” and everythin’...Was creepy.” He grunted.

“...He wasn’t that bad.” Ann defended weakly.

Morgana’s eyes widened. “Don’t tell me. Was it love at first sight with that Yusuke guy..?” He whispered.

The model rolled her eyes. “It’s not like that.”

The feline let out a sigh of relief. “O-Oh, of course not…”

Airi furrowed her brow. “Kitagawa Yusuke..? How strange…” She remarked quietly. She had never heard of that name before.

Ryuji nodded. “Yeah, and get this: He’s the pupil of that Madarame guy we keep hearin’ about.” He stated grimly.

“Madarame?!” She asked, looking at them with wide eyes. “Are you serious?”

Ann nodded. “Yeah, that Madarame. He asked for you, too.” She shrugged awkwardly. "I don't know though..."

Airi hummed. “Hmm, I guess it would be fine to check out our next potential target...Oh wait, I have work tomorrow early afternoon.” She stated apologetically. “You’ll have to go without me.”
Akira shook his head. “Don’t worry about it. I don’t want you getting anywhere near him…” He grimaced. “The way he talked about you was…unsettling.”

She gave him a curious look, but nodded.

“Oh! Why don’t we go eat lunch somewhere?” Ann suggested cheerfully. “We still have a little left over from the buffet.”

Ryuji grinned, rubbing his nose. “I want sushi then! Or domestic-raised eel!”

Airi sweatdropped. “We don’t have that much…Only what, ¥2000?” She sighed. “Why don’t we go to Big Bang Burger?”

Shrugging, the group moved to the fast food restaurant.

“So,” Ann began, sipping her soda. “Kitagawa-kun gave me free tickets to Madarame’s exhibit, which is tomorrow. We could go scope him out, and enjoy some nice art at the same time.”

They were sat in Big Bang Burger at a table near the back at, away from the other customers. The table was laid out with burgers, fries, and sodas, paid for with the last remaining funds from Kamoshida's Treasure.

Akira nodded, finishing off his burger. “I’m curious, too. It’s interesting that we’d end up meeting the man…”

Airi munched on a fry. “Do you guys even know anything about fine arts? I hear it’s pretty cutthroat.” Like all art scenes. Whether it was music, painting, writing; passions lead to competition and competition led to grudges.

Ryuji chewed his burger, swallowing. “Fine arts, huh…” He moped, hanging his head.

Morgana sneaked his head out underneath the table. “Appreciating the fine arts builds character. A phantom thief who can’t identify an original is lame.” He stated smugly.

Ryuji pouted. “Well, if everyone’s goin’…” He looked over at Airi apologetically.

She waved him away. “Don’t worry about it. Go enjoy some impressionism.” She smiled, stealing a fry from Akira’s tray.

Noticing her theft, Akira snorted. “I’m looking forward to it.” He shrugged, stealing some from her side.

Ann grinned. “Just the phrase “going to an art exhibit” sounds kinda mature.” She ate a fry. “Let’s meet at the exhibit entrance tomorrow.” She suggested.

They nodded in agreement. “I’ll meet up with you guys afterwards.” Airi stated, sipping her soda.

They finished off their food and sat for a while, checking their phones.

“Oh.” Akira blinked, turning to Airi. “What did the principal want this morning?” He asked.

Ann and Ryuji perked up, looking at the class president quizzically.
Putting her phone down on the table, Airi sighed. “Same thing what Niijima-senpai wanted. Answers about Kamoshida and The Phantom Thieves.” She scowled. “He was going to ban part time jobs for students because of the scandal...”

“What?!” Ann yelped, giving her an incredulous expression. “Doesn’t he know how many students work?!” She clenched a hand around her drink.

Aira furrowed her brow, frowning deeply. “A lot of students wouldn’t have money for food then...Wait, don’t you..?” He trailed off, looking at Airi.

She nodded angrily. “Yeah, my job is basically the only reason I don’t starve. I won’t have any money if I can’t work…”

Ryuji slammed his fist again the table, rattling their empty trays. “That bastard! Who cares about us students as long as the school looks good?!” He gritted his teeth.

“Quiet, don’t make a scene.” Morgana advised, slinking underneath the counter.

The other customers in the restaurant were glancing over at them. The teenagers quieted down, sighing. “At least he didn’t go through with it…” Airi stated slowly, hugging herself.

Akira nodded, leaning his elbows on the table. “Yeah...Boss doesn’t give me an allowance, after all.” He joked quietly.

They all burst into chuckles, mood lifting up again.

Drying her hair with a towel, Airi wrapped it around her neck and sat down in front of her laptop.

She let out a loud groan, releasing her stress from the day. ‘Fuck you, Kobayakawa.’ She cursed. Who did he think he was, threatening to restrict part time jobs for students? Did he think they just all lived richly or something? Why would they even have part time jobs then. It was as if he thought their school was full of people who had nothing wrong with them. It was delusional.

Taking a deep breath, she tried to calm herself. He didn’t do it, so it’s fine…

Flipping the screen up on her laptop, she turned it on and began to type into the search bar. ‘Madarame Ichiryusai…’ She narrowed her eyes. The results popped up, and she clicked on the first link.

“Began painting in 1976...Rose to popularity within the last decade with the famous painting “Sayuri”...?” She frowned, leaning back in her chair. She scrolled down to the paragraph titled “Apprentices.” “He’s had several apprentices throughout the years...no names listed though…” She hummed. Her phone rang out.

An: So I keep thinking about what Nakanohara said…
An: Could it really be the same Madarame?
Ak: It has to be.
R: Seconded.
Ak: Is there another Madarame who’s an artist?
Ai: No, he’s the only one that pops up.
Ai: I’m researching his background right now.
R: What does it say?
Ai: He got famous about a decade ago, with his most famous painting “Sayuri”.
Ai: It says he’s had several pupils, but it doesn’t list any names…
An: If we’re right, then Kitagawa-kun is studying under a corrupt teacher.
R: You mean a teacher who treats people like tools.
R: I bet he threw away all his apprentices.
An: Kitagawa-kun’s life is probably pretty terrible…
R: We gotta look into this.
Ak: Yeah.

She put her phone back down on the desk, resuming her browsing. Pursing her lips, she searched up “Madarame Ichiryusai’s Art.” The page loaded with multiple images of artwork. The images ranged from impressionism to realism and classical.

She narrowed her eyes and opened as many artworks as she could, the tabs all compounding together. ‘There’s so many styles, and they’re all really good…’ She frowned, she wasn’t an expert in painting so she couldn’t say for sure, but something was really weird about this. ‘There’s no way he painted them all, there would be dips in proficiency. They’re all too perfect in their styles to come from one person…’ It was only a hunch and she could be wrong, but there was no harm in telling the others this tomorrow.

Sighing, she went to bed. Hopefully they’d find something for their next target. She didn’t want this to end. She didn’t want the Phantom Thieves to give up already...

"Airi, hurry up!" He ushered as they ran through the dirty alleyways, arms filled with snacks and drinks.

“R-Right!” She panted, trying to keep up with their longer legs. She was tiny compared to them at the young age of nine, but she was the only one old enough to help out.

“Hey, you fucking brats!” They heard from behind them. “Stop stealing from me!”

Snickering, Nishiki turned his head to stick his tongue out at the original owner of their goods. “Fat chance, asshole!” They turned the corner, immediately splitting up.

Ten minutes of running through alleys and junkyards, she finally made it back to the dilapidated apartment building where one of the units was their home. Collapsing on the doorstep, she dropped her stuff and searched her ratty shorts. They had a rule: when you come back from a run, you had to pick your way in.

Taking a deep breath as her calves burned from the intense bout of exercise, she took out a lockpick she made earlier and picked the lock, opening the door with a click. It was one of her first lockpicks and it broke right away, the thin metal not being able to withstand the fidgeting.

Gathering her bounty, she closed the door behind her and dumped everything onto the communal table. There were other bags of chips and frozen tonkatsu packs here, meaning they had already made it back before her.

An arm wrapped around her neck and she gasped, trying to yank it away as hard as she could. Rui...!
“Whoa, whoa! Calm down, Airi!” They removed their arm and held her thin shoulders with their hands, turning her to face them. “Sorry….” Takase apologized sheepishly, just shy of fourteen years old. “Did I scare you?”

Exhaling shakily, she shook her head. “N-No, just...flashback. Anyway, you guys got back safely? No injuries?”

He grinned, giving her a thumbs up. “Nope! We’re all fine! It’s almost time for dinner, so hopefully this will be enough for a week.” He sighed heavily, guilt marring his eyes. “I don’t want to steal…”

Airi nodded slowly, biting her lip. “I don’t think any of us want to, but if we don’t, the kids would only have one meal a day...A-And they’re all small stuff. We only steal like, ¥1000 worths.”

He sighed again, ruffling his messy brown hair. “Yeah, it’s not like we’re hurting anyone, right? Though, Nishiki seems to wanna. Wait,” A grin slowly grew on his lips, showing one chipped tooth. “The kids? You’re a kid yourself!”

She pouted slightly. “I’m almost ten…”

He laughed and ruffled her hair, messing up her simple braid. “Stay this cute, OK? Hey, you used to play cello, right?”

She nodded hesitantly. “Y-Yeah...Why are you asking?”

He hummed, lacing his hands behind his head. “I’m just wondering if we could have music night along with movie night? One of the little kids know how to play the flute.” He shrugged. “Maybe we can get you a cello so you can play for your big bro!”

She scrunched up her face at the thought. “I...I don’t really want to.” She didn’t want to touch a cello ever again. Not when it still hurt so much. “I mean, we’d have to steal those instruments, right? There’s no way we could afford them, even if we asked the obaa-san.”

He sighed, slumping his arms. “Yeah...they’re already trying so hard to get more funding for us.”

They quieted for a while, letting the sounds of Nishiki handing out drinks to the four kids in the other room fill the silence. “Hey.” Takase began, Airi looking at him curiously. “They told me that...my aunt and uncle are coming to take me soon.” He grimaced. “I don’t really remember them, but I know they argued with my parents a lot before...before they died. I dunno if I should go…”

She frowned. “But they’re your family, right? If they take you in, you won’t have to struggle with us. You can eat three meals a day, go to school, just...live.” And not have to suffer like they did. To be looked down upon by others for not having parents. To be an invisible child of Japan.

They didn’t exist.

He clenched his jaw, turning away guiltily. “I wouldn’t forgive myself if I just abandoned you guys…”

Reaching out with her small arms, she hugged him from behind, her still chubby cheek against his spiny back. They hadn’t eaten enough this week. “You’re not abandoning us. You’ll always be our big brother, and it doesn’t mean you can’t come to visit…”

Smiling shyly, he lightly gripped her hands on his stomach. “Yeah...I’ll work hard to come back.”
“Don’t forget me, OK?”

Chapter End Notes

artist bby is finally here <3
Chapter 64

----5/15, SUNDAY, MORNING, YONGENJAYA BACKSTREETS.

It was raining again. The skies were dreary and gray, not a single hint of warmth shining through the impenetrable clouds. She grabbed her small umbrella beside the door and left her house, making sure to lock it. She had on her beige trench coat over a long sleeved blouse and black jeans, and wore laced up boots today instead of heels, not wanting to get her feet soaked. Water splashed with each step as she walked down the streets to Cafe Leblanc, constant thudding noises drumming into her head from the umbrella above her that shielded her from the onslaught.

Airi sighed. ‘There won’t be many customers today at the flower shop…’ She turned the corner into the alley where Leblanc was at. Akira was waiting underneath the awning, looking up pensively at the gray skies. “Good morning, Akira.” She greeted, tucking some stray hair behind an ear and patting her bun down.

He inclined his head to look at her. “Good morning.” He smiled, opening his umbrella.

They walked down to the station together, taking their time to maneuver the cramped alleys. “Are you excited for the exhibit?” She asked as they passed a closed bar.

“Mm, not really.” He replied quietly. “Knowing those artworks were created by a corrupt man is...disappointing.” He rested a hand in his pocket, the other holding up his umbrella.

“Actually…” Airi began hesitantly. She should tell them about what she thought last night. “That might not be true...him painting those pieces, I mean.”

He looked at her curiously. Morgana popped his head out of his bag, shaking off the excess moisture that fell onto his head. “What do you mean, M- Airi?” He asked, grooming an ear.

They walked into the station, droplets splashing onto their legs as they closed their umbrellas. They swiped their wallets and got onto the train. It was completely packed with people, especially considering it was a Sunday. The floors were wet and slippery, so they made sure to grip onto a safety pole. The two teenagers squished up against each other, blushing at the close proximity. Every time she took a breath, her chest brushed against his torso.

“Are you going to the exhibit?” An older woman gossiped in her seat.

“No...it was sold out by the time I knew about it.” Their friend replied glumly.

“Wow, it must be packed!” The older woman marveled. “And it’s expensive too...Maybe I should take out a loan.”

“Seems like a lot of people are going.” Morgana remarked quietly, watching the two women chat from his slit in the bag.

“Yeah...” Airi replied quietly. "So, while I was researching him last night, I looked at all the works I could find. The weird thing is that he has such a wide variety of styles, and they’re all too good…”

Akira blinked, looking down at her. “What do you mean..?” He asked quietly.

The train shook as it took a sharp turn, jostling the passengers. “Ah!” Airi yelped as her foot
slipped against the wet floor, slamming against him. He wrapped his arms around her, leaning against the doors for balance.

“Urgh… can’t breathe…” Morgana wheezed, the bag pressed against the glass. Akira adjusted his shoulder, moving the feline away from the door.

“Sorry…” Airi apologized, face red with embarrassment. She tried to take a step back, her hands coming up to his chest to push herself off, but his arms tightened, holding her in place.

“Don’t worry about it…” He murmured, the cool plastic of his glasses pressing against his heated cheeks. It felt...nice, to hold her like this. As if he was her protector.

Biting her lip, she looked to the side shyly. “U-Um…OK…” She leaned her head against his chest, his racing heartbeat thundering in her ear. Was he nervous like she was? She had never been so close to a man like this...

He tucked her head under his chin. “What were you saying about Madarame..?” He asked after a moment, his breath shaky.

“Um…” She stammered, trying to form a sentence in her mind and barely succeeding. “Th-They’re all too different but perfect to have been painted by one man, so it probably wasn’t him.” She swallowed, her heart in her throat. Even though the train was packed and humid from the rains, she could still make out the fresh scent of coffee around him. It was almost comforting.

Akira hummed thoughtfully. “He had a lot of apprentices, right?...He could’ve used them to paint for him.” He stated grimly.

She nodded. “Which means Kitagawa-san is being used.” She stated somberly. “There’s a chance I could be wrong, and I hope I am...but…” She trailed off.

He exhaled softly. This was getting complicated.

“*This is Shibuya. I repeat, this is Shibuya. The time is now 11:12AM, the next stop is...*”

Slowing to a stop at Shibuya station, the train doors opened, and they stumbled as the crowd of people spilled out of the car. Taking a few extra steps, Akira held her shoulders and maneuvered them both out of the way of pedestrian traffic.

Airi sighed, straightening her jacket. “Ah...everyone’s rushing to the exhibit.”

“Seems so. I’ll walk you to your job.” He offered, shouldering his bag.

“Are you sure?” She bit her lip. “Ann and Ryuji are probably waiting for you at the exhibit.”

Akira shook his head. “They can wait a little longer. C’mon.” He gestured to the stairs. They walked up into the underground walkway, making sure to climb quickly like everyone else. Entering the underground mall, they made their way to the flower shop. It was pretty empty today, most of the shoppers off at the big event.

Stopping at in front of the flower shop tucked in the corner of the mall, Airi turned around to look at Akira and smiled. “Thank you, Akira. I’ll see you later?”

He nodded, smiling softly. “Yeah. I’ll text you if anything comes up.” He held up his phone.

She waved as he walked away. Exhaling softly, she turned and entered the store, taking off her
jacket. “Good morning, Hanasaki-san.” She greeted, putting on her apron.

Her boss smiled. “Good morning, Kimisawa-chan! Who was that who walked you here? Was it your boyfriend?” She asked teasingly.

Blushing, Airi ducked her head. “N-No...he’s a friend.” She busied herself with trimming some of the flower stems. A very good friend.

Hanasaki chuckled. “Didn’t seem that way, but I’ll let it slide. C’mon, I’ll be closing early today.” She gathered a bundle of flowers. “There aren’t going to be many customers what with that exhibit going on!”

Waving farewell to Airi, Akira turned and walked out of the mall and to the stairs that would lead above ground. “Aren’t you getting too cozy with Airi?” Morgana pouted, waving his tail in the air from his shoulder.

Akira coughed. “Why would you say that..?” He looked away awkwardly. It wasn't as if he...liked her like that. Or did he? Would it be so bad if he did like her? She was kind, and pretty, and had a nicely sized chest- er. Nice smile. 'Don't perv on your friend.'

The cat grumbled. “Why would I, indeed…”

Akira blinked when he noticed the change of names. “When’d you start just calling her Airi?” He asked curiously. Didn't he used to call her Lady like he did with Ann?

“When you started getting so cozy.” The feline retorted, going back inside the bag.

Akira deadpanned at the answer. Once he reached ground level, he opened his umbrella again and walked over to the department store that loomed over Central Street. He grunted as another person bumped into him trying to get to the exhibit. ‘It’s extremely crowded.’ He noted, gazing at the extremely long line for the exhibit ticket booth. Everyone on the line were adults, dressed in expensive to professional clothes.

Looking around, he spotted the two blonds in the sea of brown and black and walked up to them, squeezing by two women. “Hey.” He greeted.

Ryuji gave him a quick grin from under his umbrella. “Yo!”

“About time! Let’s go!” Ann gestured to the entrance.

They moved past the crowd of people, pushing their way to the gates. “Tickets?” The usher asked. Ann took the tickets from her bag and handed them over. “Enjoy the exhibit.” The usher bowed.

The thieves shuffled through the packed hallway, and finally made their way to the exhibit hall. Morgana shook his head out of the bag. “So crowded…” He groaned, ears close to his scalp.

Ryuji scowled and pushed him back inside the bag. “It’ll be a pain in the ass if someone sees you, so don’t stick your head out too much, all right?” He whispered.

Hearing footsteps, the feline hid back inside the bag, and the teenagers turned to look.

“You came!” Yusuke exclaimed happily, looking at Ann. He was wearing a beige pinstriped sports jacket and a pink shirt underneath. Encompassing his long slim legs were a pair of black slacks,
Black loafers covering his feet. “Is your friend not coming..?” He blinked, his long lashes fluttering against his fair cheeks.

Akira adjusted his glasses, the reflective light hiding his narrowed eyes. He only cared about Ann and Airi.

“Um...yeah.” Ann stuttered, playing with a ponytail. “She has work, so…”

He nodded understandingly, a glimmer of disappointment in his eyes, before turning to glower at Ryuji. “You really came.” He repeated flatly.

The ex-runner glared back. “What’d you expect when you left us those tickets?!” He retorted, shoving his hands inside his purple 777 jacket.

“Make sure that you don’t get in the way of the other visitors.” Yusuke advised coolly before turning to Ann with a smile. “Come now. I’ll show you around. I’d like to speak more about the picture I’d like to draw too.” He offered, gesturing further into the crowded exhibit.

She nodded, and turned to her friends. “Well, see you guys later.” She said hesitantly and followed the artist.

Morgana popped his head out of the bag again. “Will Lady Ann be all right?!” He fretted animatedly. “What if he drags her behind some painting and tries something funny?” He despaired, ears sticking straight up in panic.

Akira snorted. Ann would beat his ass. She showed that she wouldn't tolerate sexual harassment ever again.

“I told you not to come out!” Ryuji hissed at his shoulder. Grumbling, the cat moved back inside the bag.

Sighing, Ryuji slumped. “Are we really gonna “appreciate” the fine arts? Can’t we just go find Madarame and I don’t know, scope him out..?” He appealed, looking at his leader hopefully.

“We should at least look around.” Akira shrugged. “Airi told me something earlier that’s got me thinking…” He moved closer, covering his mouth. “She said he didn’t paint any of these.” He whispered.

Ryuji looked at him in shock. “You serious…? How’d she figure that?” He furrowed his brow incredulously.

His gray eyes roamed around, noting all the wealthy adults in attendance. “She said it wasn’t possible for one man to paint so well in so many different styles or something…” He shrugged. “He might be forcing his pupils to paint for him. Which means…”

Ryuji slumped. “Shit. Yusuke might in trouble then. I guess we should do a quick pass through it once…” He pouted. “Uh...Which way are we supposed to start?” He started walking further into the well lit hall, Akira following him sedately.

Every painting hung on the walls were surrounded by hordes of people, analyzing and critiquing the art. Walking past a few, he eyed them from afar. ‘I can’t really tell from this distance but...they are really different from each other.’ He noted.

Strolling for a bit, Ryuji stopped and looked over to the right. “Hm?” There was Madarame in his homely kimono, talking to a couple of reporters and journalists. “It’s him.” He nudged Akira. They
walked a few steps closer to listen in.

“We continue to be truly surprised by your imagination.” The interviewer began with a smile. “You have such expansive styles, it’s hard to believe that it all stems from one person...Where in the world does all your inspiration come from?” She pointed the microphone in front of the elderly artist.

Humming thoughtfully, Madarame grasped his chin. “Well...It is rather difficult to put into words...” He waved his hands in the air. “They naturally well up from within my heart like bubbles rising one after another in a spring.” He answered gracefully.

Akira narrowed his eyes at the vague response. ‘More like forcing your students to draw them for you...’

The interviewer ooh’ed in response. “Naturally, you say?” She repeated.

The elderly artist nodded. “What’s important is to distance oneself from worldly desires such as money and fame.” He counseled. “My atelier is a modest shack, but it is more than enough to pursue true beauty.”

Ryuji blinked with recognition. “...A shack?” He frowned thoughtfully.

The interviewer nodded. “I see...So the act of emptying one’s mind gives rise to inner beauty. Still, to think we could hear the word “shack” coming from the great artist Madarame.” She giggled.

Madarame chuckled. “You would understand if you saw it...”

Tapping his foot, Ryuji hummed. “Wasn’t the word “shack” something...” He muttered to himself.

Akira looked at him questioningly. What was he talking about?

A woman ran up to the interview and the two teenagers turned to watch. “Madarame-san is actually here?!” She gasped excitedly.

Overhearing her outburst, more people ran up to the elderly artist. “Over there!” A man called out. “I’m so glad I came on opening day!” A fangirl gushed.

In an instant, a horde of admirers rushed up close, swallowing up the two thieves into the crowd. “Hey, stop pushin’...!” Ryuji shouted, yelping when he received a sharp elbow in the ribs.

Grunting when another person pushed against him, Akira reached out and grabbed Ryuji’s hood. Dragging the ex-runner behind him, he forced his way through the sea of screaming people, wincing when he got hit with a purse in the face.

He gasped when his glasses were knocked off the bridge of his nose. Reaching out into the air, he encircled his hand around his eyewear. ‘They’re designer...!’

“There’s way too many people!” Ryuji cried, grabbing onto the leader’s shoulder.

“I’m getting crushed...” Morgana wheezed, his bag being squeezed against two women.

“Don’t die on us, all right?!” Ryuji shouted.

Tensing his muscles, Akira pushed and shoved his way out of the exhibit hall. ‘If they’re gonna shove me, I’ll just shove right back...!’ He thought determinedly.
Not noticing the commotion, Ann and Yusuke were in the far corner of the exhibit, admiring a small painting of a cat. “I didn’t know there were so many types of Japanese art.” She marveled.

Yusuke nodded understandingly. “Usually one concentrates on their own style.” He explained. “However, Sensei creates all this by himself. He’s special.”

Ann hummed thoughtfully at the explanation, wondering if that was actually true.

“There you are, Yusuke.”

The two teenagers turned around to see Madarame walk up to them. “Sensei!” The Kosei student bowed quickly.

His gaze slid from his student to his companion. “Ah, the girl from yesterday. Are you enjoying the exhibit?” Madarame asked.

She nodded, smiling politely. “I don’t know how to put it into words…but it’s really amazing.” She replied, staring around in awe.

The elderly artist smiled satisfactorily. “You’re sensing something from the artwork...That alone is enough to give us artists satisfaction.” He stroked his beard, turning to his pupil. “I hope this becomes a wonderful piece, Yusuke.”

Said pupil looked to the side, inclining his head obediently.

“Well then, if you’ll excuse me.” Madarame nodded, taking his leave to another section of his exhibit.

Ann blinked. “You’d imagine artists would be difficult to approach...but he seems really friendly.” She grinned, playing with her red orb earrings. ‘Is he really so bad that Nakanohara wanted his change of heart…?’ She wondered to herself.

Yusuke turned and smiled slightly. “Indeed.” He stated.

Turning around, Ann observed the other paintings. A splatter of red caught her eye, and she walked up to one of the paintings in the corner. “Oh, this is it- the painting I wanted to see in person.” She gasped in joy.

The piece showed a mountain range in the distance, the sides covered with trees. The sky was painted red from the setting sun, clashing against the cooler colors of the grass and shrubbery. It exuded a lot of negative emotions.

Yusuke walked up next to her, shoulders tense. “...This one?” He asked quietly, glancing at her uncertainly.

She tapped her chin. “I guess it’s the painter’s anger? I’m not sure, but I sense this...strong frustration from it. To think such a cheerful and gentlemanly person could make such a piece…” She marveled, unaware of her companion’s growing discomfort.

Yusuke clutched his chest, grimacing.

The model turned to look at him. “Something wrong?” She inquired.

His hand fell limp as he shook his head. “Don’t mind me.” He replied calmly, a look of resignation
swimming in his gray eyes. “There are better pieces than...this one. Come now, this way!” He gestured to their left.

“H-Hey...!” She yelped, watching him walk away. ‘I wonder what’s wrong…’ She frowned softly.

The artist directed her to a couple more pieces before he checked his phone for the time. “I’m afraid I’ll have to take my leave soon.” He frowned softly. “Would it be all right to ask for that answer now?”

Ann blinked. “Well...if it’s just modeling, then...sure!” She smiled cheerfully. “I’m actually a model for a fashion magazine here in Tokyo, so this won’t be too different, I think!” She pumped a fist confidently.

Yusuke smiled widely. “How wonderful! Here,” He gave her a card from his pocket. “This is the address of Sensei’s Atelier with my number. Please let me know when you’re coming.” He requested eagerly.

She accepted the card and put it in her bag, nodding. “OK, sure!”

He bowed slightly and turned to leave, but stopped. “Oh.” He turned back to look at her. “If it’s not too much trouble, would you mind bringing your friend with you? I would love for her to model for a piece as well.” He pleaded.

Ann bit her lip. “Um, I could ask...” She replied awkwardly.

He beamed. “Great! Farewell, Takamaki-san.” He walked away, turning the corner and disappearing out of sight in the crowds.

She sweatdropped. ‘Akira’s gonna blow a gasket at this...wait.’ She stilled.

Turning her head left and right, she tried to find her companions. Tried. “Where’d they go...!?!” She looked around incredulously.

Scrunching up her face in anger, she stomped out of the exhibit.
They stopped in the station walkway and collapsed in exhaustion, finally out of the insane crowd that had swarmed the mall. “That old lady totally elbowed me…” Ryuji groaned, sitting on the ground as he held his bruised ribs.

Akira grimaced, putting his glasses back on his face. ‘I probably have a bruise on my nose now…’

Ryuji leaned his back against the railing, letting out an exhale. “…But thanks to that, I remember now.” He dug his phone out of his pocket.

Akira furrowed his brow. “Wait, what about Ann?”

The ex-runner waved him away. “Let’s not worry about it for now...It’s about a post online.” He tapped the screen a couple times, pulling up the Phan-Site. “Here, look at this.” He flipped the phone to show him.

“Why’d you leave without me?!”

They turned to see Ann stomp up to them, glaring angrily.

Ryuji sweatdropped. “You got it all wrong; we got dragged into this huge crowd and-” He shook his head. “Anyways. You gotta look at this too.” He showed the screen to the model. “This post might be about Madarame.”

They stared at him in surprise. “What’s it say?” Ann asked.

“’A master of the Japanese arts is plagiarizing his pupil’s work.’” He read the post. “’Only his public face is shown on TV.’”

Ann took a step back. “Plagiarizing?!” She gasped, staring at them with wide eyes.

“Then this might confirm it.” Akira stated, resting his hands in his pockets.

The model looked at him curiously. “What do you mean?” She asked.

“Earlier this morning, Airi told me she suspected that none of his artwork was painted by him.” He explained. "Something about how all the artworks are too different.”

Ryuji nodded in agreement. “I didn’t think much of it when I first saw it, but hearing “shack” and “Madarame” triggered it. ’His treatment of the pupils who live with him is awful. He teaches nothing and bosses them around. He treats them inhumanely, as if disciplining a dog…’” He read.

Morgana popped up, hanging its paws out of the bag. “Abuse on top of plagiarism, hm..?” He scowled.

Ryuji grinned. “If this is real, it’ll be a huge scandal.”

Ann grasped her chin thoughtfully. “I wonder if Kitagawa-kun posted this. I mean, he IS a pupil of his.”

Akira shook his head. “Probably not. Airi said Madarame has had multiple apprentices throughout the years. It says so on his biography.” He frowned deeply. “It might be one of them…”

Chapter 65
Morgana licked a paw. “Then it’s very possible the Madarame we heard about in Mementos is referring to the same one.”

“A man like that doing such a thing...?” Ann whispered, furrowing her brows sullenly. “I wonder if we can ask that Shadow from earlier about this. Oh.” She perked up. “Actually, we just need to talk to him in reality.”

Ryuji deadpanned. “And how do we go about that? Are we gonna explain it all, startin’ with Mementos?”

Morgana nodded in agreement. “Besides, if we make a move out in the open, there’s the possibility that Madarame will find out.”

Her face fell. “Oh...Yeah, right.” She reluctantly conceded.

“This all fits way too well to just be a coincidence.” Ryuji stated. "It has to be him." Their phones buzzed.

Ai: OK, I’m done with work.
Ai: Where should I meet you guys?
Ak: We’re at Shibuya station walkway.
R: We’ve gotta catch you up because wow.
Ai: ? Something happened?
R: Lots.
Ai: OK, I’ll be there in a few minutes.

“Let’s wait for Airi to get here first.” Ryuji suggested, the others nodding. “So what did Yusuke end up showin’ you?” He turned to the model.

Ann crossed her arms. “Well, I was admiring this one painting, but...he got kind of uncomfortable and said it’s not as good as the others.” She pursed her lips. “I’m thinking if that plagiarism thing is true, then that might’ve been his work…” She trailed off.

They grimaced. “Dude, that sucks for him. To paint something and have someone else take credit…” Ryuji growled, clenching a fist.

“Hey!”

Airi jogged up to them, passing by the usual throng of people that commuted in the station. “How was the exhibit?” She asked curiously.

The four groaned in response. She blinked. “Uh...was it that bad?” She smiled sympathetically.

Ryuji rolled his eyes. “We’ve got so much to tell ya.”

Akira nodded. “You’re probably right about the plagiarism. We found a post on the Phan-Site that might be about Madarame.”

“Yeah,” Ann looked down sadly. "Like he treats his pupils worse than dogs, and he doesn’t teach them anything…Kitagawa-kun might be in trouble then...”

Airi covered her mouth in horror. “That’s...That’s disgusting!” She furrowed her brow angrily. “How dare he…” She clenched her hands around the strap of her bag. Treating the kids under his name like trash? She already disliked the man.
“Hey.” Ryuji interjected. “If this post is legit, ain’t this the kinda target we’ve been waitin’ for?” He grinned hopefully.

Ann blinked. “Well, yeah, but...Is it really true..?” She looked down worriedly.

“By the way,” Ryuji turned to her. “What’d you do about the whole modeling thing?”

They all looked at the model questionably. “Kitagawa-kun gave me his contact info with the address to his sensei’s atelier.” She replied, crossing her ankles. “And...He asked for you to be his model too.” She looked apologetically at the cellist.

Airi perked up. “That’s perfect!” She replied with an awkward smile.

The others looked at her increduulously. “Huh?!” Ann gasped.

Akira stared wide eyed. ‘What..?’

Shooting them an odd look, Airi continued. “We can go check out the location then. He lives there, right?” She idly grasped her arm. "Maybe we can ask him about his situation.”

Ann blinked. “So...you’re going to model then?” She asked hesitantly.

Airi shrugged, feeling a bit uncomfortable. “Well...if he tells us what we want to know, it’s the least I could do in return. Plus, it’s kind of flattering...” She replied shyly, a slight blush staining her cheeks. To hear someone wanted to turn her into their next masterpiece was an honor, even if he did stalk her for weeks. It wasn’t what she wanted though. She didn’t know if his intentions ran deeper...

Akira looked away, lips tightening as he resisted the urge to frown. An uncomfortable sensation bubbled in the pit of his stomach at the thought of her wanting the artist’s attention. Drawing someone sounded like an intimate moment, and she’d willingly do it if she thought it would help even if the artist was someone who had stalked her and made her feel unsafe. Couldn't she just let Ann do it? He just wanted to protect the cellist, especially from the artist. Did she want Yusuke’s attention..?

His eyes met Morgana’s who stared up at him knowingly. He glared slightly, silently urging the feline to not mention it.

Ryuji got up. “All right then, let’s try goin’ tomorrow.” He declared enthusiastically. "We’re off to Madarame’s house right after school!”

“Huh?” Ann yelped in shock. "You want us to model tomorrow?! This is too sudden…”

Ryuji gave her an odd look. “What? We’re just gonna talk to Kitagawa.”

“The sooner the better, right?” Airi added. “You guys better be with us tomorrow.” She looked up at Akira hopefully, biting her lip. "I don’t think we’d feel safe being there with only Kitagawa-san as company…”

Akira nodded. “Of course.” He replied firmly. They had to help Yusuke, even if that meant bringing Airi closer to him...His lips twitched downward, a sharp ache in his chest.

“Oh, that’s what you meant…” Ann breathed out in relief. “Well, should we go home now? It’s getting late and we have school tomorrow.” She looked out through the large windows in the walkway, the sky an orange hue from the setting sun.
They all nodded and went their separate ways.

Akira, Airi, and Morgana rode the train back to Yongenjaya together. Taking her phone out, she began texting a certain classmate.

Akira looked over curiously. “Who’re you talking to?”

“Mishima-kun.” She answered distractedly, typing in the rest of the text.

His eyes darkened at the reminder of their number one supporter. He was also competition.

"I wanted to ask him if he could find if Nakanohara posted on the forum about his change." She continued, unaware of the dark aura that surrounded him. "If he did, maybe we could message him about Madarame…"

“Ooh, that’s a good idea, M- Airi!” Morgana meowed, sneaking his head through the zippers. “He could provide insight into Madarame’s actions.”

She nodded. “Exactly!” She gave him a few scritches on top of his head.

Akira relaxed and nodded. “Let us know if he does.” He idly tweaked a strand of hair. He wasn't going to admit he was relieved.

“Of course.” She smiled, leaning back in her seat. “Um...were you OK earlier?” She asked hesitantly, looking up at him timidly. "When we were talking about going to Kitagawa-san’s, you seemed kind of...angry?”

Akira tensed and looked away awkwardly. “I...wasn’t angry. It just seemed weird that you would go model for him when you haven’t even met him.” He explained quietly, forcing out a nonchalant shrug. “I mean, he was stalking you for weeks, right?”

“Oh, right...” She blushed in embarrassment, covering her lips with a closed hand. “Well...it doesn’t seem like he’s a pervert or anything, because Ann would have refused...And,” She looked down at her lap. “It’s nice to know someone thinks I’m pretty...pretty enough to paint even! It’s a huge honor...even if I’m a little uncomfortable about it.” She smiled, scratching her cheek sheepishly.

He frowned, hunching his shoulders. ‘No one ever told her..?’ “Well...” He cleared his throat. “I think you’re...you’re beautiful…” He whispered awkwardly.

She stared at him with wide eyes before covering her flaming cheeks with her hands. “Th-Thank you...You didn’t have to say that…” She mumbled, peeking up at him.

He frowned. “It’s the truth.” He frowned, offended that she would think he was lying. She was pretty important to him, being one of his first friends here in Tokyo, and he was only stating a fact. She really was beautiful, especially when she smiled. He didn’t think he’d ever have the courage to say that out loud though.

Airi stilled. ‘He...He meant that? I…’ She bit her lip, her heart pounding in her ears. People would say she was pretty, but they only meant it superficially. Hearing it from him made it sound like he was referring to all of her.
Her cheeks were warm against her hands. “...You’re very handsome.” She confessed quietly. “I know I make fun of you for doing that thing with your hair, but I actually think it’s cute...” She hid her face.

Blinking, he felt his cheeks heat up against the cool plastic of his glasses. ‘She think’s I’m handsome..?’ No girls back in Mishima had ever told him that. Even his mother complained about his looks, saying he took too much after her for a boy.

Pursing his lips, he reached out and placed an arm around her shoulders, tugging her into him. Surprised, she looked up at him. “Thanks.” He smirked, trying to act cool by sweeping a hand through his hair.

She giggled, a blush still staining her cheeks. “You dork.” She teased.

He chuckled, his smirk softening into a heartfelt smile. Even if he was jealous she was modeling for Yusuke, he had to remind himself that she paid more attention to him. She considered him a good friend, too. Was he content with that though..?

Looking between the two with amusement, Morgana chimed in. “And what about me, Mo- Airi? Am I handsome?” He raised a paw, tapping it against her arm.

She giggled. “You’re the most handsome of them all, of course!” She smiled, tapping his wet nose. He wriggled his muzzle, trying not to sneeze.

----5/16, MONDAY, MORNING, SHUJIN ACADEMY

Inui-sensei paused in his lecture. “Oh yes, the great artist Madarame is holding an exhibit in Shibuya right now, isn’t he? I’ve gone to see his works a number of times.” He closed his eyes in nostalgia. “Goodness, are they magnificent! The moment I saw them, I knew he was something else.”

Airi gave the teacher an odd look. ‘I’ve never seen him so expressive...’ She sweatdropped.

The teacher’s eyes zeroed in on a certain ebony haired student. “By the way, you seem far removed from the arts, Kurusu-kun.” Inui-sensei remarked. “Do you know who created the piece which sold for the highest price back in the 20th century?”

Blinking in surprise, Akira straightened up in his seat. He sweated. ‘Crap, I don’t...’ His eyes slid to the right where Airi was sitting, silently pleading for help.

She sat forward, resting her chin against her palm. Her fingers covered her lips from the front of the class. ‘Van Gogh.’ She mouthed silently.

“V-Van Gogh...” Akira answered hesitantly.

Inui-sensei clapped. “That’s correct. It seems you know a thing or two after all.” He looked mildly impressed. “That piece was purchased for the equivalent of 18 billion yen, and it sold for even more later. However, since the turn of the 21st century, a new record has been set practically every year.”

“Hey, did you know that? I had no idea!”

“Maybe he actually is smart. I’m kind of surprised.”

“Oh shoot, Inui-sensei’s glaring at us!”
Staring at the two disapprovingly, Inui-sensei crossed his arms. “Fujiwara, Ando. Detention.” He declared. The two groaned, nodding in resignation. “People put a serious amount of passion and money into art. If I had that kind of money, I wouldn’t mind having a painting or two myself…” He chuckled.

Airi stared with wide eyes. A smile and now a chuckle? Who was this man and what did he do to Inui-sensei?

Morgana flicked an ear. “Seems like art can make you a tidy sum. Let’s see with our own eyes whether or not the accusations of him stealing art are true. You’re meeting the others at the train station, right? Let’s go when class lets out!” He declared quietly.

Akira nodded slightly, turning back to the lesson.

Meeting up at the station once school ended, they swiped their wallets and got onto the train toward Shibuya. There weren’t enough seats, so Ryuji and Akira stood while Airi and Ann sat down. Akira handed over his bag to Airi, who hugged it on her lap with her own.

Ryuji sighed sullenly as he held onto the safety grip next to his head. “Phantom thieves goin’ by train…This ain’t any different from how I get home from school, y’know.” He grumbled.

Airi looked up at him in amusement. “Did you want to walk the whole way?”

Ann nodded in agreement. “The train is the fastest way to go. Plus, we can bring pets on here.”

At that, Morgana burst out of the bag. “Hey, who’re you calling a pet?!” He yowled. Panicking, Airi began scratching his ears to appease his rage.

“A dude, be quiet! We didn’t pay the pet fare.” Ryuji hissed, looking around with wide eyes.

Purring from the ministration, Morgana glared up weakly. “I’m the one guiding you to your destination! You should be calling me “Master”!”

Akira sweatdropped, watching the feline with an exasperated expression. Did he really have to make a scene?

“Ooh, kitty!”

A young girl walked up to them, smiling innocently at the cat.

They looked at her in surprise. “Er, shoot…!” Ann bit her lip.

“Is that your pet, Miss? I heard it meowing!” The little girl asked excitedly, looking up at Airi.

Airi smiled gently. “It’s a stuffed animal.” She lied, lips twitching.


A grin grew on Ryuji’s lips, and he looked at Airi impishly. “You heard her, Airi. Press on its head.” He suggested.

Glancing at him with an unimpressed look, she looked down at the feline on her lap. “This is
ridic—" Morgana began indignantly, but stopped when Airi gently patted his head. “Mewww…” He meowed blissfully.

“Wowweeewww eel, The girl clapped gleefully, bouncing in place. “Again! Again!” She chimed.

Airi sweatdropped. She didn't mind the little girl, in fact she was really cute, but Morgana just had to be louder than usual.

An idea hitting him, Akira leaned down and placed his hand on the feline’s head. Airi looked at him questioningly, not stopping him.

He smirked mischievously. “Time to button mash.”

He began petting furiously. “Mew...Meowwowowowowowowowowow!” Morgana sputtered, his head bobbing up and down out of his control, before flopping against the the side of the bag.

Gaping, she smack his hand away, looking at him disapprovingly.

Akira snickered silently. ‘That’s what you deserve for telling me to go to sleep all the time..!’ He thought vengefully, taking his hand back.

“...Blerghh…” The feline groaned, head rolling back.

The little girl laughed innocently. “That’s so funny! I wanna hear it again!” She cheered.

“I just threw up in my mouth…” Morgana whispered weakly, his soul departing from his unmoving body.

Ryuji sweatdropped. “Seriously..?” He shook his head exasperatedly.

"The next stop is Shibuya. I repeat, the next stop is Shibuya. Doors will open on the left side."

The teenagers perked up at the announcement and Airi turned back to the little girl. “I’m really sorry, but this is our stop. Why don’t you go back to your mother? She looks kind of worried.” She gestured to an older lady watching them from her seat, a little a ways away.

“Oh, OK. Thanks, miss!” She grinned, showing a missing front tooth, and hopped back to her mother.

They all sighed in relief. “Akira, don’t do that again…” She scolded, taking a handkerchief from her pocket and covering Morgana’s mouth with it.

Akira smirked cheekily, holding his hands up. “All right, all right.”

The train crawled to a stop, and they got up and off the cart, swiping their cards at the turnstiles to get out. “I’m going to bring Morgana to the bathroom and help him wash his mouth.” Airi announced, looking concernedly at the comatose cat.

They nodded, and she took the bag and walked over to the public bathroom. Thankfully, it was empty at this time but not for long. Putting the bag down on the counter, she unzipped the bag fully and gently lifted Morgana out. “Urgh…” He groaned, his paws hanging limply in the air.

“Here, Morgana, clean your mouth out.” She advised, turning on the faucet and holding him near the sink.

“Oh, thank you…” He whimpered in relief, sticking his head close and lapping at the water. He
spat it out right after, and he did it over and over until he shook his ears.

Lifting him away from the sink, Airi grabbed a napkin and gently wiped his muzzle. “Feel better?”

He purred in relief. “Much better. That Joker…” He seethed, jumping back into the bag.

Laughing slightly, she carried the bag in her arms and left the bathroom, walking up to her waiting friends. “Here.” She handed it over to Akira who nodded, shouldering the bag.

“So,” Ryuji began. “Which line do we gotta transfer to?” He looked over at Ann.

She took out her phone and searched up the address. “Doesn’t look like there are any stations close by to that address…” She furrowed her brow. “If anything, this is the closest station.”

He looked at her incredulously. “What?! Then we gotta walk the rest of the way?!” He shouted. “What kinda phantom thief takes the train, and then walks to their destination?!”

“The kind that are underaged drivers and don’t have a car.” Airi retorted in amusement. “C’mon, let’s just start walking. Which way, Ann?” She looked at the model expectantly.

“Looks like the fastest route is to get to station square and then walking past Central Street, in the first residential area.” Ann explained, following the directions on the GPS. “It’s supposedly a shack, but this is the neighborhood he lives in...As expected of a famous artist.” She snorted, putting her phone back in her pocket.

“Well...let’s go then.” Akira jerked his head toward the exit.
The group of thieves walked down the stairs to the station square. They strolled through the popular area, avoiding the crowds of people, and headed toward Central Street. There were a lot of students out and about since it was a school day, going shopping and hanging out with their friends. Everywhere they looked, they saw teenagers in the familiar Shujin uniform as well as uniforms from other schools.

“I hear Shibuya’s dangerous now…”

Curious, Airi stopped and turned her head to the left where two schoolgirls were talking to one another next to the Hachiko statue, the tall trees shading them from the setting sun.

Noticing her stop, Akira called out for Ryuji and Ann to wait. They stood with her, overhearing the conversation.

“There’s a rumor that there’s a scam going on, and they target students…” A high school girl fretted, gripping her phone worriedly.

“Yeah, like a guy will come up and ask if you want to make lots of money by doing simple jobs…” Her friend added. “I hope they don’t try to come up to us…A lot of people in my class already did them.”

The high schooler looked at her friend in surprise. “Really?!” She yelped.

Her friend nodded. “Yeah, and they have a lot of money now but…they all look really miserable…I hope Takeshi-kun can get out of it.” She looked down at her lap.

A few feet away, the thieves looked at each other. “Scams..?” Akira furrowed his brow in confusion. Why did that sound so familiar… He flash backed to a couple of weeks ago when a man in a suit tried to ask him for a job. He blinked. ‘Was that..?’

Airi bit her lip worriedly. “Students being scammed in Shibuya…? I should let Nijima-senpai and the class know about this.” She stated, gripping her bag. If it turned out to be yakuza, there would be almost no way to help them.

Ann nodded, a crease between her brows at the thought. “Yeah, we don’t want any of our classmates to fall for this…”

They turned and continued on, hitting Central Street. Ryuji frowned, holding his bag over his shoulder as they maneuvered the popular street. “You sure it’s this way? I don’t remember seeing a house.”

Ann nodded. “It’s supposed to be in a residential area past Central Street. We’ll have to walk a bit though.” She grinned. "Let’s get going!"

They walked through the busy street, passing the large movie theater, and continued until the towering business buildings began to change to smaller buildings and houses. Passing an empty intersection, they turned a corner at a large house.
A few minutes later, they stopped. “Is...that it?” Ryuji asked hesitantly.

In front of them was what could be called a house, as it was in the residential district, but it was so rundown, just going near it could blow it over. The sidings were all folded sheets of metal, all in different sizes and cuts, haphazardly nailed onto each other. They might have been gray before, but now shone dully in a rusty bronze. On the second floor was a small balcony, just large enough to hold cheap plastic laundry hangers from daiso*, the mid-May breeze causing them to knock into each other. An orange comforter with patches was hung outside one of the windows, drying in the setting sun. The entire “house” contrasted greatly to its much nicer neighbors, which were all made from cement and looked to be in much better conditions of wealth.

The teenagers and cat stared at the house incredulously. Ann looked down at her phone’s GPS. “We’re at the right address…” She answered slowly.

Leaning to the left, Akira spied a broken drainage pipe, leaking brown water down the walls. He grimaced at the sight, recoiling away. Gross. Did people really live like this?

Taking a couple steps closer, Airi peered at the entrance way. “The nameplate says Madarame…” She stated uncomfortably. “But...does this even count as a place of residence? How has city hall not knocked on its doors about its violations..?” She scrunched up her face when she spotted the foundation, rotting away in a black sludge.

“Uhh...You ring the bell, Airi.” Ryuji volunteered, putting his hands on her back and lightly pushing her toward the house.

She sweatdropped, stopping in front of the rusted sliding door. “Um...OK. I hope the walls don’t collapse…”

Morgana snickered. “No one sneeze or we’ll blow this house down, OK?” He joked, peering over Akira’s shoulder.

Ann gave him an exasperated look. “We’re not wolves.”

They walked up to the house, avoiding the vines climbing up the walls and spreading onto the cement. Lifting her hand, Airi rang the doorbell. The speaker cracked. “Who is it? Sensei is currently busy.”

“Hello.” She spoke into the receiver. ”Kitagawa-san, correct? It’s Kimisawa and Takamaki.” She heard a gasp from the speaker. “I’ll be right out!”

“People really do live here…” Ryuji remarked disbelievingly, running a hand through his messy locks.

The door slid open with a crack, revealing Yusuke. “Takamaki-sa-” His eyes slid to the left and froze, staring unblinkingly at Airi.

A little unsettled, she leaned back a bit.”...Good afternoon, Kitagawa-san. I’m Kimisawa Airi. It’s nice to officially meet you.” She smiled politely at the androgynous male, bowing slightly. He was a lot prettier than she thought he would be for a stalker. Like Akira, he also sported some ridiculously amazing eyelashes for a man. “I hear you wanted me to come today with Ann?”

Akira narrowed his eyes at the unmoving teen. Why was he staring so much...

“...Like a fire.” Yusuke uttered, after a moment of silence.
Airi blinked. “I’m sorry?”

He took a step forward, closing the distance between them. Her eyes widened. ‘What is he doing..?!’ She yelled in her mind.

“Your hair is like a pink rose, the braid mimicking the soft petals, but as the late afternoon light hits it, it shines orange, like a halo from the sun. It matches your milky skin tone, your slight perspiration giving it a dewy look.” He listed, holding up his hands in a portrait frame, dissecting her features with a keen eye.

“Youre eyes are a dark vermilion, contrasting against the ivory of your face. Yes! The combination is of all the warm tones, the colors switching from light to dark in such a smooth gradient! I can just imagine the piece now..!” He proclaimed, gazing at her with unbridled awe. “I beg of you, be my model as well!”

The others stared at the Kosei student incredulously. Who would say all that to someone they just met?!

Frozen in place, all Airi could do was blink. “I...Thank you...?” She answered uncertainly, overwhelmed by his acute observation of her. This was her stalker..?

“Please, let me show you both to the art room.” Yusuke gestured inside the house, giving the two ladies a determined smile. “Perhaps I could have both of you together in a piece.” He murmured to himself. "A nature theme with Takamaki-san as a wood nymph, her blonde hair like soft sunlight and blue eyes complimenting a clean river running through a forest, and Kimisawa-san as a personification of a flower, sitting by the riverbed?”

“Uhh…” Ann uttered slowly, nervously glancing to her class president for help.

He reached out with a hand to guide them in, but it met the black fabric of a school blazer, draped on a male. Cold gray eyes met irritated gray eyes. “...You two are here, as well?” Yusuke spoke, disgruntled that Akira had gotten in the way.

Ryuji gave him a shit eating grin, standing behind the girls. “Hey.” He greeted. “Sorry, but we ain’t here to talk about the modeling thing. There’s something we gotta ask you.” He furrowed his brow. “Is it true Madarame’s plagiarizin’ stuff? He’s abusin’ people too, yeah?”

Yusuke stared at him with an unimpressed face. “Are you serious?” He asked flatly.

Taking out his phone, the ex-runner showed the forum post on the Phan-Site to the artist. “We read about it online.”

Squinting at the small screen, Yusuke walked closer, crossing his arms. “This…?” He held his forehead, his shoulders beginning to tremble. A few chuckles escaped him before transforming into full on laughter. “Preposterous! Not only is the plagiarism impossible, but abuse? If he hated children so much to harm them, he would never allow pupils into his home!” He refuted. “And I’m the one residing here and studying under him. I’m saying it’s not true, so it’s beyond doubt.” One eye twitched as he stated that.

Zeroing in on the twitching eye, Akira narrowed his eyes. ‘Bingo.’

“You might be lyin’ about it!” Ryuji retorted, glaring at the artist.

Yusuke looked away, his eyebrows furrowing. “That…” He hesitated. “That is utter rubbish.” He frowned deeply, holding his arms out at his sides. “I had no family when Sensei took me in and
raised me into what you see now!” He glared scathingly. “If you continue to ridicule the man I owe my life to, you will rue this day!”

Ann stared at him disbelievingly. “...You really think that?”

Airi stepped in with a gentle smile. “I’m sorry, Kitagawa-san.” She soothed, holding her hands up in a placating manner. “We’re only worried for you... We saw the post and we wanted to make sure you were OK.”

He blinked. “I...” He exhaled sharply and looked away, an uneasy silence falling over them.

“Yusuke?”

Madarame emerged from within the darkness of the house, giving them a curious look. “What’s the matter?” He frowned. “I heard you yelling.”

They turned toward the elderly man. “These people are slandering you with baseless rumors!” Yusuke yelled.

The elderly artist sighed and shook his head. “...Forgive them, Yusuke. As the young lady said,” He smiled lightheartedly. ”They must’ve heard some bad rumors and came in worry for their friend’s safety.”

Sighing, Yusuke bowed his head. “...Understood, Sensei.” He replied reluctantly.

The renowned artist turned to the group of students. “Well, even I doubt that a cranky old man like myself could be liked by everyone.” He chuckled jovially.

Ann shook her head. “That’s not what we meant...” She replied hesitantly.

Madarame shook his head. “I’m sorry to have butt in on your conversation. However, I do have neighbors around. Won’t you please keep it down?” He looked at them sternly before smiling again. “Now, if you’ll excuse me.” He turned back inside his house.

Airi frowned softly, watching the elderly man retreat indoors. ‘He seems kind but...’ She flashbacked to Nakanohara inside Mementos.

“Wont you change Madarame’s heart?! Before more people fall victim to him...” He pleaded.

Her lips tightened. Like Morgana explained before, a Shadow was a person’s true self, their desires becoming physical. Meaning he wished with all his heart for Madarame to change. ‘That couldn’t have been a lie...’

Grimacing, Yusuke turned back to them and bowed. “That was discourteous of me... I’m sorry.” He apologized reluctantly.

The Shujin students looked at each other uncomfortably, not knowing how to respond.

He perked up. “...I know! I think you’ll be able to believe in Sensei if you saw that painting.” He took his phone out. “It's his maiden work as well as his most representative piece- It’s titled “Sayuri.”” He showed them the screen. The photo showed a traditional Japanese woman in front of a yellow moon, looking downward with a gentle and loving expression. The bottom half of the painting was enshrouded in purple mist, and Madarame’s watermark on the left side.

Ann’s eyes widened. ““Sayuri”..?” She uttered, glancing over at Airi.
“This was the painting that inspired me to become an artist.” Yusuke proclaimed quietly.

Ryuji gazed at the screen with raised brows. “I don’t know all this fine-art stuff, but even I can tell that this is impressive…”

Akira nodded in agreement. ‘Did Madarame even paint that one..? Or is it another plagiarized artwork.’ He wondered to himself.

“It’s beautiful…” Airi complimented. “The expression on the woman’s face is so tender, I wonder what she’s looking at…” She frowned thoughtfully, looking closer.

Yusuke nodded. “When I first saw you and Takamaki-san, I felt the same powerful emotion as when I saw this painting…” He trailed off.


He nodded. “I wish to pursue beauty like this.” He smiled tenderly, gazing down at the ground. “And I believe that drawing you two will be part of that pursuit. I implore you: Seriously consider my offer.” He bowed politely. “I’m sorry that you took the time to come all this way, but I must assist Sensei today. I hope that we can discuss this further another time. If you’ll excuse me, then.” He gave the ladies another smile, before walking back inside the house and sliding the door close.

Exhaling softly, Airi turned to her friends. “Well?” She whispered.

Akira gestured across the street. They walked over and leaned against the sidewalk railing. Morgana jumped out of the bag and on top of the rail, expertly balancing on it.

“Those two...seem like nice guys, don’t they?” Ryuji asked uncertainly, hunching his shoulders over.

Ann scratched the top of her head. “Maybe the Madarame we heard about in Mementos is a different person.” She suggested weakly, no conviction behind her voice.

“Should we check the Nav for him then?” Airi asked.

Nodding, Akira took his phone out and they looked at the screen in surprise. The app was already open, and “Madarame Ichiryusai” was registered.

“Hey, the app…” Ryuji uttered, staring at it with wide eyes.

“Was it picking up our conversation..?” Ann asked hesitantly.

“That’s...creepy,” Airi remarked, furrowing her brow. "But this would mean that Madarame has a Palace!”

Ann crossed her arms. “But why?! Is he really so bad..? They seem pretty happy…”

“’Madarame,’ “plagiarism,” and then “Shack,” huh? These seem to be the keywords.” Morgana theorized, swishing his tail.

Ryuji exhaled harshly, furiously ruffling his hair. “For real though, what the hell’s goin’ on?!” He grunted. “Does an old man like him really have a Palace..?! I know he's prolly the same Madarame, but..!”

Airi gave him a sharp glance. “Old men like him have lived long enough to know how to hide their intentions…” She grimaced, looking down. "Besides, the app got him, right? So there's no denying
Akira gave her a concerned look, not saying anything.

Morgana scratched his ears with a hind leg. “We have the person’s name and the location. All that’s left is the “what” that Madarame mistakes this shack for to enter his Palace.” He explained, smiling calmly.

Ann blinked. “You mean...like how Kamoshida thought the school was his castle?” She asked.

The feline nodded. “That’s right. Let’s try saying some things.” He suggested. ”They can be random guesses.”

Ryuji gaped. ”It’s a bit sudden though...” He stammered.

Airi bit her lip worriedly. “Are we stocked up enough for a Palace?”

Akira nodded, opening his bag to show her their medical supplies. “I bought us enough bandages last week.”

Ann brushed a hand through her hair. “Why don’t we start with “castle”?” She spoke.

“No Candidates Found.” The app droned.

“Then, what about “prison”?” Ryuji asked.

“No Candidates Found.” The app said again.

“Ugh! What a pain!” Ryuji groaned. “Jail”! “Warehouse”! And “guidance counselin’ office”! Might as well add “farm”!” He shot off, all being rejected. He slumped. “Not a single hit..?”

Airi idly held her arm. “Well, he’s an artist, how about “gallery”?” She inputted.

“No Candidates Found.” The app intoned.

Morgana got up on his paws. “...Should we come back another time?” He asked hesitantly.

Akira shook his head. “No, we’re already here. How about “Exhibit”? Maybe “Museum”?” He asked.

“Beginning Navigation.” The app accepted, activating its powers.

Chapter End Notes

-Daiso is a japanese dollar/pound store. You go to buy cheap stuff.
They looked at the phone in surprise as the air pulsed and wavered around them. “‘Beginning navigation…’ Whoa, really?!” Ryuji breathed.

Their surroundings began to bleed into purple as they migrated from the real world into the Metaverse. Feeling the ground beneath them solidify again, they looked around, noting that they were in their thief outfits.

Mona flailed his paws on the railing, now on two legs instead of four. “Hey, when did you activate the Nav?!” He yelped. “You surprised me!”

Skull shrugged. “Didn’t have much of a choice. I think we just happened to get it right.”

Mona bristled, tail sticking straight up in the air. “What if I hadn’t noticed, and then wandered off and got caught by an enemy?!”

The pirate rolled his eyes. “You prolly woulda figured it out once you started walkin’ on two legs.”

The cartoonish cat crossed his arms, pouting at the sound logic.

Panther tilted her head. “So even you can slip into the Metaverse without realizing it, Morgana?” She asked.

He nodded. “Yup. In a place with minimal cognitive distortion, the differences can be subtle.” He explained uneasily.

Elegant hummed. “So the Metaverse is an exact copy of the real world? The only way you’d know is if you saw Palaces?” She asked curiously.

The feline nodded. “Yeah, along with the lack of people. They’re the only indications that you’re even in another world.”

“Forget that...Look!” Skull pointed in front of them. “That shack is seriously some kinda museum?!” He observed the skyline.

In front of them wasn’t the shack anymore, but a large golden monolith of a building, shining in the night sky. Skylights shown back and forth, almost as if signalling people to come here. In giant gold and red lettering were the kanji for “Museum of The Best Artwork,” hanging in front of the edifice. Swarming the entrance was a long line of ‘people,’ waiting eagerly to go inside.

Panther crossed her arms. “It’s so extravagant...to the point that it’s gaudy.” She pursed her lips. "It’s a museum...right?”

“It’s...obnoxious.” Elegant remarked quietly, noticing all the gold that encompassed the architecture.

Joker frowned. “So him saying to let go of material wealth was just a lie…” He concluded.

“This is seriously Madarame’s?!” Skull questioned, looking lost as he tried to connect the shabby house to this Palace.
“A Palace is a scenery driven by desires,” Mona explained, standing on top of the rail. "Just like how Kamoshida’s Palace was a castle.”

“Madarame’s artwork is on display at museums in reality too, though.” Panther pointed out. “His exhibit was popular, and people already respect him. Why would he fantasize about a museum?”

Skull crossed his arms, humming thoughtfully. “You got a point...It ain’t related to plagiarism or abuse either.”

Elegant idly grasped her arm. “Maybe he wants his own museum full of his artworks? We haven’t seen inside yet.”

“Let’s try looking around.” Mona suggested. "Racking our brains here won’t do us any good.”

“Right. That aside…” Skull slowly grinned. “Ain’t a museum a must for phantom thieves?!” He asked enthusiastically.

Joker nodded, and looked around the perimeter. “Yeah, definitely. There are probably traps, too.” He smirked daringly, feeling the excitement pumping in his veins.

“Now that’s our Joker.” Mona stated seriously. "I feel the same.”

Elegant giggled. “You think there will be lasers and infrared alarms?” She asked excitedly. “This is like a Mission Impossible scene!” It had been a long time since she had watched that movie, but they could definitely draw parallels.

“You’re such a movie nerd, Elegant.” Panther smiled, sweatdropping.

The noblewoman playfully shoved the dominatrix in response, not bothering to refute the statement.

“Can I be Ethan?! Let me be Ethan!” Skull bounced in place. “Dun dun dun dun dun dun dun dundundun.” He sang.

The ladies laughed as Mona watched them curiously, not understanding the references. Joker huffed in amusement. “Focus, guys.” He reminded.

Refocusing on their objective, they turned to look at the line that stretched from the entrance all the way to the end of the parking lot. Skull whistled, crouching behind a vehicle. “But man, just look at that insane crowd.” He pointed toward the various fake people. “...Are we gonna have to wait in that gigantic line?”

Mona jumped down onto the ground. “Don’t be stupid.” He retorted. "We’re not going in the front door.”

Panther frowned. “But there’s a high wall around the building…” She pointed to the wall that encircled the outer perimeters of the Palace. It was about 15 feet high, making it impossible to jump over.

Elegant peered at the wall, trying to see if they could get over it. “Can we push each other up?”

Joker shook his head. “No. There’s a truck over there.” He pointed at the vehicle, conveniently parked right next to the barricade. "We can jump on top.”

Running through the half empty parking lot, they jumped onto the back of the truck before vaulting
over the wall. They ended up in a side garden, floor lights showing a path down to a large fountain.

Mona gazed up at the building again. “This is really how he thinks of that run-down shack..?” He crossed his paws. "It’s overwhelmingly shiny…”

“It’s just not hitting me that this is that old guy’s Palace…” Panther murmured cheerlessly.

Elegant glanced over at her, eyes dark. “Panther. You of all people would know that some men out there are capable of concealing their desires from the public. The only reason we’re not seeing it yet is because we don’t know Madarame like we did Kamoshida…” She informed solemnly. “I’m sure the further we go in, the more we’ll see who Madarame really is.”

Panther looked down and nodded. “You’re right...Thanks, Elegant. That there’s a Palace kind of proves it already...”

Skull nodded, resting his hands behind his head. “That’s why we’re here, right? C’mon, let’s keep going.”

They continued on their way. Creeping along the shrubs, they snuck their heads up. In front of the long line were two guards, creating a blockade. “The exhibit is now closed for today.” One guard stated. "We await your return on another date.”

The people in line began to push, almost rioting and clamoring to go inside. "No, I have to see Madarame-sama's art!"

"It's a one in a million chance!"

"Let us in!"

The second security office took out his walkie talkie with some difficulty as the museum goers began to push against him. “Hey, send more guards over here! Just the two of us won’t be able to deal with this crowd!”

“...This is our chance.” Mona whispered, watching with a smirk. "It looks like security is focused on the front entrance.”

Panther grinned. “That means there’ll be less of them elsewhere...Let’s go!”

Moving back from the front entrance, they sneaked through the garden walkway, ending up at an out-of-the-way fountain. To the left of the spring were oddly shaped monuments, just the right height to jump up on.

Flipping onto the flat surface, they noticed there were more of the same monuments, creating a path to a nearby rooftop. Vaulting to their intended destination, they avoided the guards patrolling right below them, silently landing on each surface.

Landing onto what was now the building proper, they ran across the narrow path up to the walls. Jumping onto the perfectly square ledges, they finally made their way onto the roof of the small side room. On top of the small section was a couple of AC units, as well as a triangular skylight, with one window popped open.

“Ooh! The skylight’s open! I think we can get in here.” Skull suggested, peering down into the museum.

Panther blinked. “But it’s a pretty far drop...Will we be able to get back out this way?”
Mona snickered. “Don’t worry...I have a rope! I’m our tool specialist, after all!” He took out a bundle of rope from behind him.

Joker accepted it, tying one end to an AC unit and dropping the other in through the open skylight.

Elegant tilted her head. “Mona, where do you get your supplies?” She asked curiously.

He puffed up his chest. “It’s my special Meowvery ability!”

She sweatdropped, not really understanding. “...Oh, OK.”

Joker gestured for them to enter. “C’mon.” He jumped down onto a partial balcony before landing onto the ground floor within the museum. The others followed him, now having fully entered the Palace.

Mona’s eyes darted around, noting the silence that pervaded the air and the lack of patrols. “...It’s quiet. Almost too quiet.” He remarked somberly.

“H-Hey...This…” Panther trailed off, looking at the nearby portraits.

Every frame in the room contained a painting of a person, constantly shifting the image. They were all very young, below thirty years old. Young girls, teenage boys, men and women, all sorts of people were featured within the gallery.

“It’s...moving…” The dominatrix commented hesitantly, walking up to one.

“C’mon, we’re in a Palace." Skull refuted. "That ain’t anything to be freakin’ out over.”

“Hm,” Mona narrowed his large eyes. “The Palace reflects its ruler’s heart...We may want to check these paintings out.”

They walked up to the one on the far left, showcasing a young schoolgirl. Skull walked closer, examining the info plaque. “Oh hey, there’s some kinda explanation here...Lemme see...It’s someone’s name and age? What the hell?” He exclaimed, furrowing his brow in disbelief.

Panther took a step back. “That can’t be the title of the painting...right? Do you think it’s the artist’s name?” She suggested weakly.

Elegant narrowed her eyes, staring straight at the hazy image of the girl pensively. She looked so sad and hopeless. Everyone featured did. “We should check the other paintings...I have a bad feeling about them.”

Joker glanced at her. “Like in Mementos?” He asked quietly.

She shook her head, walking out of the small room and into the larger exhibit hall. The portraits here were also filled with young adults, one frame each. Every single one held a somber atmosphere, making the entire museum feel more like a funeral home than a place of admiration.

Skull walked up to one of a girl in a black vest. “Another...This’s got the name and age on the plaque too…” He scanned. “I don’t get it...Are all of these former pupils or somethin’?”

Looking around the room, Elegant spotted a familiar person in one of the portraits. “Guys!” She called out, eyes wide. “It’s Nakanohara!”

They ran up beside her and gazed up at the portrait in shock. “No way...He was a former pupil?” Skull questioned quietly.
Mona ran up to the plaque and read the name. “Nakanohara Natsuhiko. His name’s written on the plaque.” He confirmed reluctantly.

“You’re right...” Panther stared up at the picture with an unsure expression. "Doesn’t art usually have like, the title of the piece or the artist’s name?"

Joker frowned. This was getting more and more complicated...

Elegant gazed down the hall and at the various paintings that were hung up. “I wonder...if all these are pupils, does Kitagawa-san have a portrait here?” She speculated morosely, walking down the exhibit. She hoped he didn't, but...

“There’s so many portraits…” Panther looked on in horror, turning her head side to side at all the paintings.

Stopping at the end of the hall, the noblewoman looked up at the largest portrait so far.

“Hey, isn’t this it…?” Skull murmured, stopping behind her.

The painting took up the entire wall from floor to ceiling, showing Yusuke in a purple button up, posing submissively with a blank expression on his aristocratic face. The background was of a dark red mist, as if someone mixed blood into water. It was special compared to the other portraits, and yet there was no doubt that he was being featured.

“It says “Kitagawa Yusuke.” There’s no mistakeing it.” Mona stated grimly, turning back from the information plaque.

“Are these paintings really…?” Panther asked hesitantly, crossing her arms.

“Madarame’s pupils.” Joker answered coldly. “We must have passed at least fifty portraits to get here.”

Skull took a step back, staring at him with wide eyes. “For real?” He breathed out in shock. "All of ‘em..? But it was only Yusuke when we went to his place before…”

“Kitagawa-san must be his latest pupil then.” Elegant theorized, idly grasping her arm. “The others must have either escaped or been thrown out...” She looked down and shook her head in anguish. Nakanohara included. How long had this been going on?

Mona nodded, frowning grimly. “Things are beginning to clear. Let’s keep investigating." He placed his paws on his hips. "We need something to further confirm our deductions."

They nodded and turned around, heading deeper into unknown territory. In front of them was a staircase that led to an information desk, equipped with a waiting area. Everything was decked out in blue and gray, coloring the room in a more neutral tone than the outside.

Walking down the stairs, a glimmer near the information desk caught Joker’s eyes. ‘There seems to be some kind of pamphlet here…’ He walked up to the brochure rack.

Skull scrunched up his face as he looked around the lobby. “This is gettin’ way too detailed for a freakin’ Palace...Why’d he bother makin’ something like this?”

The leader grabbed the shining flyer and opened it, showing a map of the area. Elegant peered over his shoulder and down at the paper. “Oh! Does it show us where the Treasure is?”
“That is a possibility.” Mona assured. "At the very least, it should be good reference for the scale of this place.”

“Huh..?” Panther’s shoulders slumped when she saw it was incomplete. "But the map only shows half of the museum…”

Joker tapped the corner. “It says it’s one out of two. We’ll have to find the other one deeper inside.” He exhaled.

Skull looked around. “Just how big is this place..?”

“We can worry about that another time.” Mona interrupted. "Right now our objective is looking into Madarame’s cognition. We may have to reconsider our plan depending on what we find.”

Skull gave the feline an odd look. “I mean, he’s got a Palace…” He shrugged. "Seems pretty fishy to me.”

Pocketing the map, they explored the lobby a little more, finding two chests on opposite ends. Joker opened one, taking out a Protect Mask and pocketing it, before moving onto the other.

“Ooh, this one’s locked.” Mona wiggled around excitedly in front of the locked box. "Hey, Joker. Didn’t you make a few lockpicks a while ago?"

The leader nodded, taking one out and fiddling with the lock.

Elegant peered from behind his shoulder as he opened the box. “Nice!” She cheered, patting him on the shoulder as he took out a new knife.

He switched it with his old one, testing the grip, before nodding in satisfaction. “All right.” He smirked, turning around.

The other side of the lobby was locked, so the only way forward was through the two halls next to the information desk. Entering one of them, the passages merged into one, leading into a large hall with a golden monument in the middle. Surrounding it were multiple banners of Madarame’s name and caricature, billowing silently.

They walked up to the monument, examining it. The sculpture showed several young children and adults, holding up their arms. At the very top was Madarame himself, raised by the multitude of children underneath him.

Panther walked up to the plaque. "’The Infinite Spring’?" She read, scrunching up her face in confusion. "A conglomerate work of art that the great director Madarame created with his own funds. These individuals must offer their ideas to the director for the rest of their lives. Those who cannot do so have no worth living!” She finished reading, staring at it angrily. “Hey...This is most likely about the plagiarism, right..?"

Skull stomped his foot. “Dammit, what a phony geezer!” He growled.

“In other words, his pupils are his property. He doesn’t even qualify as an artist if this is true.” Mona shook his head. “He’s stealing the ideas from talented students in exchange for securing their livelihood.”

Elegant frowned. “Then this confirms it. His pupils were all in portraits because he considers them his property. He makes them paint, then takes all the credit, making them his slaves...” She clenched her gloved fists. “...Unforgivable.”
Mona nodded. “Exactly. This even says that they have no worth. Couldn’t this be about the abuse?” He turned to look up at his teammates. “Madarame will keep them around as long as they’re useful to him, but the moment they’re not…” He trailed off ominously.

Joker frowned deeply, glaring coldly at the monument. ‘Another disgusting adult…’

Panther shook her head. “He’s treating them like slaves or tools!” She gritted her teeth.

“This must be why Kitagawa-san wanted us to model for him so badly…” Elegant exhaled shakily. “He needs new work or else…”

Skull furiously rubbed his head. “Why’s Yusuke keepin’ quiet about this?” He shouted. “He’s got no reason to cover this up!”

“He did say that he owes Madarame his life for being taken in…” Panther mentioned sullenly.

Skull winced. “But still…” He tried to argue.

Joker placed a hand on his shoulder, shaking his head. “Calm down, Skull.”

Panther held a clawed glove to her forehead. “When we were at the exhibit, I praised one of the pieces on display, but...Kitagawa-kun acted strange. Maybe that piece was plagiarized too…” She trailed off.

Elegant tilted her head. “Maybe it was his own painting? Did he act strange with the other pieces?” She asked.

She shook her head. “No...Just that one.”

Skull turned to his leader. “What’s the call? Ain’t this enough to target Madarame?!” He asked tenaciously.

Joker nodded. “Let’s do this.” He declared resolutely. Even if he didn't like the artist, he didn't want him to live as a slave to his mentor. No one deserved that.

The pirated pumped his fist in triumph. “That’s what I’m talkin’ about!”

“Hold on.” Elegant interjected softly. “Before we do this, let’s ask Kitagawa-san one more time. This is going to affect him too, after all…”

“Ask him what though?!” Skull shouted, giving her an incredulous look.

She flinched at the loud volume and took a step back. Mona walked up in front of her, glaring at the pirate thief. “She means we should get solid evidence that such crimes actually took place.” He explained.

Giving her an apologetic look, Skull slumped. “What a pain in the ass…”

Mona gave him a sympathetic smile. “Besides, there’s too much we don’t know about Madarame yet.” He added. Elegant reached down and gave the feline a pat on the head, silently thanking him. She didn't like being yelled at, and it hurt even if it was a friend doing it out of frustration.

Panther nodded. “...Mm, you’re right. I’ll try contacting Kitagawa-kun. I might be able to get the truth out of him if I accept his modeling offer.” She exclaimed, grasping her chin. “What about you, Elegant? Should we try going together?” She looked over at the noblewoman.
Elegant nodded, biting her lip. “If that’s what it takes. You’ll have to give me some pointers, I’ve never modeled before…” She ducked her head shyly.

The boys at the two in shock. “Wait, you two really are gonna do that?!?” Mona sputtered.

Panther nodded. “You all better come with us, OK? I’m scared to go with just Elegant…” She brushed her hair uncomfortably, hugging the other lady's arm.

Joker nodded. Of course they were going to be there. They couldn't trust Madarame or even Kitagawa not to pull something, especially with two beautiful women.

Skull huffed. “A famous, renowned artist, huh? This might be tougher than Kamoshida.” He grinned eagerly, resting his thumbs in his pockets. “Well, we’ll just prep ourselves until we get confirmation from Yusuke. This is our first mission as real phantom thieves. We’re gonna succeed no matter what!”

Everyone nodded and left the Palace, returning back to the real world.

Chapter End Notes

tbh, not actually sure if the kanji on the museum actually says that. I could only make out like 3/4 of the kanji so...welp.
As soon as she got home, Airi immediately went into the Study to continue reading the psychology book Mishima gave her. Maybe it’ll help her decipher Madarame.

Flipping a page, she continued to read. How did they get the power to change people? Why was it given to them? Did this power always exist? Were there other people out there who had also awakened this power? Morgana was technically the first person that she knew of to have this power, but he didn’t know much else. Then it was her...

Why did the app show up on her phone? Was it the phone company? A hacker? Some sort of deity? All these questions swam in her mind, and no answers.

She sighed, reading the page. “One way to decrease consonance is to change existing beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, or even memories. In the face of new facts, we may change our minds. Or in the face of social pressure, we may begin to favor something we had distaste for previously. Or we can reject the new information. If it confronts our fast-held beliefs, we may be prone to believe the bearer of information (activist, author, speaker) is a liar, is a member of an opposing group, has ulterior motives, or is somehow against our principles. Sometimes it is easier to reject facts out of hand than it is to change our minds.” She read, furrowing her brow.

“Habits and the weight of other consonant cognitions also create resistance to change. If a habitual behavior goes against a belief, it may be hard to alter... unless the belief is deeply held and supported by a large number of other cognitions. One dissonance may threaten to topple thousands of dependent consonants, like a keystone or lynch pin. We’re not as likely to change a belief which would cause so much mental trouble, especially when it’s easier to reject the threat or add a few rationalizing beliefs.”

So people rejected different perspectives due to conflicting ideals. It was easier to stick with what they knew, instead of admitting they were wrong. Maybe that was why Kamoshida and now Madarame were so distorted; they couldn’t admit they were at fault. If they tried to justify their actions, they start to truly believe it.

She sighed, rubbing her temple. This was extraordinarily complicated to read about, and being able to execute this in person made it even harder. The mind was a delicate balance of hormones, thoughts, and who knew what else. What if they messed up?

Could they cause someone to lose their mind...?

A buzz startled her out of her reading, and she turned to look at her phone.

An: Would you really forgive someone unconditionally if you owe your life to them?
An: I’m not so sure anymore.
Ai: No, but you won’t admit that.
Ai: There’s always a sense of guilt attached, because you know you’re lying to yourself.
An: Oh...hm.
R: Really? That’s deep.
R: Wait, Ann. What’re you bringing this up for?
An: According to Kitagawa-kun, Madarame isn’t a problem.
Ak: What do you mean?
An: I mean, I know Madarame is a bad person, but still…
An: Maybe I’m so hesitant because I haven’t actually met any of his victims.
Ai: We did though.
Ai: Nakanohara was one of his victims.
Ai: I asked Mishima-kun to keep an eye out if he posts on the forum.
R: Oh damn, you’re on top of this.
An: That’s mom for you.

Airi groaned, rolling her eyes. “Stop calling me mom.” She closed the psychology book and walked out of the Study and into her room, taking a seat on top of her bed.

R: But did that really count?
R: With Kamoshida, we were all classmates with his victims...
An: Yeah, we only met Nakanohara’s Shadow for like, five minutes.
An: So...This may be an extreme line of thinking.
An: But if an evil person isn’t causing trouble now...
An: Is there really a point for us stepping in?
R: Well...you got a point.
R: So we’re gonna let Yusuke decide if Madarame’s worth going after or not?
R: I dunno...If it were me, I’d never forgive that bastard!
Ai: Same. We already know he’s done this to his past pupils, what’s to say he doesn’t do it to Kitagawa-san?
Ai: Or anyone else after?
Ak: Can you ask Yusuke, Ann?
An: OK, got it.
An: I guess we can talk some more about this after that.
An: OK, Let’s meet in Shibuya after school tomorrow.

“Tomorrow..?” She sighed. Another day of missed work then. She’d have to call her boss to let her know she wasn’t coming in.

Leaving her phone on her bed, she got up and picked up the cello, sitting down on the stool next to it. Tuning the pegs, she plucked the strings absentmindedly. ‘What if Kitagawa-san says no..? Do we leave him to suffer?’ She frowned, dragging the bow against the chords, playing a crescendo of notes.

She idly played the mission impossible theme, thinking on what they should do. She wouldn’t forgive herself if after changing Madarame’s heart, Yusuke was left all alone, hating them for taking his father figure away. She wouldn’t wish that on anyone. The house was always so quiet...

“Don’t do this, Hisoka…”

The cello screeched. She winced, putting down the bow.

Sighing, she put the instrument back onto its stand and went to bed, not wanting to think about that man anymore. She closed her eyes, letting her breathing deepen.
Hisoka chuckled, running a hand through his slicked back hair. “Ah, there you are, Kimisawa. Do tell, where are the papers?”

His face hardened. “I don’t have them. You should know this. Why are you threatening my wife and daughter?”

A smile slowly grew on his thin lips, eyes narrowed like a predator. “You’ve been digging around in his files. You know that it’s against the rules.” He drawled, slowly taking a step, circling around the small family.

“Hisoka...we were co-workers. Friends. When did you change to become this...this monster? Why would you murder for him?”

The hitman gave his target a sad smile. “I wish I could tell you...old friend. It’s unfortunate for this to be our outcome...but I have no choice.”

Akira put his phone back in his pocket and sighed. Of course their first job as an official team was going to be complicated. He sat down on his couch in his room, still dressed in his school uniform.

Morgana jumped up next to him, sitting down. “Our first job turns out to be this...” He yawned, showing his pink tongue. “We need to find out what Yusuke is going through.”

A phone rang out, and Akira took it out of his pocket. The screen showed it was Ryuji, and it was a call. He picked up. “Hello?”

“Hey, it’s me.” Ryuji spoke.

“What’s up?” Akira asked, leaning back in his seat.

“I just can’t forgive Madarame, and I know Airi doesn’t either, but what Ann said made me think...To Yusuke, are we just a bunch of thugs?”

Akira sighed. “Probably. But does that matter? What’s important is helping him.”

The speaker cracked. “I knew it...” Ryuji exhaled. “And yeah, you’re right, man. It ain’t like he thinks it is! Pisses me off just thinkin’ about it! Good people have to put up with so much crap while shitty adults do whatever they want. Makes me sick. I’m not wrong...am I?” He asked hesitantly.

Akira shook his head, before realizing he wouldn’t be able to see it. “No, you’re right. We’ll take them down.” He declared.

“Aww yeah!” Ryuji shouted energetically. “Don’t tell the girls I called you, by the way. Seriously. I don’t need Airi motherin’ me any more than she already does about my doubts on this. Havin’ two moms is awful.”

Akira snorted. “Yeah, sure. That’s not what you say when she gives you bentos every day.” He remarked sarcastically.

“Shuddup! Well, see you tomorrow.” Ryuji hung up.

He sighed, putting his phone away. “Ryuji’s not wrong to worry about this, but don’t worry.” Morgana affirmed, licking a paw. “We’re doing the right thing.”
Akira nodded in agreement before getting up to change into his sleepwear.

---5/17, TUESDAY, AFTERNOON, SHUJIN ACADEMY

While Usami-sensei was explaining the Leibniz notation, drawing the formula onto the chalkboard, three phones buzzed in the classroom.

An: All right, I contacted Kitagawa-kun about modeling for him.
An: Still waiting for his response.
R: Thanks!
An: I really have no idea what I’m supposed to do as an art model though…
Ak: Don’t do anything.
Ai: Yeah, don’t you just sit in a position for hours?
Ai: Anyway, I’m sure it’s not so different from being photographed. It just takes a lot longer.
R: Yeah, look. You don’t gotta go all out for this.
R: You two are only doing it so you can get dirt on Madarame, remember?
An: That is true.
Ai: I’d feel bad though, if Kitagawa-san puts in a lot of effort into the painting and we don’t.
An: It sounded like Kitagawa-kun wants this to be a private picture of his, so…
An: Doesn’t that sound a little creepy?
Ai: I’d rather that than Madarame taking it from him…
An: Yeah, that’s also true…
An: Well, I guess I’ll let you guys know when he contacts me again.

They met up in the vending machine alcove in the school courtyard, the sun setting in the sky. It was late enough that most of the school was empty, leaving them alone. Checking her phone, Ann stood up. “I got a response from Kitagawa-kun. He said he wants us to come over after school today.” She announced, turning to her friends.

Ryuji grinned, leaning against the drinks machine. “Perfect. He prolly changed his plans immediately just so he could get you guys over there.”

Airi leaned forward, sitting on one of the benches. “What should we ask him..? I don’t think he’ll really spill his secrets to us,” She bit her lip. “Especially after yesterday.”

Ann shrugged. “We need to find out if what we saw in the Palace was true...maybe ask him about the other apprentices?”

Airi perked up. “Oh, that’s a good idea! If we can contact the apprentices before him, we could convince him to leave-”

“Quiet.” Morgana hissed, his ears swerving in the direction of the courtyard. “It’s that student council president.”

They turned to watch. Across the courtyard was Makoto, seemingly interrogating Mishima in one of the walkways. The Phanboy tried to take a step back, a grimace on his face, but the council president refused to let up.

“Yikes...She got hold of Mishima today?” Ryuji winced. “At least we know he’s not gonna give us
up. It’d suck if she noticed us. C’mon," He gestured with a hand."Let’s split up.”

They nodded. “OK, see you later.” Ann replied, walking away.

They split up, each taking a different exit out of the school building to avoid confronting the council president.

Arriving at Shibuya, Akira and Ryuji walked over to the station walkway at their usual spot. “We finally landed a big target.” Ryuji grinned eagerly. “C’mon, let’s get some dirt on Madarame.” He looked out toward the crowd. “But man, the girls are late…”

“Sorry!”

Ann walked up to them, brushing her bangs out of her eyes. “I was thinking about some things and didn’t noticed how much time had passed.” She apologized, looking around curiously. “Is Airi not here yet..?”

The boys shook their head with a frown. “Thinkin’ ‘bout what?” Ryuji asked.

She looked away. “Don’t you think Kitagawa-kun has to be protecting Madarame? I mean they live together, so he’d have to be aware of Madarame’s true nature. The only reason I can think for him doing that is that Madarame has something on him…”

“No, I’m sorry Senpai, but I truly don’t know…”

Airi walked up to them, silently signalling them to be quiet. “Yes...Yes, of course…” She spoke into her phone, furrowing her brow. They watched her curiously. “No, my results should be number one in the grade level...Yes, but I...yes, Senpai. Good bye.” She hung up, sighing heavily.

“What was that about?” Akira asked concernedly.

“Niijima-senpai got my phone number from Mishima-kun and called me while I was on the train.” Airi answered, rolling her eyes. “She asked me again about if I knew anything about the Phantom Thieves, and then implied my spending time with you guys will lower my grades as if you were pulling me away from my duties…” She pursed her lips in displeasure. “Otani-chan gave me a weird look earlier too when I was leaving, but I don’t think she has anything to do with that…”

Ryuji rolled his eyes exasperatedly. “Can’t she give it a rest?” He blew a raspberry. “Anyway, Airi, we were talkin’ ‘bout how Yusuke should know Madarame’s true nature since he lives with the guy, but he still defended him yesterday. Isn’t it kinda weird?” He asked, scratching his head.

Airi frowned morosely. “Not really...If he doesn’t go along with Madarame’s demands, he’d be homeless and won’t be able to pay for school. Plus, Madarame technically raised him. You’d feel like you owed them for that.” She glanced away, staring blankly at all the passerby. “If you put up with someone’s wrong actions for years, it almost becomes normal…”

Akira placed a hand on her shoulder, silently comforting her. It wasn’t hard to understand why she said these things after the hell she went through at her first orphanage, even though he didn't know all the details.

Ann looked at the class president worriedly. “...Is that really how it is?” She asked timidly. "A-As an orphan, I mean..?"
Airi looked at her in surprise. She knew?

“You were at an orphanage, right?” Ann continued, biting her lip nervously. "Since you lost your parents, and you live alone…”

“Wait, what..?” Ryuji looked at her in shock, before turning to the class president. “Is that true..?”

Airi gave them a bitter smile. “You figured it out, huh....Yeah, you don’t know anything as a kid, or have any rights.” Her eyes darted away for a second. “I’m sure not all adults are like that, but most don’t care when children aren’t blood related. You have to make yourself worth the trouble, otherwise they’ll...Sorry, that got dark.” She waved them away. “Don’t worry about that, it’s in the past now.” She gave them a small smile. She hated talking about it, but most of all, she hated being reminded that she was an Invisible Child.

A person who was worth nothing and would never be anything more.

It was only with her teammates, her friends, that she felt like she was worth something. She was important to them, and she would pay them back with her life if she could. Most of all, it was because of herself and Rui that she wanted to prove to the world that an Invisible Child could rise up. That she was more than just an unwanted orphan.

She was a person, too.

Ann twirled a ponytail awkwardly. "Did you do art back then? It sounds like you know a lot more than us..."

Airi shrugged. “I wouldn't say that. The institution made us do ballet and music. We only learned about European art since there’s a lot of God imagery..." The only thing she kept with her was her music. No one would take that from her again.

Ryuji rubbed the back of his head uncomfortably. “Sorry, Airi. I never knew…”

She waved him away. “It’s OK, I don’t really like talking about it..."She smiled, though it was more subdued. "Let’s just get back on topic."

Akira nodded, shifting his shoulder so Morgana didn’t slide off. “You two ready to model?” He asked concernedly.

Ann nodded. “Yeah, I’m prepared.” She stated resolutely.

Ryuji gave the model an odd look. “Whaddya mean prepared? Prepared for what?” He turned to the others. “Something seem different about her to you?”

Akira blinked, looking Ann over. “...Not at all…?” He answered hesitantly.

Airi covered her mouth as she giggled. “She’s got her work face on. Don’t you remember when we did that group project together in middle school? She had it then too.” She grinned at the memory.

They were in their second year of middle school and were assigned a group project about Mt. Fuji. Ryuji was entrusted with printing out their reports while Ann and Airi worked on the exhibit. Except he forgot, staying up to play video games. After their disastrous presentation since they had to work off of their memories, Ann exploded at him while Airi looked on with disappointment.

Ryuji sweatdropped. “No...All I remember is her yellin’ at me for my part of the work...” He looked at her accusingly. "And you just stood there with that soul crushing frown.”
Ann gasped in realization and glared at him. “Ugh! I remember that! We got a lower score because you forgot the report at home and we had to hand it in late! I told you to bring all your stuff but you didn’t!”

Airi burst out into laughter, covering her mouth.

Akira watched them curiously, feeling a little left out. He hadn’t known them in middle school, and hearing how they had such fun times together made him feel wistful. If only he had friends like these before...He subtly shook his head. No. He was friends with them now. That’s what mattered.

“Anyway.” Ryuji groaned. “Let’s get goin’...We gotta go talk to Yusuke.”

Ann gave him an unimpressed look, but let it slide. “Kitagawa-kun seemed really happy when we agreed to be his model. Once he finishes drawing and gets a little friendlier, we should bring up Madarame.”

They nodded and went on their way to the shack, the sun already starting to set.

Chapter End Notes

Invisible Child- another way to refer to an orphan who have slipped through the large cracks in society. They may have documentation proving that they exist, but no one has checked or cared. It’s hard to go through daily life as an invisible child since it impacts all corners of livelihood. People also look down on them with pity and/or disgust, but never helping.
Chapter 69

Thank you for 12k hits and 405 kudos!!! You guys are amazing!

“I thought it would just be you two coming, Takamaki-san, Kimisawa-san.” Yusuke forced himself to say calmly as he glared at the two unwanted teenagers who sat on the side. Akira and Ryuji gave him innocent looks.

They were all inside the shack, seated in a small room filled with art supplies. The floors were so rickety and rough that no one dared to take off their shoes. Judging by Yusuke’s silence about it, they assumed he thought the same. He already had an easel and a large canvas set up in front of him, angled so that he would be able to comfortably paint while simultaneously look at his model.

Airi smiled apologetically from her seat next to Akira. “I’m sorry, Kitagawa-san.” She soothed. “They’re just worried for us.”

Ann nodded slowly, sitting down on the stool in the center of the room. “Wouldn’t you get nervous too, being with someone you don’t really know in a room?” She added.

The artist pursed his lips and reluctantly conceded, though the light slipping in from the windows behind him shadowed his face, concealing what he really felt from them.

Ryuji thumped his chest lightly. “We’re here to keep an eye on you, so don’t try anything perverted, ‘kay?” He warned casually. "Keep your hands to yourself."

Yusuke sighed. “Stop making such odd assumptions. I have absolutely no interest in them as someone of the opposite sex.”

Airi blinked. That was unexpected. Usually everyone found Ann attractive, sometimes sexually. Especially men. Was he asexual?

Ann looked at him in surprise. “Huh?”

Yusuke turned to look at her. “Is there a problem?” He asked calmly.

She shook her head slowly, trying to comprehend the fact that he didn't think of her as a sexual object. “...No, not really.” She answered awkwardly after a moment and crossed her legs, resting her jaw against her hand.

Straightening up on his chair, the artist held out his brush, checking the angle. “Well then, let’s get started.” He declared pleasantly, a content smile on his face. Observing his model for a bit, he began to sketch onto the large canvas, creating an outline.

The four thieves on the side sat silently, watching it unfold. Airi squirmed in her chair, unsure of how long they would have to wait. This house almost resembled her second orphanage, what with how dilapidated it was. It was just missing some trash and the starving children, forgotten by society.
Her eyes slid to the artist. Then again...

“...Hey.” Ann called out after a while, staying in her pose for his sake.

Yusuke ignored her and continued his sketch, looking back and forth from the model and the canvas.

“Kitagawa-kun?” She tried again. His thin eyebrows twitched, showing that he heard her this time, but tried to concentrate on his piece.

Ryuji scrunched up his brow at his continued silence and sat up. “You hear her?” He asked, idly rubbing the back of his head.

The artist ignored them all, continuing his sketch with a concentrated expression.

Ann shook her head slightly, trying her best to stay still. “...It’s no use.”

Akira exhaled. This was going to take forever. His bag rumbled in his lap. “This isn’t what we planned!” Morgana whispered from inside. "We were gonna catch him off guard and make him spill his beans, weren’t we?”

“How were we supposed to know this was gonna happen...?” Ryuji retorted weakly.

Airi exhaled. “He’s an artist. Of course he’s going to take a while...” She leaned back in her seat, getting comfortable.

Ryuji slumped in his chair. “Guess we just gotta wait ‘til he’s done...What a fuckin’ pain in the ass...”

The bag shook and Morgana peeked out of the opening in the zipper. “Perhaps I should try going outside this room...?” He whispered.

Nodding, Akira unzipped the bag for the cat. “Don’t get caught.” He warned quietly.

“Heh, who do you think you’re talking to?” The feline retorted smugly.

“Be careful,” Airi whispered, hugging her school bag. "The floor here is so rough you might get splinters.”

“Got it. I’m going to scout a bit.” Darting out of the bag, Morgana made his way to the panel doors, pushing just enough to squeeze through. He left the room to roam the rest of the house, footsteps silent against the rickety floors.

A considerable amount of time passed by before Yusuke slumped, sighing heavily. His right hand fell from the canvas and clenched his brush, his knuckles white from the pressure.

The Shujin students perked up. “Are you done?” Ryuji asked hopefully, stretching his arms.

The artist shook his head. “It’s no good...” He despaired.

The ex-runner froze. "...What?”

Ann relaxed from her pose. “I’m sorry...Am I the problem?” She asked timidly, fidgeting on the
“No, not at all. It’s just…” Yusuke trailed off, pursing his lips from frustration. “It doesn’t feel right. I’m sorry, Takamaki-san, for wasting our time.”

Airi sat up in her seat. “Do you want to try painting me? Maybe it’ll help…” She suggested, covering her mouth as she yawned.

He perked up. “If you don’t mind...perhaps it’ll be different.” He got up to change the canvas.

Ann stood up from her seat and traded places with Airi. Sitting down on the warm stool, the cellist patted her braid and straightened her uniform. Sitting with her legs together, letting the sides of her feet rest against the floor, she placed her hands in her lap and stayed still.

Placing a new canvas on the easel, Yusuke sat down and began the process all over again. Ann slumped against her seat. “My back hurts from sitting in that position for so long…” She groaned quietly.

Akira glanced at her from the corner of his eye. “Isn’t modeling for photography the same?” He asked halfheartedly.

“Yeah, but I only have to hold a position for like, four seconds with photography.” She pouted. “Not forty minutes.”

They watched as the artist sketched out an outline of Airi on his canvas, her not moving an inch except for blinking and slight breathing.

“She’s pretty good at this.” Ann remarked quietly. “Was it really that bad at her orphanage..?” She wondered quietly, furrowing her brow in puzzlement. “She didn’t outright say it, but the tone in her voice was...dark.”

Akira nodded, a frown on his lips. “She told me some stuff...I don’t know the whole story, though.” He doubted he ever would, but maybe one day, if they were close enough, she would be able to confide in him. He wanted to be there for her like she was for him. She had been kind to him when he thought there was no more kindness in this world. Was that why he was so...possessive? He wanted to hoard the light to himself.

Ann snorted, breaking him out of his thoughts. “Of course she told you…”

He gave her an odd look. Why did she keep doing that? Did she know..?

Exhaling loudly, Ryuji slumped over his bag. “I guess even class prez here’s got a sob story...We all do, huh?” He grinned weakly.

Ann nodded. “We’re all victims of adults...It sucks.” She scowled, crossing her arms.

Ryuji leaned back in his seat, almost sliding off of it. “That’s why we’re doin’ this, so Yusuke won’t be another one...We’re just gonna have to keep waitin’ though...Hope Morgana’s found somethin’,” He scowled. "Otherwise I don’t think we’ll have time to question the guy.”

The windows darkened as the sun set against the city skyline, showing a contrast of red and blue as the hours ticked closer to the evening. Yusuke finally sighed, putting his brush down. “This one is better, but...No.” He shook his head dejectedly.

Blinking, Airi relaxed her back, wincing as it popped. “Still no good?” She asked. The others
straightened up in their chairs.

“I’m having trouble staying focused today." Yusuke announced regrettably. "I’m sorry, but we’ll have to resume this another time…”

Gaping, Ryuji shot off his seat and stomped his foot. “Oh hell no!” He shouted indignantly. "How many hours do you think you made us wait?!” The other thieves followed his lead and stood up as well.

Yusuke blinked, looking at them questioningly from his seat.

Ann grimaced. “I’m sorry...we had another reason for seeing you today...We needed to talk to you.” She announced somberly.

“Not that we’re not glad to model for you.” Airi added quickly, smiling apologetically.

Akira stepped forward. “It’s about those rumors regarding Madarame.” He confronted coolly.

Yusuke glared at them. “This again…” He muttered, getting up from his stool. He towered over them all as the tallest person in the room, shoulders and expression tense as his "guests" confronted him.

Ann grasped her chin and began slowly. “That painting I saw at the exhibit...You’re the one who actually painted it, right?”

Taken aback, he looked away, holding a hand near his chest. “That’s…” He uttered, wincing.

Her face fell at his silence. “I knew it.” She stated dolefully.

Ryuji frowned, giving him a sympathetic look. “Your sensei’s seriously messed up. He just thinks of his pupils as tools. That’s why he doesn’t give a damn whether he steals their work or physically beats them. I’ll make this clear, there’s no point in hidin’ stuff from us.” He affirmed, resting his thumbs in his pockets.

Chuckling bitterly, Yusuke hung his head. “I have no idea what you’re talking about…” He rebuffed weakly.

Airi looked at the artist sympathetically, taking a step closer. “You feel guilty for thinking badly of them, because they took care of you, right? So you should be grateful, right? But you don’t have to keep lying to yourself." She pleaded. "We can help you. You don't have to live like this." She gestured to the house and its dilapidated state. No one should have to live like this, especially when they could have better. He deserved better and she wanted him to have better.

Yusuke took a step back, looking away. “Stop it…” He whispered, defeat coloring his voice. “It’s just as you all say. We’re...our Sensei’s "artwork."” He hugged himself. Their eyes widened. He was admitting it? “But...I offered my ideas to him myself. As such, it can’t be called plagiarism.” He grimaced, as if the words themselves pained him. “Sensei is simply suffering from artist’s block right now…”
Ryuji stared at him incredulously. “Dude, you still-”

“Bullshit!” Airi cut him off.

They turned to look at her in shock, not expecting her to raise her voice like this.

“Artist’s block? That’s a flimsy excuse and you know it.” She argued, trying to make him see reason. "When was the last time he even painted? Can you even remember? What was his last painting?"

“What’s wrong with a pupil helping out his master?” Yusuke snapped, narrowing his eyes at her. “I’m only giving him inspiration with my pieces!”

She stared at him disbelievingly. “What about the other apprentices? Your older brothers and sisters who lived here alongside you? Do you even know where they’ve gone? Did you care that they suffered too?!"

Yusuke took a step back. “I…They left because they couldn’t take being an artist!” He refuted weakly. "I have nothing to do with them anymore!"

Airi frowned. “Fine, let’s say that. Ann mentioned earlier that you were uncomfortable when she praised your painting at the exhibit as Madarame’s. Can you really say that you’re fine with that? Don’t you want people to see your art for yours..?” She whispered before raising her voice. “He doesn’t care about you if all he wants is your talent!”

Gritting his teeth, Yusuke swept his arm in front of him. “There are no victims here! I am dedicated to my craft, and aspire to one day be as great as Sensei. I’m supporting him like a good pupil!” He shouted, glaring down at her smaller form from his tall stature. "Stop pushing your self-centered righteousness on me!"

Stunned, Airi took a step back and ducked her head, hiding her face under her bangs. Self-center righteousness? Was that true..? Was her help really not wanted here? She only wanted him to see the truth.

Frowning deeply, Akira took a step in front of her, shielding her from the artist. He didn't appreciate him yelling at her.

“Are you serious?!” Ryuji stomped his foot angrily. "He’s just using you! Your brothers and sisters ran away! Why aren’t you doin' the same?!"

Yusuke looked away, anger dying down to a low simmer. “I’m supporting Sensei as his pupil. Where’s the wrong in that..?” Sighing heavily, he took a seat. “Don’t ever come here again...If you do, I'll sue you for causing a disturbance.” He declared grimly.

Ryuji furiously glared at him. “Hold it!” He gritted his teeth. "We’re not done talkin’ here!”

Yusuke narrowed his eyes and stood up once more. “Then you leave me with no choice…” He took out his phone from his pocket.

“Hey!” Ryuji called out crassly.

“I’m reporting you to the police.” Yusuke announced. The thieves looked at him in shock. “I asked Takamaki-san and Kimisawa-san to be my models today, but I don’t recall ever calling you two here!” He remarked coldly.
Ryuji growled indignantly. “What the fuck, man?!”

Ann turned to glare at him. “Ryuji! Stop it!” She hissed.

Huffing, he backed off. “Dammit..!”

Pursing his lips, Yusuke put his phone away. “I won’t report you...but only under two conditions: I want both Takamaki-san and Kimisawa-san to continue modeling for me.” He turned to look at the class president. “I am only including you because I need you as a model.” He mentioned coldly. “My second condition is that I respectfully request you don’t bring that up again.”

Fighting the urge to continue arguing, Airi nodded slightly. “Fine. I apologize for overstepping...” She pursed her lip, still not looking up. That didn't mean she was going to give up though. Maybe she could slowly convince him.

Glancing at her worriedly, Ann took a step forward. “But you said that it wasn’t working out today…” She claimed hesitantly.

Yusuke swept his bangs out of his vision. “That’s because I was unconsciously being modest for your sakes...However,” A smile grew on his lips. “I have nothing to worry about anymore. If you two are willing to bare everything to me...”

Airi’s head shot up. “...bare?” She whispered, her eyes slowly growing wider. Did he mean what she thought he meant..?

Clenching his hands, Yusuke hoisted his arms up in the air. “...I will put my heart and soul into creating the best nude paintings ever!” He declared resolutely, unaware of four pairs of eyes gawking at his statement.

“What?!” Ryuji screamed out loud, his voice bouncing around the small room.

Ann moved an arm to cover herself even though she was still fully clothed. “Nude?!” She shrieked. Airi stood there motionlessly, her face getting redder and redder by the second. What...Her? Nude?...Why?

Akira glared at the artist incredulously, his arms unconsciously reaching out to shield the cellist in his arms and away from his gaze. Hell no!

The artist swept an arm in the air. “Ah, to think I’d be able to create nude paintings with my most ideal models..!” He exclaimed excitedly before turning to his unwanted visitors with a frown. “Of course, you two won’t be allowed in, and I ask that you forget about our discussion today, as well.” He looked down. “If I don’t submit a new piece to Sensei soon, there will be some...inconveniences.”

Snapping out of her stupor, Ann looked at him, panic welling up in her voice. “Nude, meaning it’ll be without any clothes, right?! Why are things suddenly escalating like that?!”

“Because those are my terms.” He answered pleasantly.

Letting out a shriek, the model turned to the other lady in the room. “Airi! Say something!” She begged.

Expression blank, Airi covered her face with her hands, hunching her shoulders. This was such a plot twist..!
Bemused, Akira patted her on the back as he continued to give the artist an incredulous look.

Ryuji sputtered. “Wait, ain’t that bad?!” He stared wide eyed at the artist, a slight blush on his face.

Yusuke shook his head. “Sensei is out during the afternoon while the art exhibit is on, so I can use this place freely.” He beamed. “I should buy more art supplies…”

"Will you give us a second here?!" Ann yelled, completely overwhelmed with panic.

He straightened up, giving her a smile. “Of course, I’m willing to wait. I’ll make time according to your plans. But, please come before the exhibit ends.” He requested pleasantly.

She blushed. “No! That’s not what I mean! Why are you not listening…?!” She despaired, hanging her head.

Unaware of her meltdown, Yusuke wiped the smile off his face. “Sensei will be returning home soon. We’re done for today. Takamaki-san, Kimisawa-san, I’ll be waiting for you to contact me.” He stated graciously.

Ann waved her hands in front of her rapidly. “No no no!” She refuted furiously. "We are not done talking here!”

Ignoring her, the artist turned back to his cabinet, keeping himself busy by reorganizing his supplies.

Grimacing, Ryuji turned to Akira. “Hey...What should we do?” He whispered.

Holding a hand to his forehead as he shook his head, the leader let out a sigh. “We have to leave…” He admitted reluctantly. What the hell just happened.

“Yes…” Ryuji exhaled. “Dammit. He got us good this time.”

Ann glared at her companions. “Don’t give up so easily! Airi?!” She looked at the comatose cellist.

Airi didn’t respond, still in shock.

Slumping his shoulders, Ryuji turned to the door and slid it open with a shuffle.

Morgana was sat outside in the hallway, waiting for them right beyond the door. “Huh? Are they done modeling?” He asked naively, unaware of what transpired while he was gone.

Furrowing his brows at the meowing, Yusuke made to turn. “…A cat?” He muttered.

Widening his eyes, Ryuji grimaced. “You moron!” He hissed, picking up the feline by the scruff of his neck. “Mraow?!” They quickly made their way out of the house before the artist could question them, Akira pushing Airi by her shoulders.

Stopping across the street from the shack, Ann finally exploded. “He’s totally out of his mind!” She screeched. "I’m gonna have to pose nude if this keeps up!"

Morgana bristled from Akira’s bag, Ryuji having shoved him inside once they exited the house. “How dare that Yusuke..!” He hissed.
“And Airi!” Ann turned to the cellist who was still covering her face. “You didn’t say anything! We’re both gonna have to pose nude at this rate!” She despaired.

Her hands flew off her heated cheeks. “I...I just didn’t know how to respond!” Airi sputtered, clenching her hands around the edge of her skirt. “Why does it have to be nude anyway?! It’s not like the Mona Lisa is nude!” She laughed, slightly hysterical. "Why did it come to this..."

Akira rubbed his forehead, feeling a headache grow. “This was not how we planned it…”

Ryuji groaned. “The way he said it, it’s not gonna be semi, but full-on nude…” He stated grimly.

Morgana gawked, tail sticking straight up. “F-Fu-F-F-Full nudity..? Lady Ann’s gonna...and mo-Airi…” He stammered faintly.

Ann glared at the feline. “Drop it!” She demanded.

Airi covered her ears and closed her eyes. “Nope nope nope, if I pretend it didn’t happen…” She muttered to herself. Why would he want to paint her nude? She could understand why he would want Ann, she was absolutely gorgeous. But her? Sure, she had rose colored hair, but that wasn't special enough to want her to be nude.

Ryuji crossed his arms. “You know, you guys won’t have to worry about that if we make Madarame confess before the exhibit ends.” He reminded casually.

Biting her lip, Ann looked away. “But Kitagawa-kun thinks he owes his life to him. Is there a need to make Madarame confess?” She murmured uncertainly.

Morgana stared at her with wide eyes. “Then, Lady Ann...” He gasped. "You’re fine with baring it all?!

“I am not!” She shouted indignantly.

Ryuji kicked the ground with the front of his sneakers. “Madarame’s no different from Kamoshida. That asshole’s usin’ Yusuke, who doesn’t have parents." He gritted his teeth. "You’re tellin’ me we should just ignore how he’s bein’ treated horribly like the other pupils?"

Airi nodded in agreement, straightening up from her crouch. “Yeah, I agree with Ryuji. Plus, those other pupils are somewhere out there with no way to get back at their “Sensei.” We should do this for them, too.” She stated resolutely.

Sighing heavily, Ann shook her head. “You’re right...It’s frustrating to leave this alone, even if Kitagawa-kun is fine with it himself…” She trailed off solemnly.

“You can’t leave it be because you’ve endured a lot yourself, with Kamoshida.” Morgana extrapolated quietly.

She looked down, gripping onto her bag straps. “...Yeah.” She whispered.

Akira leaned against the sidewalk rails. “We made this group so we could help people. Whether or not he accepts it, Yusuke does need our help.”

Ryuji nodded. “Madarame’s the kind of target we’ve been waitin’ for. Let’s help Yusuke come to his senses too...before he ends up like us.” He ended grimly.

Ann nodded. “Right.” She agreed.
Morgana flicked an ear. “We need to look into Madarame first.” He reminded.

Airi nodded, taking a seat on the railing. “I’m sure there’s lots more about him that we haven’t uncovered yet...” She grimaced. “Plagiarism and abuse might not be his only crimes.”

Morgana licked a paw. “It may become easier for us to investigate his Palace if he’s preoccupied with his exhibit.”

Ann nodded furiously. “Also, there’s the thing about us modeling! Kitagawa-kun said there’d be “inconveniences” unless he submits a new piece…” She looked away. “Maybe that’s going to be announced soon as Madarame’s next work…”

Ryuji looked at them in shock. “Does that mean the whole country’s gonna see you guys nude?!” He shouted.

“No way! Hell no!” Ann shrieked, stomping a foot.

Airi covered her ears again. “Nopenopenope…” She chanted under her breath.

Akira facepalmed. “Let’s...try to avoid that…” He coughed awkwardly, a slight blush coloring his cheeks. He only wanted to see one of those and that would be reserved for his dreams only.

Morgana nodded, resting his two front paws on Akira’s shoulder. “We must deal with Madarame no matter what, before his exhibit ends!”

Ryuji rolled his shoulder. “Let’s start after school tomorrow. It’ll be a pain if Miss President finds us on the rooftop again, so where to meet up...Let’s see…” He crossed his arms thoughtfully. “I guess that walkway-like place in Shibuya would work. It’s near Madarame’s place, too.”

Airi blinked. “You want us to meet up in the most busiest place in Shibuya to talk about the phantom thieves..?” She sweatdropped. “What if someone overhears us?”

Ryuji waved her away. “Don’t worry ‘bout it. No one pays attention when they walk that way, they’re all too busy goin’ places...” He stated casually.

She shrugged in acquiesce.

Morgana hummed. “...Changing our hideout periodically, huh?” He grinned. "That’s a plan I don’t mind backing.”

“Hey, can I talk to you kids for a sec?”

They turned around. A woman walked up to them, wearing a black graphic t-shirt over a long white shirt and a pair of washed out jeans. Her black hair was styled into a bob, held back with a pair of orange sunglasses. Around her neck was a DSLR, worn and scratched.

Ryuji crossed his arms. “...Huh?”

“From the looks of things, you don’t seem like the ordinary, stalking fans.” She remarked, pursing her apple red lips. The students looked at each other in confusion.

“Oh, sorry. I should’ve been more clear. I’m actually looking for people that know Madarame’s pupils.” The camerawoman explained sheepishly. “There’s this painting, “Sayuri,” that was supposedly stolen in the past. But there’s this rumor that it was taken by one of his pupils in retaliation for being abused. Have you heard anything about that?”
Airi’s eyes widened. “Stolen...? I didn’t even see that on the bio...” She bit her lip. “How did you hear about that?”

The woman shrugged. “No one knows where the rumor originated from, but I hear all of them, sooner or later.”

Glancing at his teammates, Akira shook his head. “We don’t know anything about that.”

She slumped. “I see...There’s no case unless there’s a victim, and if there’s no proof of abuse...I can’t write it either.” She held a hand to her forehead, shaking her head with disappointment.

“Looks like I’m back to square one. Sorry for taking your time.” Her brown eyes slid over to Akira. “I’m a journalist. If you ever get any leads, mind contacting me here?” She handed him her business card.

He looked down at the card, noting that she worked for a tabloid based in Tokyo.

Airi peered at the card in his hand, reading the name “Ohya Ichiko.” “Are you going to keep searching for those pupils, Ohya-san?” She inquired politely.

Ohya nodded. “Yep. Gotta get a scoop somehow.” She shrugged. “Anyway, since you guys don’t know anything, I’ll just be going now. See you then.” She gave them a smile before walking away.

They watched the journalist as she turned the corner, before turning to each other. “What just happened..?” Ann asked.

“We’re not the only ones who suspect Madarame.” Akira put the card into his bag, maneuvering around Morgana.

“...I guess we should go home for today.” Ryuji suggested awkwardly.

They nodded in agreement and began walking down the residential streets, heading back to Central. “I wonder...” Airi murmured, taking out her phone. “Can I see that card again?”

Akira handed it over and she entered the number into her contacts. “Wassup?” Ryuji asked, lacing his hands behind his head.

“If she finds the other pupils...I want to ask her to put me in contact with them.” Airi confessed.

They looked at her in surprise.”Really? Why?” Ryuji asked.

Airi sighed. “I want to know if I knew any of them from...before.” She pursed her lips. “At the institution, there were a couple of kids who were really good at art before we were all transferred out.” She idly grasped her arm. “At the very least, I want to try to help them. Nakanohara is a teller in City Hall, right? So he’s probably doing OK, but the others might be homeless...I don’t know.” She ducked her head. “Maybe if I can get into contact with one of them, they can also help us convince Kitagawa-kun to leave...”

Ann covered her mouth in surprise. “...You’re right. I didn’t even think that far.” She looked at her determinedly. “If there’s anything we can help with, let us know, K? We’ll keep our ears open too.” She looked down. “You guys are right. I keep thinking if Kitagawa-kun is OK with it, then maybe we shouldn’t do anything, but there were dozens of other portraits inside the Palace, and they’re out there somewhere...”

Ryuji thumped his chest. “We’re gonna pay back Madarame for each and every person he abused.” He clenched his fists. “No way we’re lettin’ him get away with this, not anymore. The Phantom
Thieves are here!” He grinned viciously.

Akira smirked. “That’s right. We’re not gonna leave someone to suffer.” He looked at his teammates, who nodded resolutely.

They made it back to Central Street, the noise pollution immediately penetrating their ears compared to the peaceful silence of the residential area.

“We’re going into the Palace tomorrow, right?” Airi asked as they descended into Shibuya station. “I’m going to go pick up a shift then. I’ll see you guys tomorrow.” She waved, heading toward the underground mall. She had already missed enough work as it was and she needed the money.

“Seeya!” Ryuji called out, walking toward his line. “Bye!” Ann waved, leaving after the punk.

Akira cupped his mouth. “Stay safe!” Popping out from the bag, Morgana meowed loudly. "See you tomorrow, mo- Airi!"

Airi turned around, now past the mall entrance, and waved before turning the corner.
Bowing to her boss, Airi left the flower shop and headed down toward her subway line. It was
evening now, the usual day shoppers replaced by the party crowd. Shibuya was never empty of
people, no matter the hour. It was almost claustrophobic with how crowded this city was.

Her phone rang out as soon as she stepped on the platform, and she took it out of her pocket. The
caller ID said it was from “Mishima Yuuki.” She accepted the call, placing the speaker near her
ear. “Mishima-kun?” She spoke.

“H-Hi, Senpai! Sorry for calling so late, I just wanted to say sorry for giving your number over to
Niijima-senpai. She didn’t give me much choice…” He said guiltily.

“It’s OK, I know she must have been pressuring you.” She assured. Her superior wasn’t someone
who would give up so easily, even when she was ordered to by staff. Why was she digging so hard
though? What would it matter to her who the Phantom Thieves were?

“OK, but um...remember when you asked me to look out for someone named Nakanohara? I found
him on the Phan-Site.” He blabbed through the speaker.

She perked up. Nakanohara?! “Are you serious?! Did he say anything?” She asked eagerly.

“He said he wanted to meet up with The Phantom Thieves and talk about another person who
needs a change of heart.”

“Oh? Did he say who..?” She spoke quietly, glancing around at the bystanders. Did he mean
Madarame? Having his testimony would mean they would have all the proof they needed to target
the elderly artist. Then they could save Yusuke from being taken advantage of.

“He said it’ll complicate things if he posted it online. I asked him to meet you and Kurusu at
Shibuya Station, if-if that’s OK…” He stammered.

“Yes, that’s perfect! Thank you so much for doing this, Mishima-kun.” She replied gratefully.

“It’s no problem, Senpai...I’m always happy to help you! You’ve helped me on the exams and stuff,
and-and with Kamoshida, so…” He trailed off nervously, the speaker crackling. “Anyway, I’ll let
Kurusu know, too. Good night!” He quickly hung up.

Blinking, she put her phone back in her pocket, right as the train pulled up to the station.

Taking it back to Yongenjaya, she walked back to her house, the street lights barely illuminating
the somewhat desolate alleys. She bit her lip, feeling her anxiety rise up as she was alone. At least
her usual way to and from home didn’t coincide with that one intersection...

In the middle of finishing her biology problems, her phone rang.

R: I found out something insane about Madarame.
R: Sounds like a student offed himself when he couldn’t speak up about Madarame stealing his work.
Ai: That’s horrible…
Ak: Is that true?
An: That journalist was looking into Madarame too.
An: It could be real.
R: Someone died though.
R: No one’s talking about it...I bet it was covered up.
Ai: Was there a name?
R: No…
An: I wonder if Kitagawa-kun has heard anything…
An: It’d be great if he could help us out.
R: Ain’t that asking a bit much?
R: After today, he’s prolly gonna be on edge about us.
Ai: Yeah, I don’t want to upset him again.
Ai: Maybe I went too far today…
Ak: No. It needed to be said.
R: Yeah, Madarame’s even more of a piece of crap now!
R: Let’s meet up tomorrow. It’ll be our first time at the new hideout.
An: It’s that passageway in Shibuya, right?
An: I’ll see you guys tomorrow.

Putting her phone down on the desk, she sighed. Madarame’s list of crimes kept getting longer. ‘How is it that people can get away with this..?’ Why? Why did this world operate in a way that let adults get away with such crimes while children had to suffer the consequences. Why was it so unfair..? Did no one see this as wrong apart from the Phantom Thieves? Were they all that stood between the villains and the victims?

Were they forgotten like she was..?

Shaking her head, she went back to her biology homework, putting it into her schoolbag once she finished. Turning on the laptop on the desk, she bit her lip and reluctantly checked for utility bills.

Her face fell. There they were, the deadline in ten days.

Furrowing her brows, she checked the amount compared to last month’s. Did she use more than usual..? Right. She had been staying up lately, playing the cello more and more now that she no longer avoided it. The study session a little over a week ago meant she used more electricity then, too.

Sighing in resignation, she paid off the bills using her special account and slammed her laptop shut. Turning off the lights, she went to bed for the night.

Being an adult sucked.

----5/18, WEDNESDAY, AFTER SCHOOL, SHUJIN ACADEMY

Once the last bell rang, the class emptied out into the hallway, leaving a couple of stragglers packing up their bags.

Putting her textbook into her bag, Airi noticed out of the corner of her eye that Mishima was
making his way over to them. Blinking, she looked up at him as he stopped at her desk. “Yes, Mishima-kun?”

Overhearing her, Akira and Ann paused in their actions, turning their heads to watch. Flicking an ear out, Morgana spied the two from the desk.

Rubbing the back of his head, Mishima looked away nervously. “Um, just wanted to remind you that Nakanohara is meeting you guys at Shibuya Station.” He blurted. “If Otani or Matsumoto come up to you, don’t listen to them. They’re…” He pouted a bit. “They’re being weird. And… "He whispered, ducking his head. "You can j-just call me Yuuki.”

Airi raised her eyebrows at suggestion. “Well...If you’re all right with that, Yuuki-kun.” She smiled brightly. “We’ve known each other for a while now.” Since last year during their freshman year. They had been in the same class where she took charge as class representative as well.

Stiffening at hearing his given name, Mishima blushed feverishly, the blood reaching his ears and down his neck. “Then..! Is it OK if I call you Airi-senpai?” He asked hopefully.

She giggled at his earnest facet. “Sure! I don’t mind, though you can drop "-senpai" if you want…” She sweatdropped. Always with the Senpai. She was the same age as her peers so there was no need to call her that. No matter how many times she refuted the moniker, her classmates and some others in the school still called her that. Apparently they respected her enough to think of her as a Senpai.

It was nice to know that but it was embarrassing and improper.

A smile grew on his lips and Mishima beamed, his cheeks flushed with happiness. “Airi..!” He breathed, testing the name on his tongue. He had dreamed about this since last year when they were freshmen.

He opened his mouth to speak but froze, a chill sweeping up his spine. A drop of sweat slid down the back of his neck, the tiny hairs on his skin raising in fear.

Sliding his eyes away from the class president, he looked up and swore he could see a force of darkness standing behind her. The sunlight dimmed outside at the same time, cooling the room below freezing, and the reflection from the glasses cleared, showing the gaze of the devil.

Akira stared back at him with a blank expression, not blinking his eyes for a second.

Airi, not noticing the dark aura behind her, frowned at her classmate's silence. “Are you OK, Mishi- I mean, Yuuki-kun?” She asked concernedly. Why had he just stopped like that?

Unable to tear his eyes away from the unrelenting glare, Mishima nodded shakily. “Y-Yeah...I’m just gonna...go...now.” He gulped before turning around and sprinting out of the room, slamming the door shut.

She watched in bewilderment at his quick retreat. “Why does he keep running away..?”

“Who knows.” Akira replied flatly, standing behind her at his desk. The Phanboy was getting way too close to her and he didn't like it at all.

Ann snorted, resting her cheek against her palm as she sat sideways in her seat. “I could just watch you guys instead of my dramas.” She grinned slyly when Akira turned to glare at her.

Airi scrunched up her face in confusion. “What..?”
Akira coughed. “Nothing, Ann’s just being weird. We should get going if we want to meet with Nakanohara.” He suggested, resting his hands in his pockets.

“Wait- We’re meeting with Nakanohara?” Ann asked disbelievingly. "Why didn’t anyone tell me?"

Airi winced. “Mishi- Yuuki-kun told me last night. I forgot to tell you and Ryuji-kun...”

The model turned to Akira, glaring at him expectantly. He shrugged, looking away. “...Whoops?”

Now that the room was empty of other students, Morgana jumped up onto the table, giving the leader an amused look. “Yeah, we should go before we miss him. Starting today, our new hideout is the walkway in Shibuya, OK?” He reminded.

Nodding, they made their way out of the school to the train station.

Stopping right outside of the Ginza Line at Shibuya, they met up with Ryuji who was leaning against a column. “Yo.” He greeted casually. “Ready to go to the hideout?” He shouldered his bag.

“Nope, we’re waiting for Nakanohara.” Ann gritted, glaring at her two classmates.

He scrunched up his face. “Wait, what? Nakanohara?” He repeated, confused.

Airi smiled sheepishly. “Yeah. Mi- Yuuki-kun told me last night that Nakanohara wanted to meet up to talk about a change of heart.” She ducked her head guiltily. “I...forgot to tell you guys.”

“Excuse me...”

Startled, they turned around. A familiar man in a suit walked up behind them, his bowl cut and face were unmistakable.

“That’s Nakanohara. Mishima held up his end.” Morgana whispered from behind Akira’s shoulder. He nodded slightly, resting his hands in his pockets.

Brown eyes darted to the cat. “For real.?” Ryuji breathed, staring at him with wide eyes.

The bespectacled adult cleared his throat awkwardly, looking downcast. “…My name is Nakanohara Natsuhiko,” He mumbled. "The one who was posted about on the Phantom Aficionado Website.”

Ann leaned closer to her friends. “He seems pretty nice. Doesn’t seem like the stalker type.” She whispered. “I think the change of heart must have worked.”

“The administrator of that website contacted me…” Nakanohara continued. “They told me to look for someone in a Shujin uniform with a cat, and another student with pink hair…” He trailed off.

“So? Whaddya want?” Ryuji asked warily.

Elbowing him for his rudeness, Airi took a step forward. “Nakanohara-san, thank you for meeting us." She said softly. “What would you like to tell us?”

The Teller looked down at his shoes, years old conflict written all over his face. “You may have already heard, but there’s someone I wish to trigger a change of heart in.” He took a deep breath.
“...An artist by the name of Madarame.”

They stared at him in surprise. Ryuji leaned back toward Ann. “Ooh, you think this is it?” He whispered eagerly into her ear. "Is the pupil gonna confess his master’s secrets?"

She shushed him, shoving an elbow into his side.

Giving the two blonds an odd look, Nakanohara continued. “I’m...one of Madarame’s former pupils. He gave me lodging at his home, where I thought only about art. I genuinely wanted to be an artist…” He clenched his hands, looking away. “There was another pupil as well. A very talented man, multiple years my senior. Obviously, Madarame kept tabs on him. Everything he made was claimed as a Madarame original. He wasn’t the only victim though…”

Ryuji nodded. “All right,” He mumbled. "We got some real proof of the plagiarism.”

The Teller shook his head, his face scrunching up in anguish. “In response to Madarame’s actions...that senior pupil committed suicide.” Nakanohara divulged despondently.

Airi flinched, looking away. ‘Shiho…” She glanced over at Ann, who looked at the adult in horror.

“He must have been unable to bear seeing his work praised under Madarame’s name…” Nakanohara looked away. “That was when I disobeyed Madarame’s pleas and left.” He clenched his hands. “...But he quickly pressured other parts of the art world, and my life as a painter was destroyed.”

He hung his head. “I tried to turn over a new leaf working at a ward office...but it was no use. My attachment to art warped my emotions. Soon I began getting attached to everything...” He chuckled bitterly. “In the end, I even turned into a stalker…”

Akira furrowed his brow, sympathizing with the man. He hadn’t meant to become a bad person. It happened due to his circumstances.

Lifting his head, Nakanohara stared at the teenagers pleadingly. “...I’d like to ask again. Please, make Madarame have a change of heart.” He requested quietly. "Not only for me. It’s...to save the life of another man as well.”

Akira tilted his head. “Save their life?” He repeated as a question. Did he mean Yusuke?

The Teller nodded. “Even now, there is still one young man remaining under Madarame’s tutelage.” He stated morosely. "I think he’s about your age.”

“That has to be Yusuke.” Morgana whispered, watching the man. The thieves glanced sharply at each other from the inference.

“Not only is he a talented artist,” Nakanohara explained quietly. "He also owes Madarame for taking him in after his mother passed...He is the perfect target.”

“So Yusuke’s got no choice but to listen!” Ryuji hissed angrily.

“I actually spoke to him a few times back when I was still living at Madarame’s. I asked him if he found it painful to stay with Madarame...and do you know what he said?” The former artist asked, not waiting for an answer. “If I could leave, I would…”

Ann bit her lip. “Kitagawa-kun…” She whispered grievously.
Furrowing his brow, Nakanohara locked eyes with Akira’s. “I have no right to say this given my prior cowardice, but I don’t want to see another suicide...!” He grimaced. "I'd like to find a way to save this young man. He has a bright future ahead of him...Please consider that when thinking about changing Madarame’s heart.” He bowed politely before turning away to leave.

“Wait!” Airi called out, running up to him. The others stayed behind, watching from a distance.

Nakanohara turned back and blinked. “Yes..?” He asked hesitantly.

She smiled gently, stopping in front of him. “Thank you for telling us this...I’m sure it must’ve been hard for you.” She whispered. “I wanted to ask you some questions, if you don’t mind.”

Furrowing his brow, he nodded slowly. “All right...” He replied warily.

She cleared her throat. “You said you lived at Madarame’s house? Was it at the shack that’s in the residential area right off of Central Street?”

Nakanohara nodded. “Yes, all the apprentices lived there. Madarame would leave for days at a time, which we were grateful for...” He looked away.

She blinked. “He would leave for days..?” Did that mean he had somewhere else to stay? "OK, Um...” She bit her lip. “I know this might be too personal, but...can you give me the names of all the apprentices you remember living with? Including the one who...” Her breath hitched. Calm down. “...Committed suicide.”

His eyes widened. “...Why would you want that?” Nakanohara asked warily, narrowing his gaze at her.

Airi wrung her hands in front of her apprehensively. “I want to track them down and help them.” She confessed. "You’re working as a teller now, which means you probably have a stable income, but the others must have left or been kicked out, right..?” She hung her head. “They might be homeless and suffering...And,” She took a deep breath. “I think we should pay our respects to the deceased artist. He deserves some kind of recognition," She whispered. "...Even if he’s gone now.”

He stared at her blankly, mulling over her words.

Airi bit her lip, waiting for his answer. She hoped he didn't reject her. This was something that was important to her. To be able to help others because it was the right thing to do. To remember them when no one else would. She knew that being forgotten, to be treated as if they didn't exist...It hurt.

Exhaling heavily, Nakanohara finally nodded. “Thank you.” He uttered quietly but sincerely. "You’re the only one who has cared...I can email the list to you through a private address. I don’t want Madarame to find them...” He took out his phone.

She nodded quickly, agreeing to his terms.

They exchanged their information. “Um...” Airi put her phone back in her pocket. “If...you’d still like to paint, I can introduce you to my school’s art club. They’d be grateful to have a talented artist to help guide them...?” She offered hesitantly, giving him a smile. Maybe even something this small could help him.

Taken aback, he stared at her in shock. Clenching his jaw, he took off his glasses and covered his eyes with a hand. “I...will have to think about it. Thank you...for the offer.” He exhaled, replacing his glasses. “You’re very kind, Kimisawa-san...I wish you the best of luck in changing Madarame’s...
Breathing out, Airi smiled at her accomplishment and turned back to her friends. “Sorry about that.” She beamed, unable to keep her happiness contained.

They looked at her quizzically. “What did you ask him?” Ann inquired, brushing a ponytail.

“I asked him for the names of all the apprentices he remembered. He said he’ll email the list to me.” Airi smiled softly. “I also asked him for the name of that senior apprentice ...I want to be able to tell him when we change Madarame’s heart.” She smiled serenely. “It’s the least we could do, since we couldn’t help him in time.” Never again would she fail.

Ryuji whistled, impressed. “Damn, you really did think of everything.” He grinned proudly. “That’s our mom!”

Airi gave him a dirty look before sighing. “Fine, OK.” She rolled her eyes. “I’m team mom.”

Ann stared at her, stunned. “...You really asked for their names? Do you think we can find them?”
She asked hopefully.

“I hope so...I don’t know if we can find all of them,” Airi bit her lip worriedly. "Or if some are even alive…”

Akira placed a hand on her shoulder. “We’ll do our best.” He assured quietly. “As you said, it’s the least we could do since no one else is helping them. We could also introduce them to that reporter, and she could write an incriminating spread about Madarame with their testimonies.” He smirked darkly.

The team nodded in agreement.

Morgana jumped up on Akira’s shoulder. “We’ve been asked to act directly on behalf of one of Madarame’s victims, and we don’t have the time to deliberate whether or not to change Madarame’s heart.” He summarized.

“Let’s save Yusuke.” Akira declared. Whether he liked him or not, the only thing that mattered was helping others like them.

“Hell yeah!” Ryuji exclaimed grimly. “Madarame’s just a piece of shit who prays on the weak!”

Ann held a clenched hand near her chest. “Suicide...I’ll never let something like that happen!” She declared firmly. “Plus, we finally got to hear how Kitagawa-kun really feels!”

Airi nodded in agreement. “He must have lied to us yesterday because he’s the only one left. There’s no one he can count on...except us.” She stated earnestly. "Let's do this."

Blue slits slid from one thief to another before Morgana purred with satisfaction. “Well, since we’ve reached a unanimous decision, how about we continue this at our new hideout?”

Chapter End Notes

sorry Mishima LOL
“My fellow thieves, welcome to our new hideout!” Morgana announced dramatically.

They were at a small corner in the middle of the Shibuya Station walkway, a plethora of people walking past without a single glance in their direction. Ryuji sat on the ground with his legs spread out, while the others leaned against the railing. Akira placed his bag on the floor, Morgana popping his head out so he could participate.

Airi sweatdropped, adjusting her bag. “Our hideout is in one of the most populated places in Shibuya…”

“That’s the genius of it!” The feline puffed up his chest. “No one would expect The Phantom Thieves to talk about sensitive information here! Our target this time is Madarame! We all saw that Palace. We’ll pay dearly if we assume it’s just going to be like the last one.” He warned. “And furthermore...Lady Ann and Airi’s chastity are on the line!”

Ann pushed herself off the railing, straightening up. “What?!” She yelped, her hands coming up to cover herself even though she was fully clothed in her uniform.

Scrunching up her face, Airi covered her face with her hands, silently screaming. She still didn’t understand what Yusuke saw when he stated he wanted to paint her nude. Ann she could understand, but there was nothing special about herself.

Akira’s expression darkened. Unbeknownst to himself, his fingers started to twitch as if he wanted to grab a certain class representative and hide her from the world. He knew Ann would be able to take care of herself if need be, but Airi...She was strong, but he doubted she could fight off Yusuke if it came down to it. She was delicate; someone who didn't like violence, which was why he was so protective of her. Or at least that was what he told himself.

Even though he knew they ladies wouldn’t actually let Yusuke paint them nude, he had no choice but to let her go through with this, because the alternative was letting Yusuke stay in slavery.

Ignoring them, Morgana continued. “We’ll need to do what we did with Kamoshida. First, we secure an infiltration route in the Palace. After that, we send our calling card. Once the Treasure has materialized, we steal it.”

Ryuji sat up from his slouch. “Oooh I got a question! Madarame doesn’t know that we were doin’ stuff in the Palace yet. Why are we already gettin’ treated like criminals in there?” He asked speedily, looking down at the feline.

Morgana purred. “You’re learning, Ryuji. Well done.” He complimented. “It must be because he doesn’t trust anyone. Any unknown person may as well be an enemy. “

“Oh,” Ann interjected. “Maybe he’s just super salty from all those rumors that have been spreading about him…”

Airi choked and covered her mouth. “That-That could be it, too…” She snickered.

Akira sweatdropped. "Salty, huh..."
Ryuji scratched his head. “Then his Palace bein’ so crazy had nothing to do with us..?”

Morgana licked a paw. “Either way, we should stay on our best behavior.” His gaze hardened. “It’ll be harder for us to steal the Treasure if we needlessly increase the security level.” He warned.

“We need to be careful of Kitagawa-kun this time too.” Ann added soberly. "I’m sure that whatever he sees will just get passed on to Madarame.”

Airi nodded in agreement. “I’m not sure how we could help him out here, but at least in the Palace, we can free him from Madarame.”

Morgana smiled. “That’s right!”

Ann crossed her arms thoughtfully. “Hey, what is Madarame’s Treasure going to look like anyway? Another crown?”

The feline shook his head. “I doubt that. But my sixth sense will know when I see it.” He assured.

“Oh yeah, you go completely nuts, huh.” Ryuji commented.

Airi gasped. “Oh, that was so cute! You were meowing like it was catnip.” She blushed at the memory. He was purring and rubbing his face against the Treasure, his little paws spread out to hug it. If only her phone’s camera function worked inside the Metaverse...

Morgana ducked his head. “Don’t remind me…” He groaned in embarrassment, a red blush covering most of his face.

Ann covered her grin. “Our time limit is when the exhibit ends, right? That means...June 5th.”

Airi nodded. “Otherwise, Kitagawa-kun would be in trouble...” She frowned.

The bag rustled as the feline stretched his paws out. “We’ll carry out the plan after we’ve sent out the calling card. So, our infiltration route will need to be set in stone two days prior, on June 2nd.” Morgana reminded firmly.

Ann clenched her hands. “Now listen here.” They turned to look at her questioningly. “We can’t mess this up, NO MATTER WHAT! OK!” She stressed each word, glaring at the guys.

They nodded, sweatdropping at the ferocity in her voice and the fire in her eyes.

“This is the first job for The Phantom Thieves, so let’s make sure we do it right!” Morgana urged sharply. “Come on, it’s time to get this mission started!”

They nodded, Akira taking his phone out to activate the Meta-Nav. The air around them wavered, static filling their ears. With the same floating sensation as always, they transported to Madarame’s Palace.

Putting his phone away, Joker walked forward into the parking lot, the others following him.

“I’m sure you already know this, but the first thing we need to do is secure an infiltration route.” Mona reminded.

Skull rolled his eyes. “Then we send the callin’ card. Yeah, yeah, we know the drill. Anyways,
let’s get ready!” He exclaimed.

They walked over to the truck, about to jump on top again but Joker stopped, staring into the space next to it. Elegant blinked, recognizing that he was doing the same thing as last time during Kamoshida's Palace infiltration. “This again..? What makes him stop like this?” She pursed her lips. He would just stare into space for a few moments before he snapped out of it.

Panther sighed. “Who knows, we’ll just have to wait a few seconds.” She crossed her arms. Time passed as they waited for Joker to come back to his senses.

“Inmate. Our master requests your presence.” Justine droned, staring at him monotonously.

Pursing his lips, Joker nodded. At least time doesn't pass outside while he was in there. Though...

His eyes slid to his teammates. ‘Sorry, guys…Give me a second.’

With a creak, the cell door slammed open, blue light glowing ominously. Taking a deep breath, he walked through the portal. With a tug at his body, he blinked and found himself in the Velvet Room.

The chains at his wrists jangled as he made his way to the bars, the dirty inmate uniform stretching over his shoulders as he grasped the metal.

“Welcome back.” Igor greeted from his desk, his always present grin sending a shiver down his spine.

“Hey.” Akira greeted warily. The twins were stood in front of his cell, standing at attention.


“...What do those mean exactly?” Akira asked hesitantly.

“They represent your comrades, of course. The more you develop your bonds with them, the stronger they will grow, and the stronger you will be.” Igor explained. “You must surely be accustomed to infiltrating Palaces by now?”

Akira exhaled. “Somewhat. It's rather stressful…” He bit out. Every time he was inside the Metaverse with his friends, they were risking their lives. One of his fears he had yet to confront was the thought that one day...one of them might not make it out.

The Proprietor chuckled, unaware of his dark thoughts. “Regardless, you have yet to obtain a truly acceptable number of Personas. This is not the full potential of the power of the wild card.” He hummed, the double bass in his voice vibrating through the mysterious room. “I suppose this is a prime opportunity to help further your rehabilitation along. Don’t worry…” He grinned wider. “This assignment is not mandatory. Think of it almost as a test of strength.”

Akira blinked. “What is this assignment?” He asked slowly.

At his question, Justine turned to look up at him. “We will have you bring us the mask we specify.” She answered coolly.
“You just gotta show us the Persona we ask for!” Caroline added, turning to him as well with a scowl.

“First off...we would like for you to bring us a Jack Frost.” Justine requested.

Her twin scrunched up her face. “That’s too easy, Justine! It should be a challenge. Hmm…” She tapped her baton. “I want it to have Mabufu too! You got that, Inmate? Bring us a Jack Frost with Mabufu.” She glared at him expectantly.

“Very well. We ask for a Jack Frost with Mabufu.” Justine finished.

Igor tapped the heel of his shoe against the plush carpet. “This will not be mandatory for your rehabilitation, but you will be handsomely rewarded for it. I encourage you to at least try your hand at this.”

Akira blinked. “I...have that one already.” He stated hesitantly, bringing a hand up to his eyes. Concentrating, he brought forth the desired mask in a spark of light, and held it out through the rusted steel bars.

Caroline grabbed it out of his hand, inspecting it with one molten gaze.

Watching her work, he took a seat on the floor. The cuffs bit into his ankles as he pulled at the chain, crossing his legs. Supposedly the chains represented how he felt; chained down by society. He didn't know how to feel about that, but he couldn't do anything about it.

Justine took a step closer. “It seems you brought the specified Persona.” She remarked, a hint of surprise glinting in her gold eye.

The brasher twin handed the mask back to him and tapped her shoulder with the baton. “Hmph...Fine, I’ll take it.” Crossing her arms, she grinned wickedly. “By the way, your Personas are super weak...Not that I’m surprised, Inmate.”

Akira pursed his lips. As if that was his fault. He’d just have to train harder.

“Though I guess you deserve at least *some* praise for finishing your penal labor.” Caroline admitted, eyebrows raised in amusement. “You might actually complete your rehabilitation...”

He perked up. Hearing that from the ruthless probation officer filled him with hope. Perhaps one day, his Velvet Room wouldn’t be this prison, but something nicer. Maybe a limo...

Justine nodded, a minuscule smile on her childlike face. “In order to promote that process, we would like to offer you the use of a new facility.”

Caroline glanced at her double. “Hmph. It’s rare to see you smile, Justine.” She remarked.

Justine turned to her sister. “*You* are the smiling one, Caroline.” She retorted calmly. "Did something happen to make you so joyful?"

The brasher twin looked at her in shock. “Me..?”

Akira quirked his lips, watching the two. Even though they were technically his tormentors who verbally abused him, it was nice to see the sisters acting like their physical age. ‘Not that I know if any of these people are human or whatever else…’

Caroline glanced sharply at him. “Hey, are you laughing at us?!”
“You have a cute smile…” He complimented quietly.

Molten gold glared at him. “Know your place, Inmate!…” Caroline warned.

Justine nodded in agreement, any traces of her smile disappearing in an instant. “As wardens, we simply feel satisfaction in seeing your rehabilitation progress...That is the extent of it.” Her gaze sharpened. "I find it upsetting that you would see such a matter as a source of amusement.”

“It’s like you forget where you are, Inmate.” Caroline added harshly.

He deflated and nodded submissively. There went any chances of having an amiable conversation with them.

The harsher twin huffed. “You’ve got some real guts though!” She admitted gruffly. "With that spirit, you should have no trouble making progress!”

“Very well then…” Justine sighed. “If you have the will to continue your penal labor, we can grant you greater freedom within this prison. It is a deal between us, the wardens, and you, the inmate.” She clarified.

Caroline smirked, resting a hand on her hip. “Not like you have the right to turn it down though! Hard work is what you’re meant to do, Inmate!”

Taking a deep breath, Akira nodded, agreeing to their terms. If this was what he'd have to do in order to gain their trust for his freedom, he'd do it.

Igor clapped slowly, the grin never leaving his face. “Congratulations, you have unlocked The Strength Arcana.”

“Now, it’s time for your next task!” Caroline announced, crossing her arms.

Flipping the papers on her clipboard, Justine tapped her finger on the chosen name. “We request a Shiisaa with the skill Frei. Please come talk to us again once you have it.” She solicited.

“You get how to do it now?” Caroline yelled. "Then stop wasting time!”

Akira nodded. He didn’t have that Persona on him at the moment. “If we’re done, I’d like to go back.” He requested politely, watching his manners. He didn’t want to be yelled at again.

“Fine.” She replied shortly, smacking the bars with her baton. The vibrations that resonated from the collision rang out, pervading him down to the bone.

With a gasp, he blinked, realizing that his surroundings had changed with a blink of an eye. The cold stone prison was replaced with black asphalt and a post-modern museum, the night sky glimmering with stars. He was back at the Palace.

“Joker..? Are you OK?”

He turned his head.

Elegant stood behind him and watched concernedly, wringing her gloved hands in front of her. He silently cursed himself. He worried them and more importantly, he had worried her.
“Joker?” She called out again. The others perked up in the background and got up from the floor, stretching their arms.

“I’m...fine. Sorry about that.” He ducked his head apologetically.

Skull groaned, cracking his back as he stretched. “Man, what is with you starin’ into space like that?”

“It...I was reorganizing my Personas. I space out when I do.” Joker replied hesitantly. It technically wasn’t a lie, as he did organize and fused his Personas in there. “Let’s go.” He gestured with a hand.

They nodded, shoulders tensing as they resumed their infiltration route once more.

Climbing the truck, they jumped over the wall, landing inside the gardens. Running through the veranda to the fountain, they jumped on top of the oddly shaped monument on the side, dashing straight to the open skylight across the walkway. There were still the usual Shadows patrolling, which meant Madarame hadn’t suspected anything as of yet. Joker broke every statue along the way, pocketing the items for later.

Jumping down the skylight, they surveyed the small room. Nothing seemed to have changed since their last visit. They walked toward the exit, eyes glancing around.

“Wait, Joker!” Mona yelped, stopping in his tracks.

Joker stopped, looking down at the feline questioningly.

Walking up to the doorway, Mona’s eyes sharpened, detecting almost invisible red beams. “Tch...It’s an infrared laser device.” He pointed at the just barely there red glow that crossed the doorway. "If we touch it, the security will increase!"

“Hold on,” Skull interjected. “There wasn’t anything like this last time though!”

“The rumors might slowly be making Madarame become more wary of us...” The feline answered. “Joker! They’re not easy to see, but you should be able to do it with your skills. Be careful!”

The leader nodded in understanding. Narrowing his eyes, he concentrated on his third eye ability, seeing the red lines clearly. Running toward the gate, he slid underneath, emerging on the other side unscathed.

The others followed his example, Skull stumbling a bit as he stood back up. Elegant spotted movement in the corner of her eye and hid behind a corner, signalling for the others to hide as well.

They looked out. The entire gallery was now booby trapped with infrared lasers at almost every corner, a few Shadows patrolling several sections of the room. To get through, they would have no choice but to fight.

Nodding to Joker, Elegant sneaked up behind one. Jumping up onto their back, she ignored its yelp of surprise and ripped their mask off. “Show me your true form!” She smiled slyly.

Erupting in a geyser of black sludge, the security guard transformed into two Night Walking Warriors, swaying ominously in their spots. She jumped down, scythe appearing in her hand, and slashed at one. Panther ran up beside her and gave her a high five, following up with her whip and flogging it until it disappeared in a black mist.
“Zoro!” Mona summoned his Persona, the black caped thief appearing behind him, wielding its rapier. He sent a Garu at the enemy, knocking it down. “Oooh! It’s almost scary how good I am!” He preened.

The thieves rushed up, aiming their firearms at the single Shadow. “...H-Help me. I don’t want to disappear.” The Night Walking Warrior wept.

“Lend me your power.” Joker demanded, voice firm and deep.

It looked up in surprise, its green gelatin-like arms supporting it. “...Are you a human? If you are, then you should understand me, right? All right, let’s calm down and talk. Take a deep breath, and listen well...What if I was a “human”?” The Shadow argued. "Then, what you’re doing...Well, it’d be a criminal act!”

“That’s true...” Joker replied reluctantly.

It cried out in relief. “R-Right? If you don’t stop now, people will call you a “criminal” behind your back your whole life...Think of how I feel. A group of strangers appears, forcing me to do whatever they want...Doesn’t what you’re doing bother your conscience?”

Joker fought the urge to roll his eyes about being called a criminal. “…Nope.” He answered honestly.

The Shadow huffed. “I thought you’d say that. You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?” It perked up. “I see...It appears you and I are on the same page, doesn’t it?” It got up, a blue glow illuminating its blocky figure. “My new name is Mokoi. I am a Persona who’ll be with you. From now on, I’m on your side.” It bowed its head, warping into a replica of Joker’s mask.

It flew toward him, merging with his current one and he smirked, feeling the new power course through.

“Nice one, Joker!” Mona cheered.

Now that the security guard was gone, this section of the gallery was safe to move around in. Joker turned to Elegant, narrowing his eyes in suspicion. “...Were you making fun of me earlier?”

She bit her lip, fighting the urge to smile. “It’s what you always say when you rip off their masks.” She shrugged lightheartedly. “I’m just following my leader’s example.”

He deadpanned. “You’re fired.” He smirked at her pout. “Let’s go.” He gestured for them to move on. Dashing over and under the infrared beams, they spotted another Shadow, patrolling a corner.

Giving the noblewoman a warning look, Joker dashed forward. “Show me your true form!” He commanded, ripping the mask off the guard. In a splash, it divided and turned into three Girl of the Hanging Tree. “Jack Frost!” He called out, the tiny snowman dancing behind him. “Bufa!” He sent an ice attack at one of them, killing it.

Skull rush up to another, beating it with his bat. Elegant knelt down with her sniper rifle and took a shot once the pirate moved out of the way, killing it. Taking her TMP out, Panther aimed carefully and fired, knocking the Shadow down.

They ran up with their firearms and surrounded it, not giving it an inch to escape. The Shadow held up her hands. “All right. I wasn’t going to ask you this, but just what do you plan to do?” She asked warily.
“Lend me your power.” Joker replied, gesturing with his 9mm.

The fairy-like monster blinked in surprise. “…So you want to talk? We don’t know each other very well, after all. Thought has crossed your mind, hasn’t it? Come on, where would you take me?” She asked slyly, stretching out in her white Chinese style one piece.

Joker blinked. Was she flirting with him…? “…A famous pancake place.” He answered halfheartedly.

The Shadow perked up, her butterfly wings fluttering. “Yeah, an outdoor brunch place would be nice. Maybe have a cup of black coffee to go with it…” She trailed off, a hint of blush on her red skin. “Oh, yes. I heard that human women often trick their lovers into meeting their parents. If your girlfriend asked if you were free to have dinner with her “friends,” what would you say?”

He shrugged. “Sure.” That wouldn’t happen, though. Well, maybe they could visit… He subtly shook his head, dispelling the thoughts. Concentrate.

“Really?” The Shadow marveled. “It’s so nice that you’re OK with such short notice…Well,” She ducked her head. “This isn’t about me, though. That way of thinking is just like m-Hm?” She froze. “…Wait, I remember something…”

Floating into the air, she smiled happily. “I’m not a Shadow from around here. After all, I came from the sea of the human soul! I’m Hua Po. This is the start of our very long relationship.” Closing her eyes, she merged with Joker’s mask.

He let out a sigh, feeling the extra power existing within him.

“Man, it’s still so weird to see you have so many Personas.” Skull commented, putting his bat away.

“Yeah, well…” Joker shrugged, not knowing how to answer.

Panther snickered, reeling her whip. “How many female Personas is that now? Three? What a player right, Elegant?”

Said thief blinked. “Well, it’s useful to have multiple Personas. We don’t have any ice users with us…It’s funny how they flirt with him though.” Elegant smiled halfheartedly, not sure why it seemed to bother her. She squished that down. Now wasn’t the time to think about things like that.

Joker huffed, looking away in embarrassment. “Let’s keep moving before I fire all of you.”

They sneaked through the rest of the exhibit hall, ambushing Shadows and avoiding the security alarms. Joker gained two more Personas, a Makami and an Apsaras. Near the information desk, they noticed a locked door with a large button next to it.

Joker slammed his fist against it, and the metal shutters receded into the ceiling. Pushing the door open, they saw it was a shortcut back to the skylight.

Elegant smiled. “That’ll be useful if we have to come back.”

Leaving the door, they made their way to the information desk, now with two Shadows patrolling. Sneaking up, they ambushed them, clearing the hall of any enemies. Through the tunnel, the slid underneath another pair of sensors, making it back to the Infinite Spring monument.

Panther frowned, eyeing the empty surroundings as she flexed her fingers nervously. “We’ll be in
unknown territory once we go past here, right?”

Mona nodded. “The security will probably get a little more fierce as well. Make sure you don’t touch anything or run into any of the displays, all right?” He warned, looking at Skull.

Said pirate frowned. “...What’re you lookin’ at me for?”

Joker sighed and started his way up the walkway, going deeper into the museum. To their left was a lock door, so they went right. Dodging more security beams, a door wavered in front of them. “Oh, a safe room. Should we mark it down?” Elegant inquired.

He nodded, opening the door.

The room shuddered, the rickety wooden shack replacing it just for a second, before settling into a staff-only resting area. Panther grinned. “Oooh, let’s make a note of this place so we can come right back here later.”

They all took a seat, rolling the computer chairs to the table. “Doesn’t this building seem pretty big to you guys?” Panther asked hesitantly.

Skull nodded. “Yeah, and all those paintings in there, too...” He grimaced. "It’s fucked up.”

Elegant leaned back in her seat. “It’s going to take us a while to get through this…” She sighed, crossing her arms.

“This is just the beginning though. We’ll need to brace ourselves for anything moving forward.” Mona warned, jumping onto the table.

Joker nodded. “We have to take his Treasure though. Let’s keep going.”

Chapter End Notes

Justine & Caroline - Rank 1
Chapter 72

Getting up from their seats, they exited the room and went down the new hallway. It ended at another gallery, the portraits held up on partitions, creating a set path to the next exit.

As always, the paintings were of multiple young teenagers and adults, most likely apprentices. Some looked familiar, as if they were copy and pasted into the frames. Sneaking through the passage, they killed all the Shadows and took the treasures.

They opened a door at the end and went through. “Hm?” Elegant looked at a door to the left. “Let’s try going this way first.” She gestured.

Going down the bare hall, they ended up at a locked door, a large button next to it. Joker slammed his fist against it and it opened, revealing it was the door they couldn’t go through before.

Skull grinned. “Nice! Another shortcut.”

They retraced their steps, sliding past the alarms, and ran up the stairs to the second exhibition room. In front of them was what seemed to be a security room, the glass doors locked. Joker hit the open button a couple times, but to no avail.

Skull cursed, glaring at the doors. “Dammit, it ain’t openin’…”

“We’ll just have to come back later.” Joker shrugged, going down the hall to the right.

It was a large barren room, featuring one gold pot in the middle. The side rooms were sealed off with a wall of glass, with one security guard patrolling one side. They ran past the vase, heading toward the door at the end of the hall.

“H-Hey, wait a second!” Mona called out, having stopped. The humans turned to look at him questioningly.

“You’re just gonna ignore that golden sheen?” He turned to the vase, eyes shining the same veneer. “Mmmm...Look at that luster…” He drooled, jumping in joy. “I know it might be tough to take with us, but don’t you think it’d sell for tons?”

Elegant sweatdropped and walked up to the feline. “Mona, no. We’re here for Madarame’s Treasure.” She scolded gently. He was being cute right now but they couldn’t afford to stop.

“You’re just gonna ignore that golden sheen?” He turned to the vase, eyes shining the same veneer. “Mmmm...Look at that luster…” He drooled, jumping in joy. “I know it might be tough to take with us, but don’t you think it’d sell for tons?”

Elegant sweatdropped and walked up to the feline. “Mona, no. We’re here for Madarame’s Treasure.” She scolded gently. He was being cute right now but they couldn’t afford to stop.

“Yeah, but…” He trailed off, hypnotized by the glow. Jumping up on the display case, he purred loudly as he rubbed his face against it.

Skull groaned. “C’mon, we didn’t come here to-” His eyes widened. “Hold on, you’re steppin’ on something!”

The feline froze, looking down on the depressed platform as it clicked in place.

“Isn’t this bad?!?” Panther yelped, taking a step back.

“Calm down.” Joker advised, tensing his shoulders.

Furrowing her brow, Elegant quickly reached out, intent on pulling Mona off. She squished herself against the display as multiple infrared lasers flashed on, trapping her, Mona, Skull, and Panther in squares. Joker adeptly back flipped away, landing out of range of the trap.
“Oh no, I tripped the security!” Mona cried, cringing at his actions.

“Urgh, and you were the one makin’ us be careful too...” Skull looked around his prison. "So, whaddya wanna do? Run outta here?"

“Don’t!” Elegant warned, holding herself stiffly as a laser hummed almost right next to her ear. Her heart jumped up into her throat. “If you trip any of these, that will draw every enemy here!”

Panther looked around from her cage of lights and zeroed in on their leader. “Oh, hold on!” She perked up. “Joker’s not trapped!”

Mona looked up hopefully. “Sorry Joker, but we’re going to need you to search for a way to turn off these infrared lasers!” He looked ready to cry. “This is a museum, so there has to be some switch to let the workers avoid these lasers. Find it..!”

“Got it! Don’t move!” Joker called out, surveying the room. Spotting a shelf, he pulled himself up and flipped onto the small catwalk into one of the side rooms. Now near the ceiling, he ran to the other end, ambushing the oblivious security guard. “I’ll reveal your true form!” He yelled, ripping the mask off.

“Be careful, Joker!” Elegant fretted, trying to crane her neck to see. “We can’t back you up from here!”

He nodded as a formality, but knew he was strong enough to take care of this on his own. The Shadow convulsed, turning into a Hua Po who fluttered in the air with her butterfly wings.

Smirking at the easy prey, he took out his dagger, slashing it a couple of times before jumping back and kneeling with his 9mm. With a smirk, he shot it and the Shadow dissipated into nothing, clearing the room. Twirling his gun, he rubbed the back of his neck at the effortless fight. “Easy.”

Putting his weapon away, he walked around, turning his head left and right. A small red light caught his eye, and he went up toward what seemed to be a control panel. ‘I wonder if I should press it…’ He glanced toward his trapped teammates.

“Elegant, don’t move! Your butt’s about to hit one!” Panther yelled out, standing as close as she could without touching anything.

Elegant stiffened, pressing herself against the display. “Sorry!” She yelped, blushing furiously. “I don’t have any space!”

Mona whimpered, hugging the vase. “No one touch a beam!” He yelled.

“Ugh…” Skull groaned, laying on the carpet, bored out of his mind. “Joker, hurry up! I’m gonna end up fallin’ asleep here!”

The leader rolled his eyes. These were his teammates.

He slammed his fist against the button. With a start, the glass next to him started to recede into the ground, freeing Panther from her cage. “Yes!” She cheered, running out into the side. “Thanks, Joker! Now we need to get the others out!”
He nodded. His third eye senses saw a trail of footsteps leading to a portrait, walked over to it.

“Huh..?” Panther pointed at the gap. "I think there’s a little space between that painting’s frame and the wall.”

Knocking it down, it revealed another button. Joker pressed it, and the other glass pane rolled down, freeing Skull.

“Ooh, good job!” The pirate grinned, getting up from the floor and moving away from his former prison.

“Awesome!” Panther cheered. “Let’s hurry up and get back together with him!”

Joker smirked at the wording. “Yep, let’s get back together with him.” He replied cheekily.

She blushed. “Shut up! I just meant- Ugh, never mind.” She fumed, stomping over to the pirate thief.

Snickering, he followed her, meeting back up with Skull.

“Hey, thanks man!” The pirate grinned. "Now we just gotta get Mona and Elegant out of there.”

They turned to observe their two trapped teammates. Panther pursed her lips. “I don’t think we’ll be able to get them out unless we can turn the lasers off.”

The nobiewoman was pressing herself against the art piece, holding herself stiffly away from the red beams just centimeters from her. Mona himself was suction cupped to the vase, un-shed tears in his blue eyes.

“It’s OK, Mona.” Elegant soothed, reaching out a hand to pat his head. “Joker will get us out soon.”

He nodded glumly. “Sorry...I couldn’t control myself…” His ears drooped. “I can’t believe I have to say this, but I need more training…”

She sighed and looked out toward her team. “We passed by a security room earlier, right?” She yelled out. ”Do you think the controls are there?”

Joker gave her a thumbs up. “We’ll go check it out! Hang in there!” He replied loudly.

Skull tapped his foot. “All right, let’s try to get in there!”

They looked around, and noticed that behind them was a vent. Gray eyes followed the hypothetical trail, seeing that it might connect to that monitor room. Jumping up on some stacked canvases, Joker began crawling through, Skull and Panther following after him.

“I can’t believe you found a path like this…” The pirate remarked.

“Don’t look back here, all right?” Panther warned, crawling at the very end.

Skull groaned. “I keep sayin’, I’m not gonna look!”

Hitting the end of the vent, they jumped out, landing amidst computer desks. They looked around curiously. Most of the monitors were turned off, the large TV screens on the wall showing filler.

A blue glow caught Skull’s eye and he turned his head. “Hey, what’s that?” He pointed to a lone
laptop. Walking up to it, they saw it was a control terminal for the lasers. He perked up. “Ooh, it says security-whatever on here! Maybe this’ll let us turn them lasers off!”

“We need a passcode.” Joker informed, tapping the screen at the blank input bar.

Panther furrowed her brow. “Where do we find it, then?”

“Uh, they probably ain’t gonna just leave it lyin’ around.” Skull reminded.

She frowned. “Then what are we supposed to do..? Look for someone who might know it?”

Sighing, Joker moved away from the terminal and unlocked the door they couldn’t before. Maybe they could find the code somewhere.

Sliding open, they walked through before dodging behind a corner, peeking out. There were two security guards standing in the hallway where there were none earlier, talking to each other.

“Hey, did you hear about those intruders?” One guard asked.

The second guard sighed. “Yeah, you mean the thieves sneaking around in here? I got a call telling me to change the password, just in case.”

“And? What did you change it to?”

“Hello.”

“...Huh?”

“I said, hello! 07734. If you read the numbers upside-down, they spell out the word hello.”

“...Isn’t that a little childish?”

“Eh, it should be fine as long as nobody else finds out. It’s not like anyone’s eavesdropping on us. Anyway, don’t forget: when you see the code input, be sure to say hello.”

The thieves grinned to each other. “C’mon Joker, let’s go say hello!” Skull snickered.

Joker nodded, smirking. That was easier than he thought.

Hearing one of the guards leave for a lower floor, they dashed out and ambushed the one left standing, killing it. Going back to the security room, they put in 07734 into the terminal. In a second, the infrared beams disappeared, finally freeing the last of their team from the sprung trap.

Panther smiled, clapping her hands. “It looks like it worked!”

“Sweet!” Skull rolled a shoulder. “Let’s go grab Elegant and that stupid cat and get movin’!”

Mona quickly jumped off, detaching himself from the vase. “Those guys did it..!” He cheered. “We’re saved!”

Exhaling, the noblewoman slumped, wincing at her spine popping from her slouch. “Just in time.” She groaned, stretching her arms. She was afraid that her rear might’ve actually touch a red beam. The team leisurely walked up to them and she gave them a grateful smile. “Thanks guys.”
Joker nodded, smiling slightly. “Of course.”

Mona slowly walked up to them, his large head tilted down. “I-I’m sorry...That was very much unlike me…” He apologized timidly.

Skull sighed, rubbing the back of his head. “Sheesh...Weren’t you the one tellin’ us not to go around touchin’ shit in the exhibit?”

Elegant nodded in agreement. “Yeah, you acted as if that was the Treasure…”

The feline nodded sullenly. “Urgh, that is true...I can’t believe I made such a novice mistake, even for solid gold…” He turned back to gaze at the pot. “But something was drawing me to this vase…”

Panther shifted her balance. “What do you mean...? Isn’t it just an ordinary gold vase?” She asked. “I wonder if there’s something special about it. Should we take a closer look just in case?”

Joker shrugged and walked up to the pot. With a quick slug, he smashed the vase into dust. His eyes widened and he jumped back as a large red jewel appeared, floating above the floor.

“What is this?!” Panther yelped. The team bent their knees in preparation, wary of their new opponent.

“Oh, I see…” Realization dawned on Mona. “So that’s why I was drawn to it! Joker, catch it!” Said leader looked at the feline in confusion. “I’ll explain the rest of this later.” Mona urged. "Just get after it and attack!”

The gem began floating away, and they ran after it. Taking out his dagger, Joker lashed out, hitting the Shadow. In a flash of black liquid, an alien figure emerged from the stone. Its blue body glowed like LEDs, the otherworldly designs swirling down its anatomy. Large yellow eyes stared at them unseeingly, its arms waving in the air.

Furrowing his brow, Joker dashed forward, slashing it a couple times. He back flipped away, frowning when he noticed he had done no damage. “It’s null against physical!” He informed the team.

Stepping forward, Panther sent a burst of fire at it, which dispersed upon hitting its skin.

Skull growled. “That’s it!” He cocked his shotgun and fired a shell at point blank range. Finally, it fell limp to the ground and they rushed up, surrounding it with their firearms.

“Ohh…” It chuckled. “To think you would coerce me into giving in...How brilliant. My name is Regent...My existence shall become a new part of you.” In a flash, it merged with Joker’s mask and they relaxed their stances.

Mona cheered. “Good, good! That was pretty nice considering it was your first time running into one.”

“What was that though?” Elegant asked curiously. "It was hiding in that vase…”

“That was a rare Shadow that occasionally resides in pricey items. I call them Treasure Demons.” Mona explained giddily, wiggling his body around. “They’re great. Not only do they give you a lot of experience, they are useful for your Personas too. However, they run very fast, and attacks don’t deal very much damage to them.”
Joker closed his eyes, concentrating on his other selves. “I can’t use it in battle, but it has an attack from almost all the elements…” He hummed. “I can probably fuse it with another Persona and make a stronger one.”

Skull took a step back in shock. “Whoa, really?! You can fuse Personas?”

The leader nodded. “It’s kind of gruesome…” He grimaced. “They fuse by being beheaded.”

The team looked at each other worriedly. “Does it hurt..?” Elegant asked hesitantly. "I mean, Personas are a part of you, so if you’re beheading them to create new ones, then…” She trailed off, biting her lip at the thought.

“Yeah, I couldn’t imagine doing that to Carmen…” Panther crossed her arms uncomfortably. “Personas are us, so you’d have to...kill yourself?”

Joker smiled fondly. It was nice that they were worried for him like this. “Don’t worry, it doesn’t hurt.” He reassured. "I think because they weren’t my own Persona first, like Arsene, that I can do this.”

They nodded uncertainly. “If you say so, Joker...” Mona pumped a paw. "Well, let’s keep going!”

The thieves set out across the room and down the hallway, turning the corner. The rest of the hall was blocked with infrared beams and they looked around for another way.

Panther pointed up at a ledge to their right. “Let’s try that way.”

They jumped up onto the rim. Looking out into the next room, they saw a security guard roam the barren exhibit and a large hole in the middle of the ground. Skull sputtered. “The hell?! How’re we supposed to get past this huge hole in the-”

“Wait.” Elegant held out a hand. “Watch.”

Their eyes followed the Shadow who walked over the gaping hole without falling in. “It’s an optical illusion.” Joker concluded, jumping down and ambushing the enemy.

Finishing it off, they observed the surroundings, noting two bathrooms. Joker ran into the men’s room, the guys following him. The ladies hesitantly followed. “Ugh...I can’t believe I’m in here.” Panther complained sullenly as she eyed the urinals with a disgusted grimace.

“It’s just a bathroom…” Elegant shrugged, though she couldn't deny she was also uncomfortable being in here.

Smashing a statue, the leader grabbed the treasure, pocketing it. “Oh hold up, I gotta piss.” Skull announced casually.

Shoulders stiffening, Elegant backed out of the room. “Nope…”

Panther blushed furiously at his admittance. “Ugh, Skull! You’re so gross!” She stomped out of the men’s restroom as well, leaving the guys behind.

Mona stared after them before turning to the pirate with a glare. “Skull! Don’t be so repugnant in front of Panther and Elegant!” He scolded, following the ladies out.


Rolling his eyes, Joker walked out of the bathroom, pushing the pirate thief along as well.
“So...I guess we have to check the female bathroom, too?” Elegant asked timidly.

With a blush, the leader nodded. “Um, yeah…” He answered awkwardly and with a grimace, walked into the women's restroom.

“Hey!” Panther frowned disapprovingly with her arms crossed underneath her bosom. ”I know we’re in a Palace, but do we have to go in here? Why not just let me and Elegant do it?”

Joker paused. He really could've, but it was too late now. He had already walked into forbidden territory. With an awkward glance, he spied a treasure box and took whatever was inside without looking before quickly walking out.

Panther gritted her teeth. “OK, now that we’re done with going into bathrooms, let’s just keep moving…”

Everyone nodded hastily and continued through the Palace. They found another Safe Room and marked it down in the app. They all took a breather, removing their masks as they took a seat around the break room.

Ryuji sighed, leaning back in his chair. “Man, that was close...We woulda been totally screwed if Joker wasn’t there to help us…” He pushed his mask up on top of his head, grinning cheekily at the feline. “Ain’t that right, Monamona?”

Morgana bristled at the jab, sitting at the other end of the table. “Grrrr…”

Looking disapprovingly at the fellow teenager, Airi lightly smacked his hand. “None of that.” She reprimanded. "Morgana said he was sorry and he learned from his mistakes.”

Ann nodded in agreement, frowning at him. “She’s right, you’re being immature. We ended up learning about Treasure Demons, so it all turned out fine.”

Morgana looked up at them tearfully. “Mom- Airi...L-Lady Ann…!” He cried happily.

Ryuji sighed heavily, slumping. “Yes, mom.” He grumbled. “I’m just sayin’ we gotta make sure we don’t fall for the same trap again.”

Akira chuckled. “Well, next time you can get the rest of us out then. Let’s keep going.” He gestured, sliding his mask back on.

They continued through the museum, taking out Shadows and grabbing whatever treasure was hiding about. Entering another exhibit hall, they looked behind them as electricity crackled, blocking the way they came. “Huh..? Is this…” Panther trailed off.

“**Intruders in the Second Exhibition Room! Apprehend them at once!**”

They looked up at the announcement on the intercom just as security guards spawned within the room, patrolling the artworkd.

The thieves quickly darted behind a partition to avoid being seen, faces marred with tense frowns and narrowed eyes. “Crap, let’s get outta here, fast!” Skull cursed. “Which way’s the exit?”

Mona glanced outward toward the other end of the hall. “It’s also blocked.” He informed grimly. “We’re going to have to find another way.”

Tensing their shoulders, they ambushed two of the Shadows in succession without garnering the
attention of the last guard. Hiding behind another portrait, they looked out at the only guard left who was exuding a red aura around itself.

“This one looks tough…” Elegant remarked somberly, gloves squeaking as she clenched her hands. “Are we all ready?”

The team nodded and assaulted it. In a flash, the Shadow convulsed and transformed into five Corpse Birds. The emaciated onion-like birds floated in the air, their scrunched up expressions glaring at the intruders.

“Hm, they’re an undead type…” Mona hummed, staying in the back for support. “I think we all know who’s the best for this job!”

Smiling serenely, Elegant stepped forward, doing a tiny curtsy. “I did learn a new skill earlier…” She hummed. The others casually taking a step back, watching with a smirk.

White light began to glow around her as Jeanne hovered divinely. Concentrating the energy into her tips of her pointer and middle, she brushed her lips before snapping her fingers. With cries of pain, white beams stabbed through the Shadows, killing them all. “Makouha!”

“Awesome moves, Elegant!” Mona cheered.

The room blared red as four new enemies emerged from the depths of the Palace. “Four enemies! Don’t worry, though. They’re still nothing special!” He advised.

“Jack Frost!” Joker called, the tiny snowman dancing behind him. “Mabufu!” He sent a barrage of ice, killing the two Hua Pos. A Koropokguru sent a wind attack at Skull, knocking him down with a cry of pain as the winds cut into his arms.

“Skull!” Panther yelled out in worry, stepping forward with Carmen. “Maragi!” She held her arm out, palm forward, sending fireballs at the little leaf men. They erupted into flames, burning into a crisp.

“Amazing, Panther!” Mona admired.

Grouping back together, they looked around the barren room. The security was still switched on, the doors barred with electricity. Furrowing his brow, Joker used his third eye ability. In his vision, he noticed a portrait was hung crookedly and walked up toward it.

“Does this painting look crooked to you?” Panther asked, looking at it curiously.

“Let’s take it off the wall.” Elegant suggested.

Joker nodded, and he and Skull reached up for the frame, lifting it off and putting it on the ground. On the wall was a switch, a big red button just begging to be pushed.

Mona scoffed. “A button hidden behind a painting? How stereotypical.”

Skull rolled his eyes. “Who cares about that shit? Just hurry up and try pushin’ it.”

Joker slammed his fist against the button, and with some static, the electric fences turned off and receded back into the floors, leaving the paths unblocked.

“All right! It looks like it’s unlocked now!” Panther cheered, pumping a fist in victory.

Elegant smiled. “We can keep going then. Nice work, leader!”
The thieves went through the new door, ending up in an indoor koi pond. “Whoa! That shiny buildin’ over there’s kinda suspicious.” Skull exclaimed, pointing to the right.

It led out to an open garden and an even more ostentatious golden monolith of a building at the end of the walkway. The building was made up of golden blocks, stacked haphazardly in what some would call avant-garde. The same golden pattern swirled over the walls and onto strange tendrils, reaching into the night sky.

They looked out at it. “Whoa, it’s even gaudier than the rest of the museum…” Panther remarked with wide eyes.

“I didn’t think that was possible.” Elegant huffed, idly grasping her arm.

Mona frowned. “It definitely looks like something important would be hidden away in there…” Skull ran ahead. “Let’s go find out!”

They ran in the direction of the building and the bamboo painted shoji doors parted a path for them, one after another. “Whoa, it really opened up…” Skull marveled, impressed with the mechanics of the Palace.

They ran through, stopping in the middle of the garden. “Whoa! The hell?!” He yelped.

Blocking their way were several red electric fences, static filling the air. Behind the blockade was a large shoji door, elaborately painted peacock feathers decorating its surface.

Panther bit her lip. “Are these…infrared lasers? There’s no way we can get past them…” Mona crossed his paws. “This level of security only proves there’s something worth protecting up ahead.”

“Hold on.” Elegant turned to the side, looking at a plaque that was stood to the side like an information sign. “There’s something written here.” She walked up to it. The others turned to watch. “All personnel: This door can only be opened via the security room that lies beyond it. Please be cautious, as it is impossible to open from the outside.” She read.

“So it’s never gonna open?!?” Skull yelped. “How’re we supposed to get past..?!?” Joker crossed his arms, frowning deeply. Was there any way they could time it? But then they’d have to wait for who knows how long...

“Wait.” Mona called out, eyes locked on the large door that blocked their path. “That door…I think I’ve seen that pattern somewhere…” Panther tilted her head. “Where? Is it from your memories?”

Mona shook his head. “No, nothing like that…Oh right!” He perked up. “There’s no mistaking it! That’s the same door I saw earlier!” He turned back toward the pond. “Guys, let’s head back!”


“I think I know what real-world door that’s based on. There may be another way to open it!” Mona replied. “In any case, I’ll explain later! Come on, let’s go!” He ran back toward the last hallway where they emerged from.

‘I suppose we should listen to Morgana for the time being…’ Joker mused and followed after the
feline, Elegant and Panther moving behind him.

Skull slumped his shoulders. “What is goin’ on…” He groaned, running after them.

Running back to the koi pond, they moved to the other side where a Safe Room was. Registering it in the Nav, Joker transported them back to the entrance, and they left the Metaverse.
“You have returned to the real world from Madarame’s Palace. Thank you for your hard work.”

They blinked as they reappeared back in front of Madarame’s shack, the sun still setting in the sky. Their outfits faded away for their uniforms and the ground beneath them solidified, pavement compared to the Palace’s carpets. The neighborhood was quiet, not a single person walking by within this well-off residential area.

Ann crossed her arms worriedly. “How’re we supposed to get past that door..?”

Ryuji sighed, leaning against the sidewalk railing. “I dunno...You think there’s some kinda off switch somewhere?”

Airi tilted her head. “I don’t think it’ll be that easy...Morgana?” She looked at the feline in Akira’s bag.

He huffed proudly. “Looks like this is where I come in.”

Ann looked at him weirdly. “Mona..?”

He purred loudly, tail waving behind him. “I have a suspicious place in mind.” He announced.

They looked at him in surprise. “Where?” Akira asked, resting his hands in his pockets.

“Remember? This shack is the basis for Madarame’s Palace. I actually scouted it out the last time we were here.”

Ryuji raised his eyebrows. “Whoa...So this was your plan from the start..?” He asked, impressed.

“Correct.” Morgana purred.

Ann deadpanned. “...You only went “scouting” because you were bored.”

The feline’s tail shot up and his eyes darted away, embarrassed at being caught. Airi covered her mouth as she giggled at the adorable reaction. “At least something good came out of it.” She voiced optimistically.

“So? Where’s this suspicious place?” Ryuji asked, surveying the house for it.

“It’s on the second floor." Morgana answered cheerfully. "I noticed an unnaturally hefty lock on a door up there.”

Ann frowned. “If it’s locked, that means there’s something in there he doesn’t want people to see.”

“But don’t we wanna be openin’ the door in the Palace?” Ryuji asked.

The feline nodded. “Yes, and we’re going to do that by opening the real one in front of Madarame’s eyes. Basically, we’re going to change his cognition that the door is unopenable.”

Ann played with a ponytail. “In other words...when we open the one in Madarame’s house,” She
blinked in astonishment. "That area in his Palace will open on its own?"

Ryuji crossed his arms. “I’m not really gettin’ it...Is that gonna work?” He asked cluelessly.

Airi tapped her chin. “Since the Palace is his mind, that area was locked because he knows it’s locked in the real world. So if he sees it unlocked, he has no choice but to accept that the door is open.” She explained. “Right, Morgana?”

Morgana nodded firmly. “There’s no chance it won’t open!...I think!”

Ryuji stared at him, unimpressed with his semi-confidence.

Grimacing at his teammate’s skepticism, the feline turned to their leader. “You understand, don’t you, Joker?” He asked hopefully.

“Well, yeah...but…” Ryuji trailed off uncertainly.

Morgana glared at him, slightly hurt. “Why don’t you trust me?! It’s worth a try!” He yelled indignantly.

“But even then,” Ann interjected. “There’s still that hefty look we have to deal with in reality, right?” She grasped her chin. “Airi, you were the one who did all the lockpicking in Kamoshida’s Palace. You think you can unlock it?”

“Maybe...What type of lock was it?” Airi asked, taking a seat on the railing.

“It was a huge padlock with the word “Miwa” on it.” Morgana groomed an ear. “I think it’s Japanese.”

Airi frowned. “Miwa..? That’s going to be tough.” She remarked solemnly.

Ryuji scratched his head. “Why’s that..?”

“MIWA is one of the most trusted lock brands in Japan. They do a lot of high security, mostly hotel room doors and such.” Airi explained. “I could’ve sworn they switched to mostly electronic locks a few years ago, but if Madarame is using one of those, he’s definitely hiding something important.”

Akira idly tweaked a strand of hair. “You think you can do it?”

She nodded. “Yeah, most likely. As long as it’s not the electronic version, I could probably get in with a lock pick.”

Ryuji crossed his arms, a thought hitting him just then. “So like, you never told us how you know how to pick locks.” He frowned. “I asked ya back in Kamoshida’s, but you didn’t answer. Where’d you learn? It’s not like it’s a common skill.”

The others looked at her curiously, waiting for an answer. “Um...” Airi gnawed her lower lip. Guess she was going to tell them, too. “Well, after that thing happened...” She looked over at Akira, who nodded in understanding. Rui's death. “I was taken in by a small sanctuary...This one wasn’t well funded though, and they couldn’t really provide much. So...” She looked away uncomfortably, letting them figure it out themselves. It wasn't like her nightmare ended after the
institution closed. Life didn't work that way.

Akira furrowed his brow. “You had to steal..?” He asked quietly.

She nodded slightly, looking down at her lap. “Two older kids took me with them when they would go out. One of them was basically a veteran, having lived in the district all his life. They taught me how to pick locks and had me look out for store owners.” She gripped her skirt. “We never stole too much...just food. I mean…” She bit her lip, hunching her shoulders in guilt. “I know we did bad things, I heard it all the time when we went out...But we had to.”

Ryuji exhaled. “Damn…” He whispered, looking away with a creased brow. “You guys had it that bad..? I knew it was shitty, but...”

She nodded silently, not looking up in fear of their judgement. It wasn't as bad as they probably thought, but she still went against the law to survive. They would've starved or froze to death during the winters since the old apartment they used for their "home" didn't have heating. She remembered being so underweight that Takase had been able to encompass her entire waist with his hands. The caretakers tried but majority of them were elderly people that had already retired, doing this to pass the time in their meaningless lives after decades of cheap labor. They had no money to give, only some old clothes and blankets.

No one else remembered them as kids. They were nothing. They fought to be seen, to be acknowledged as something more than invisible children, and to do that, they had to steal to survive.

“Airi...” Ann breathed, covering her mouth in horror. “Why didn’t the government help out...? You guys were starving, right? Shouldn’t they have done something?” She pressed hesitantly.

“It’s not like they didn’t want to feed us. The staff at this one were a lot nicer, and they actually cared.” The cellist answered bitterly. Unlike the institution that shattered her humanity and soul. "The problem was that it was near San’ya, and it wasn't even officially an orphanage. The owner kind of declared it as a safe haven for kids one day and we ended up there, off the record...” She had thought a couple of kids wouldn't be lost in the system so easily, but perhaps no one cared enough to try.

Ryuji winced. “San’ya..? You serious?” He clenched his fists.

Akira looked at them curiously. “San’ya..? Is that a bad place?” He asked uncertainly. He was still new to Tokyo and didn't really know many of the towns aside from Shibuya and Yongenjaya.

The ex-runner grimaced. “Yeah. It’s the poorest district in Tokyo. A lot of the homeless live there...” He looked away uncomfortably. “The cities surroundin’ it are also pretty poor. I used to live in Ueno, which is right next to it...” He ducked his head, a dash of embarrassment lighting his cheeks. "I'm in Meguro now though, so it's a lot better."

Airi looked at him sadly, understanding his shame. No one wanted to broadcast the fact that they were poor, especially in the presence of friends who were better off. “...To answer your question, Ann, the government cared more about taking care of the homeless problem than us orphans. By taking care of, I mean banning them.” She answered bluntly. “I heard they’re even building hotels and nicer houses there...” She sighed. Was her old orphanage still there? She never looked back...

Frowning wistfully, Akira sat next to her, gently bumping shoulders. To think his friends had lived such tough lives, while he lived a typical middle class lifestyle in Mishima...He never knew how good he had it.
Ann covered her mouth in horror. “Airi...Ryuji…” She whispered. “I...never even thought that I was rich, or how much better I have it. I’m sorry...I never even asked if your home lives were OK.” She lightly placed a hand on the ex-runner’s arm. How had she never thought about it? Thinking back, she realized Airi never had her own lunch in middle school, always eating the school’s food and accepting hers when she didn't finish. How Ryuji only wore one set of the school uniform.

They just smiled like they had no worries.

Ryuji gave her a weak grin. “Hey, it’s OK. We’re not that poor. I bet your rich foreigner self has never even stepped inside a tatami apartment.” He joked.

“Airi…” Ann stared up at him worriedly, scrunching up her face. “I’m sorry! You don’t have to pay me back for that dolphin toy from middle school, or that time I lent you money for a yakisoba bread, or all those times I paid for your drinks-”

“OK, I get it!” He rolled his eyes. “You feel sorry for my broke ass cause you’re livin’ the life in Kichijoji. It’s fine.”

The model huffed. “I just feel bad, OK?! Who knows how many times I accidentally rubbed my wealth in your face…” She looked down guiltily. “I wasn’t being a good friend. I promise I’ll try to be more considerate.”

Ryuji stared at her with wide eyes. “Ann…” He whispered. Feeling his cheeks heat up at her new consideration for him, he quickly turned away. “A-Anyway, let’s get back on topic! Airi, you gonna go in and pick the lock?”

Said cellist stared at the two of them with raised eyebrows. What was that about? “Yeah, but there’s no way I could do it alone.” She answered after a moment. “I’d have to somehow sneak in and pick the lock, then wait for Madarame to see it. I doubt there's a window in that room, which means there's no easy way to escape. It’s really risky…”

Mona perked up from within the bag. “I can come with to monitor the situation. However, there’s still Yusuke to worry about. If only there was someone who could distract him for a while…” He trailed off, turning to the model.

Ann blinked. “...Huh?” She idly twirled a ponytail.

A light bulb lit up above his head and Ryuji turned to look at her. “Oh...Ohhh!” He leaned back against the railing leisurely. “Man, how are we even gonna get into his house? We’d get reported for sure if we force ourselves in…” He despaired theatrically.

The model scrunched up her face. “What?”

Airi hid her face in her hands, resisting the urge to sigh. Akira sweatdropped, patting her shoulder. He had a feeling he knew where this was going.

“What?!” Ann asked again, narrowing her eyes.

With a shrug, Ryuji grinned at her. “I guess the only way is…” He trailed off, her looking at him with trepidation. “Havin’ you go nude.” He finished saucily.

She took a step back. “WHAT?!” She shrieked, holding an arm up near her chest in a defensive manner.

Morgana purred. “Fancy you say that, Ryuji. I was just thinking the same thing.”
Ann glared at them furiously. “This isn’t funny!” She yelled, stomping her foot.

Ryuji sighed, tapping his foot against the gravel. “We’re not sayin’ you should really get naked.” He scowled. "Not that he'd even appreciate it..."

Ears twitching at the statement, Morgana narrowed his eyes at the ex-runner. “It’s simply the best excuse for you two to enter Madarame’s house without raising suspicions...So, we’d like for you to play the role of decoy, Lady Ann.” He requested cheerfully.

Ann looked down with embarrassment written all over her steaming face. “This is way too sudden...How are we even going to do this?”

The feline waved his tail back and forth. “It’s simple. While you distract Yusuke with the offer of posing nude, mo- Airi will sneak off to open the door. I’ll follow you guys to monitor the situation and help out if needed.”

Airi bit her lip. “What if we get found out..?”

Morgana shook his ears. “We can run into the Palace!...Or something?” He suggested weakly.

“Is that really gonna work?!” Ann sputtered incredulously. “I mean, you’re not giving me much confidence in this plan!” She grimaced. “Do I have to be the bait..?”

“There’s no other way.” Akira replied sympathetically. He didn't want her to go through with this since she was clearly uncomfortable, but honestly, this was their best shot. “Good luck, Ann.”

She fumed and stomped her foot. “Why can’t one of you guys go nude?!"

Airi choked and covered her mouth as she coughed, shoulders shaking. ‘Don’t think about that, don’t think about that…’

Looking over at her in concern, Akira rubbed her back, trying to help her coughs.

Feeling his touch, an image of him au naturale flashed in her mind and she flushed. ‘No!’ She screamed silently, banishing the thoughts away. ‘He’s your friend!’

Ryuji frowned, not noticing the class president’s situation. “That ain’t what he wants. If we could, we’d trade places, but he's hellbent on gettin' you two to model for him.”

Ann pursed her lips. “Then make it so he does!”

Airi froze at her statement, an image of Akira, Yusuke, and Ryuji together in her head. Naked. All those toned arms and abdomens, with their attractive smirks...She covered her nose, feeling liquid traveling down her nostrils. ‘Nope nope nope…’ Discreetly taking out a tissue, she wiped the blood away, coughing awkwardly. She wasn't being a pervert, she was just admitting that all the men in her life were very handsome, even though Yusuke was little better than a stranger.

Akira notice the redness of her face and gave her an odd look.

Ryuji waved the model away. “All you gotta do is trick Yusuke, have him take you to that room, then just open the door. Make sure Madarame sees too.” He grinned lightheartedly.

Ann grumbled. “You make it sound so easy..!” She looked away, holding a hand to her temple. “But if there’s no other way...I don’t...I don’t…” She gulped. “I don’t have a choice...Urgghhhh!” She screamed in frustration. “God!”
Wincing at her screech, Airi stood up and placed her hands on Ann’s shoulders. “You don’t have to go nude.” She soothed. “You only have to say you will, and stall Kitagawa-kun long enough for me to pick the lock. I’d only need a couple minutes, ten at most. Just...talk to him about what he envisions, or something.”

Clenching her fists, Ann tensed her arms. “Fine, I’ll do it! For Justice!” She shouted. “Seriously, you better pull this off!”

Mona furrowed his brow. “If it’s for your sake Lady Ann, I won’t stop scratching even if all my claws were to break!” He declared adamantly.

Airi sweatdropped. “I’ll do my best.” She smiled reassuringly. She had had enough practice inside the previous Palace to have some confidence in her skills.

“We’ll be countin’ on you, Airi!” Ryuji exclaimed excitedly. “Don’t let Yusuke realize, all right? Morgana, you better watch their backs!”

Ann crossed her arms over her chest protectively. “If he tries to force my clothes off...I’ll tear that house down!” She growled. “I’m really gonna lose it if we do all this and the Palace door doesn’t open. Got it?!”

Ryuji rolled his shoulder. “We’re workin’ to get dirt on that guy’s crimes either way. It won’t go to waste.” He assured with a grin. “If he tries anything, I know you’d smack the shit out of him. All right, let’s get down and dirty tomorrow.”

The ladies tensed. “Tomorrow?!” They shouted in surprise.

He shrugged. “Earlier the better.”

“Um, b-but..” Ann stammered. “Will Kitagawa-kun agree?”

He crossed his arms. “I dunno, just say something like ‘I really need it to be tomorrow.’ That should work, yeah?”

She groaned despairingly, holding a hand to her temple as she shook her head. Airi bit her lip. “I’ll have to get some lockpicks tonight, then…”

Akira stood up from the railing, shouldering his bag. “You can make them at my desk.” He offered. “It’s where I usually make them.”

Airi smiled gratefully. “If it’s not too much trouble.” She stretched her arms into the air. “We should get home now if we’re doing this so soon…”

“Let’s go home then.” He ordered. “Get some sleep, guys.”

“Aye aye, leader.” Ryuji grinned, walking toward Central street.

“Yeah yeah…” Ann sighed heavily, following at a more sedate pace.

They walked back to Shibuya station, separating for the day.

The two Shujin students walked into the cafe in Yongenjaya, the bell ringing at the door. “Are you sure you’ve got this, mo- Airi?” Morgana whispered from within the bag. “This is important. Lady
Ann’s chastity is on the line!”

Airi huffed with amusement. “You don’t believe in my lock picking? If I fail, you can take over…” She answered quietly. She was more than sure she could do this. She had been picking locks for years after all, and every lock inside of Kamoshida’s Palace.

Waving to Sojirō, they walked up to Akira’s room and put their bags down. Morgana dashed out and began grooming himself on the bed, finally free from his small confines.

The leader lead her to the work desk, pulling the chair out for her. “Here. The tools should be to your right. Materials to your left.” He explained, pointing to the aforementioned drawers.

“Gotcha. Thanks again for letting me use your space.” Airi smiled, taking a seat and placing the equipment in front of her. Right as she was going to start, their phones rang.

R: You get in touch with Yusuke?
An: Mm-hm. He asked me to come by tomorrow.
R: Awww yeah, he fell for it!
An: Um, do I...really have to do this...?
Ai: You don’t have to.
Ak: Strip for him, Ann.
Ai: ...
An: I AM NOT STRIPPING.
Ak: I’m kidding. Just be careful.
Ai: You better be joking.

Airi glared at him from the desk. He rubbed his neck sheepishly from his seat on the couch.

Morgana bristled. “Joker...!” He warned, swatting his arm with a paw.

R: Man, this is such a pain…
R: We gotta open that door AND have Madarame see it, right?
Ai: Yep. When he sees it’s open, the door inside should open too.
R: I still kinda don’t get it…
Ai: If you have an apple in front of you, uneaten, you’ll think to yourself there’s an untouched apple.
Ai: But if someone takes a bite out of it, you can’t deny that it’s not untouched anymore.
Ai: Now there's an eaten apple in front of you and you know it.
Ai: Same thing here, but with doors.
R: Ooh...OK, that makes sense!
R: Oh, and one more thing.
R: Let us know if any weird shit goes down and we’ll be there to back you up ASAP. You got that, Ann? I'm worried for you.
An: Kk, got it. He's not touching me.

“A Palace is a reflection of how its owner views the real world.” Morgana explained, grooming an ear. “So, if Madarame’s cognition of reality changes, it’s only natural that his Palace would be affected. You really dumbed it down for Ryuji, mo- Airi.” He chortled. "It took him this long to finally understand.”

Airi frowned disapprovingly. “You two need to stop insulting each other. Ryuji’s our teammate
and we should help him to understand too. He's a little slow but he's our friend.”

His ears drooped at the dressing down he received. “Yes, mom…” Morgana mumbled. “...All jokes aside, we really will need Lady Ann to strip for Yusuke. It’s the only way in.”

Akira huffed in amusement. “She’s more likely to punch him than to strip for him.” He stood up from the couch. “I’ll go get us some coffee.”

Airi nodded. “OK, I’ll get started here then.” She waved the pliers she had in her hands.

He headed downstairs, ordering two cups. With a sigh, Sojiro slowly got up to make them, reluctantly grabbing the grounded beans from the shelf. Akira sat down on a bar stool to wait, listening to the couple behind him chatter.

“Hey, we’re heading out. This place is closing soon.” The man stated.

“Whaaaat? But I want to watch TV.” The woman whined. “There’s a special on that guy they call a “Detective Prince,” Akechi.”

He sighed. “It’ll still be on the news. You can watch it at home. That pretty boy’s been on TV a lot lately. You can see his face any time actually. Anyway, it’s late. Thanks for the coffee, boss!” He waved to the barista, leaving the bills on the counter. He and his lady friend left the cafe, with only Akira and Sojiro left.

Getting up from his seat, Akira grabbed the dirty dishes and the money, bringing it over to the counter. He took the dishes over to the sink and began washing them, making sure they were nice and clean. The TV blared next to him, and he listened as he scrubbed a curry stain.

“Next, we have an update on the massive personal information leak. Recently, personal info stored by several domestic companies was decrypted and leaked online. Hundreds of thousands of people’s info is believed to be leaked, and many are voicing their anxiety.” The newscaster informed. “According to experts, there is a high chance that an international group of hackers is involved…”

He frowned, drying the plates. ‘Someone stole all that personal information..? Could we do something about it?’ He placed the dishes back in the cabinet.

“Here.” Sojiro slid two cups of coffee on the bar. “How’s school?” He asked nonchalantly, drying a cup. “You’re not causing any trouble, are you?”

Akira shook his head. “I’m not.”

The barista nodded. “Good. I’ve gotta report to your probation officer twice a month. It’s already a pain in the ass as is, so please don’t make me have to write even more crap.” He glared at the teenager. “Got that? This society is kept in check by laws and authority figures. You can go and get yourself killed if you want, but don’t go dragging other people into your mess. The last thing we need is more idiots like you roaming around.”

Akira flinched slightly at the mention of his death, and nodded obediently. Seemed even after a month, his guardian still didn’t trust him. At least he knew that the man was actually doing this out of the kindness of his heart. He didn’t receive much money from housing and watching him.

A phone rang out in the quiet of the cafe and Sojiro took his out of his pocket, answering the call. “Hm? What’s wrong?” He spoke into it. “Yeah, I’m heading out now. Sorry about that.” He smiled. “…I know. The usual, right? OK, I’ll see you later.”
Hanging up, the smile dropped from his face. “As you can see, I’m pretty damn busy both at work and in my private life.” He smirked lightly. “If you could lend a hand, it’d really be a great help…”

Akira nodded. “I’d be glad to.”

The older man huffed, crossing his legs as he leaned against the counter. “Now we’re talking. Either way, I won’t ask you to work for free. If you agree to help me, then…” He trailed off before continuing. “I’ll teach you how to make the perfect cup of coffee. Not a bad trade, eh?”

Akira smiled slightly. Learning to make his own coffee? “Sounds interesting.”

Sojiro smiled lazily. “All right. Looks like we’ve got ourselves a deal. I’ll be counting on your help soon.” He took off his apron. “I’m leaving for the day. Don’t stay up too late and make sure to walk Airi home.” He narrowed his eyes. “Who knows what you’d do to that poor girl…?” He muttered grumpily as he left the cafe.

Akira blushed at the accusation. ‘I’m not that kind of guy..!’ He thought as he waved bye to his guardian. Exhaling, he grabbed the two steaming cups and went back upstairs, pleased that he made another deal.

Airi was slowly sharpening a lock pick, frowning in concentration. She had four already finished on the desk, and was just about to clean up another one. Morgana was stretched out on his bed, closing his eyes.

“I got you some coffee.” Akira placed it gingerly onto the table, away from all the tools.

“Oh!” She perked up. “Thank you, Akira.” She smiled, grabbing the cup by the handle. Blowing the hot liquid, she slowly took a sip. “Mmm, Kona.” She savored the flavor.

Akira sipped his as well. “Kona?” He inquired.

“It’s a Hawaiian bean. It’s known for being rich but light and delicate with a complex aroma.” She explained. “Sojiro-san hasn’t explained the different types? You were working here last time, right?”

He sat down on a nearby chair, pulling it up to the desk. “He only had me wash and clean. I wasn’t allowed anywhere near the beans…” He answered sheepishly, taking another sip. “But he said he’s going to teach me soon when we have time. I’ll probably learn when it’s summer.”

He picked up one of the finished lockpicks, scrutinizing the smooth exterior. “You made them really well. Mine still have a couple of nicks.”

She smiled wryly. “Well, I’ve had more time to learn.” Takase taught her well in the few months he lived there before his relatives took him. "Morgana started teaching you, right? Or did you know how to do this in Mishima..?”

Akira snorted. “No. I was the typical middle class school boy. My parents wouldn’t have let me anywhere near illegal things…” He grimaced, ducking his head.

Airi looked at him curiously. “I don’t think I’ve ever asked, but...how are they?” She put down her cup. "Have your parents talked to you lately?”

His fingers tightened around his coffee, the heated porcelain searing his skin. “...No.” He answered shortly, ignoring the pain. “I haven’t heard from them since Boss was appointed my new guardian for this year.” He looked away, his neck tensing at the subject he didn't want to get into.
She stared at him worriedly and reached out to envelop his hands with hers, gently taking the cup away. Placing it on the desk, she grabbed his hands, fingertips feathering over the burns on his palms. “You don’t have to tell me.” She said quietly. “Just know that I’m here for you...We’re all here for you.”

Grabbing her bag next to her, she took out a tube of Recov-R gel, carefully applying it to his wounds.

He stared down silently as she took care of him. “…Thanks.” He whispered. What did he do to deserve them? Deserve her..?

When was the last time anyone had cared for him like this? Maybe when he was younger when he scraped his knees, and his mother soothed his crying, kissing the pain away. That was the last time he could remember his parents touching him. His healed fingers twitched, and entwined with herss. ‘I didn’t realize I was so touch starved…’ He thought bitterly, the physical contact sending shivers down his spine.

Her hands were smaller than his, her fingers slimmer. They were calloused from playing a string instrument and from roughing it out in the city in her younger years, but they still held an elegance to them. Fitting for her.

He wasn’t going to mention that they fit well with his hands.

He took a deep breath. “I don’t have a good relationship with my parents. My arrest gave them the perfect opportunity to send me away...The last thing they did was ship my clothes here.” He explained dispassionately, staring blankly at their woven hands. “That’s it.”

Biting her lip, Airi slowly pulled him forward, embracing him with a hug. “It’s OK.” She murmured. “You’re with us now. The Phantom Thieves are a family, too.” She softly rubbed his back. What was it like to have blood family, and they didn’t want you..? To grow up with parents who sent you away without a word. At least her parents had loved her dearly before they died.

His shoulders sagged and he rested his forehead against her shoulder, breathing in her peppermint scent. “Yeah...We’re a family, too.” He answered quietly, his arms resting at her waist. Her soft warmth was so comforting, he could fall asleep like this...

A snort broke the silence, and they looked over. Morgana was asleep on the mattress, paws raised in the air. His whiskers twitched as he dreamed. “Lady Ann…”

Shoulders shaking, Airi covered her mouth as she laughed.

Chuckling, Akira took his arms back, leaning back in his seat. “It’s pretty late.” He remarked. “I’ll walk you home.”

She nodded, grabbing the lockpicks and putting them in her bag. “You don’t have to.”

He rolled his eyes. “And like I said before, I want to.” He walked her home before going back to the cafe.

Waving good bye, Airi closed the front door of her house and did her nightly ritual before getting into bed.
Snuggling the Mona plush Ryuji had gifted her, she stared up at the dark ceiling. Why didn’t she ever ask him about how he felt? He transferred here to Tokyo and was immediately thrust into the phantom thief business, never a free moment to take a breather. He took up the mantle as their leader without complaint, but was he really OK..? 

Pulling the blanket higher, she promised herself to watch out for him. It was the least she could do as "team mom," and she couldn't help but care for him, for them. They were her family now. They thought of her as someone dear to them, and they were dear to her.

Her phone buzzed and she grabbed it off the nightstand. Staring curiously at the screen, she unlocked it, reading the email.

Her eyes widened. ‘Yes..!’

Chapter End Notes

-San'ya was reported as Tokyo's poorest district, Ueno being right next to it. A lot of temporary construction and factory workers live in this ward, paying by the day for their "apartments." Their schedules aren't stable, their jobs come with risks and no benefits aside from a small paycheck. A lot of them are also over the age of 60 and on welfare, unable to support themselves. You can probably see a bunch of drunken old men passed out on the streets if you visit, no matter what time of day it is. Crime isn't that big of a deal because there isn't much of anything to steal.

-Meguro is a ward in Tokyo that's south of Shibuya. It features a lot of western architecture, not as heavy traffic as other parts of Tokyo, and lots of big apartment buildings.
The bell rang, signalling the end of another day of classes. Students ambled out of the room slowly, not wanting to go out in the rain that poured down from the sky like an endless waterfall.

The thieves packed up their bags and stood up from their seats. “Well then,” Morgana began, stepping into the outstretched bag. “Let’s head over to the hideout.”

Akira nodded, and they took the train to Shibuya. Meeting up with Ryuji outside of the Ginza line, they walked over to the station bridge, leaning against the railing. People passed by without a glance, rushing to their business as the rain flowed down the windows.

“Ann, Airi, Morgana. We’re countin’ on you.” Ryuji stated firmly. “Me and Akira’re banned from goin’ there, so all we can do is wait here…”

Morgana shook his head, balancing on the steel bar. “No, you two have something different you’ll need to do.”

Akira blinked. “What do you mean?”

The feline flicked an ear. “You have to wait inside the Palace. Once that door opens, sneak in and look for some kind of control room. We need to make sure the door can’t close anymore after it’s open.”

Airi perked up. “Oh, because after Madarame sees the door is unlocked, he would just lock it again.”

Realization dawned on Ryuji. “Oohh, I get it. Mkay, you can leave that to us!”

Ann clenched her teeth. “Don’t mess up, OK? I’m going to head home for a change of clothes.” She announced, straightening up. “There’s no way I’ll let Kitagawa-kun see me naked.” She gripped the straps of her bookbag. “I’ll meet you at the house.” She said, looking at Airi. “It will only take me twenty minutes.”

Airi nodded slowly. “Um, OK..? Why would you need to change clothes?”

“You’ll see. I’ll seduce him with my acting.” Ann replied grimly before power walking to her train. Blinking, they looked at each other and shrugged.

Ringing the doorbell, the cellist and the model heard thumping sounds from within the rickety old house before the door slid open with a rusted crack. “Kimisawa-san, Takamaki-san!” Yusuke gestured inside. “Please, come in. I’ve been expecting you.”

“Hi, Kitagawa-kun! Please excuse the intrusion.” Airi smiled nervously, lips twitching as she tried to contain her laughter. She closed her umbrella and placed it in a weathered pot next to the shoe rack. Adjusting her bag, she grimaced at the heavy weight. ‘How does Akira carry him every day..?’
The artist led them to the same art room from last time, heading straight to his paints. “To think you’d really come...I assumed you were lying when you contacted me.” He smiled ecstatically, his back turned toward them.

“I’m sorry it was so sudden.” Ann apologized, standing awkwardly in the middle of the room.

“Oh, it’s not a problem.” He assured, taking out different acrylics and water. “But as I told you yesterday, Sensei will be returning in about twenty or thirty minutes. So um…” He paused. “I’m sorry if that causes some anxiety for you two.”

“That’s why I’m here today, dammit.” The model mumbled irritably.

He turned around. “What was that?” He asked curiously, not hearing what she said.

Airi held up her hands. “Oh, she said that it’s fine!” She laughed nervously. "As long as you get some work done, I think it’s OK.”

“Y-Yeah! That’s right…” Ann added awkwardly.

He tilted his head. “By the way...Have you gained some weight?” He asked hesitantly. “Kimisawa-san looks the same, but…”

Airi bit her lip and looked away, trying not to laugh. When Ann had mentioned she was going to grab a change of clothes, she forgot to mention she was going to be wearing her entire wardrobe. When she waddled up to her in front of the shack, Airi could only stare in silence, mouth opened in shock. The blonde was now swallowed in fabric, the multiple layers bulging out into a round shape. She resembled that North American tire company mascot than anything else and looked 200 pounds heavier.

The model tilted her head, lifting a heavily clothed arm. “You think so? I weigh the same as always...Maybe I’m bloated today?” She asked innocently, eyes darting around.

“Yeah, you did eat a lot of salty food…” Airi added, voice shaking a bit. A padded elbow jabbed her in the side and she squeaked, covering her mouth.

“Yup.” Ann agreed, popping her lips at the “p”, letting her arm fall. “I’m pretty salty, er. Full of salt.”

Yusuke hesitated, giving them an odd look. “So, then...can you, um...get ready here? Whoever wants to start?”

“Um!” Airi spoke up loudly, startling the artist. “I need to go to the bathroom first. I...also had a lot of food. Ooh,” She grasped her abdomen, faking a wince. “It’s not sitting well with me. Why don’t you go first, Ann?”

The model glared at her from the corner of her eye. “I...need to take my clothes off, right?” She asked glumly.

The artist tucked some hair behind his ear uncomfortably. “Y-Yes please…”

She slowly raised her arms in preparation. “I’m embarrassed. Could you look the other way..?” She asked timidly.

Nodding, he turned to face the wall. "As you wish."
Airi bit her lip, shoulders trembling in silent laughter. This was something like out of a cheap porno with how ridiculous it was.

A black tank top landed next to Yusuke's feet. “...!” His eyes widened. To his left, a black skirt fluttered to the floor. “...Oh!” He gasped, shoulders stiffening.

“Phew, that was tight…” Ann sighed in relief, wiggling in less layers

“Tight..?” He repeated to himself, before shaking his head. “No, I’m doing this for art…!”

“Don’t look over here, OK..?” She sang. “Hey, your sensei’s coming back soon, right?” Another shirt hit the wooden floor boards.

“I believe so…” He answered awkwardly.

“Well,” Airi interrupted. “I’m going to go to the bathroom now. I’ll be right back!” She assured, rushing out of the room and sliding the door closed.

“It’s right down the hall!” Yusuke yelled out. "Second door on the left!

“OK!” She answered back, unzipping her bag. With a gasp, Morgana popped his head out and jumped out of his prison. “Phew...Let’s go, before Lady Ann is forced to bare it all!” He whispered firmly.

She nodded, following the feline down the hall. The rest of the house was just as dilapidated as the outside, the former white walls stained yellow with age and bad maintenance. The floorboards creaked underneath her shoes as she dashed up the stairs. None of the lights were turned on, leaving the halls in the dark aside from the occasional windows.

Turning the corner, she stopped. Next to a rack of canvases was an elaborately painted door, blocked off with a heavy padlock. The familiar peacock feathers decorated the surface, showing that it was the same door as the one in the Palace.

“This is it!” Morgana stated, staring up at the heavy duty lock.

Taking out a lockpick from her bag, Airi began her work, inserting the slab of metal into the slot.

“I’m going to go back down to check on Lady Ann. Keep working on it!” He announced, sprinting back downstairs silently.

“Do you think we could do this somewhere else then? A little more atmosphere would be lovely…” Ann suggested, taking off another layer. ‘Airi better hurry up..! I only have four more layers left!’

“This should be good enough…” Yusuke refuted quietly.

“But wouldn’t a room with a lock be a bit better?” She drawled.

“A lock..?” He furrowed his brow in confusion.

She sighed dramatically. “Must a girl say more..?” She threw a pink lacy camisole at his shoes.

“Wha?!” He took a step back in shock, his cheeks heating up. “But the only one with a lock
is…Sensei’s room…”

She perked up. “Then why not there?”

He straightened up, coughing awkwardly. “I can’t intrude…Besides, I don’t have the key…”

“Knew it…” She whispered, taking off her pants. “Good thing Airi got those lockpicks…”

Yusuke tilted his head and turned around. “Takamaki-san, are you about-?” He stopped. At her feet were a giant pile of discarded clothes, leaving the model in only her school uniform. “You were wearing all this?” He gazed at the mounds of fabric with astonishment.

She sweated, and posed cherubic-like. “D-Don’t you think it’s cold today?” She laughed nervously.

He blinked. “I suppose so…?” He glanced out the window, noting that the light in the sky was slowly dimming into evening. “The sun is starting to set…”

She brightened. “Riiight? That’s why a change of location would be nice…I mean, I’m gonna take it all off.”

He nodded slowly. “True…” He crossed his arms, looking away. “It might make for a better picture if I can brighten my model’s mood…”

She pumped a fist. “Uh-huh! That’s right!” She beamed.

A smile grew on his lips as he closed his eyes dreamily. “She may even be willing to try out various expressive poses for use in a dynamic composition…”

Ann took a step back, holding a hand close to her chest. “Wh-What kind of poses?!” She yelped.

Morgana squeezed his head through the small gap in the door, staying close to the dark floor. “Lady Ann!” He whispered. “You have to act! Get back in character!”

She froze, before swaying cutely side to side. “Let’s gooo…I was just starting to get in the mood.” She grinned teasingly, before walking out of the door. “I wonder if Airi’s done! Let’s go get her!” She sang.

His eyes widened and he held out an arm. “Wait! If you wander around, Sensei will…”

“Ohhh…It’s sooo hot.” She tried to mewl seductively from outside the room. Tried to.

Morgana sweatdropped, running ahead to the stairs. ‘Is that what she calls acting…? Hopefully mom’s done by now.’

“W-We really can’t use any other room…” Yusuke argued weakly.

A black blazer fluttered in the air, landing in front of the door. “Hey, why not this one?” She suggested, stopping at a door.

His eyes widened and he ran out of the art room, picking up the jacket. “Please, wait..!”

Standing away from the infrared road blocks, Joker and Skull shifted their feet, waiting for the door to open. “They seriously gonna be able to pull this off…?” Skull grimaced. “She was sayin’ stuff like ’I’ll just seduce him with my acting,’ but that sounds outta her league…”
He slouched, resting his gloved thumbs in his leather pockets. “Plus we ain’t got one sign this place is gonna open...Isn’t Madarame comin’ home soon? On top of that, even if Airi’s able to unlock the door, how’s she gonna show it to Madarame? Do we have enough time to get through before he closes it right up again?” He fretted, rubbing his head. “To be blunt, won’t it be a miracle if this works?”

Joker sighed, resting his hands in his pockets. “We don’t have any other ideas. We’ll just wait and see. I trust Airi will be able to do it, and if she can’t, then Morgana can fill in after.” He answered quietly but assuredly.

The pirate sighed. “Yeah...” He glanced toward the door. “...It’s almost time.”

The leader nodded, his legs tensing in preparation. They’d have to sprint straight through before the door locked again.

Ann strolled up the stairs to the second floor, humming innocuously. Yusuke rushed after her, his footsteps thumping heavier against the old floor boards. “Please, can you just wait and-” He paused as a thought hit him. “...Where is Kimisawa-san?”

She turned back to him, smiling brightly. “What? She went to the bathroom.”

He furrowed his brow. “We passed by the bathroom already, and the door was open...”

She bit the inside of her cheek, trying to think up an excuse for the cellist. “Well, maybe she went to look for another bathroom..! She hates being in small spaces.” She laughed nervously. “What about that way?” She pointed ahead down the hallway. ‘Airi, are you done yet..?!”

“No, we can’t go in there!” He refused, frowning at her insistence.

“Why..?” She pouted, shaking her chest from side to side. "Do you not like being with girls like me?"

“N-No! That’s not true..!” He refuted, looking away uncomfortably.

“Then we can continue this...inside...” She teased, even as her heart pounded nervously.

“S-Sure...” He answered in a daze before blinking and shook his head. “I mean, no! We can’t go in there!”

A click was heard, and they turned their heads. “That’s...from Sensei’s room!” He gasped, running ahead and turning the corner.

Standing in front of the now opened doorway was Airi, discreetly pocketing the broken lockpick. “Oh, hi Kitagawa-kun!” She smiled angelically. “Are you guys done already?”

He blinked in surprise, not seeing her other hand. “The door is open..? It’s supposed to be locked.” He narrowed his eyes in suspicion.

“Really..? I thought it was the bathroom. It was open when I got here.” She lied. “I...really need to go!” She ran inside the dark room, not seeing any other way to escape.

“Wait! That isn't a bathroom! It’s a storage area for paintings!” Yusuke yelled. “Only Sensei can go in there!” He chased after her into the darkness.
“Yes!” Ann whispered victoriously. “I didn’t have to strip..! Thank you, Airi!”

Morgana walked out of the shadows and stopped next to her. “I can’t believe that was what you called acting.” He shook his head. "It was terrible.”

She glared down at the feline. “You be quiet! I didn’t see you trying to stall him!”

“I’m home.”

They gasped, staring at the stairs where the sound of the front door reverberated from.

“Crap! He’s back..?!” Ann whispered.

“Hello?” Madarame called out from the first floor. “Yusuke?”

Biting back a curse, the model and cat ran into the room, stepping on the remains of shattered lock picks. From behind them, they could hear footsteps as the elderly man walked up. “What..?! Who opened this door?!” He yelled. “Yusuke!”

Sighing in boredom, Skull idly kicked the floor. “Nothin’s happenin’...I wonder what’s-”

“Wait.” Joker interrupted, looking at the door. With a rumble, the large painted doors slammed open to the sides, the red infrared barriers disappearing in a flash.

They stared in shock. “..It’s off!” Skull exclaimed. “They seriously did it!”

Joker smirked proudly. He knew he could count on them. “They’re amazing.”

Skull grinned. “Yeah, for real! Let’s go!”

With a dash, they ran toward the door, passing the sign that said “Treasure Hall Lounge.” “OK, let’s find the control room, quick! The path’s gonna close up if we dick around for too long!” Skull reminded. “But it’s just gonna be me and you for a bit if we run into any enemies. You good..?”


The pirate grinned. 'I’ll be countin’ on you!"

They entered the lounge, one security guard blocking the rest of the hall. Glancing around, Joker noted nothing worthwhile in their surroundings, only a few golden dividers.

Skull clenched his jaw. “Dammit, already..?”

“We have to beat it.” The leader declared, running up to the guard. “Get out of our way!”

The guard flashed its light at them. “Hm?! Who are you?!” It narrowed its yellow orbs at them. “I see, that attire...You must be the thieves who dare threaten Madarame-sama!” With a tremble, the Shadow convulsed, transforming into a large tiger-like beast with a snake as its tail. “You cannot go any further! You are trespassing on Madarame-sama’s territory!” The Nue warned.

Skull scoffed. “You guys ain’t got nothin’ on us! I’m more scared of screwin’ up and havin’ Ann yell at me!” He brandished his pipe. "And I don’t need Airi givin’ me that creepy face either!”

Joker snorted, dashing forward with his dagger. Slash...
just in time to dodge a swipe of its paw.

With a growl, the beast rushed at him with one paw up, smashing him with a fist.

He fell back with a groan. Shakily standing up on his feet, he gripped his head. ‘Why can’t I concentrate..?!’ He reached for his items but accidentally dropped some money instead.

“Joker!” Skull yelled, splashing him with a Relax Gel.

Blinking, the leader straightened. “Thanks.” He flashed his teammate a grateful smile before tensing his form again, ready to fight.

“No problem! C’mon, Persona!” The pirate shouted, Captain Kidd appearing behind him in a flash of blue. “Zio!” He sent a shock of lightning at the enemy, hurting it a bit.

Frowning, Joker called out. “Bereth!” He summoned the horse riding knight. With an arch of his arms, he sent a critical slash, knocking the enemy down. “Let’s go!” They rushed in, hitting the Shadow several times.

Landing, Joker adjusted his gloves and smirked, the enemy dissipating behind him. In its place was ¥3900, which he pocketed.

Skull slumped, putting his bat away. “Phew...Things’re real tough when it’s just me and you...It’d be a pain in the ass if we got spotted again. Anyways, let’s turn off that security system!”

Joker nodded in agreement, and they ran ahead. Looking around, he spotted a similar looking security room to the left and headed that way. Slamming his fist against the button, the glass doors opened, revealing an empty surveillance area.

“Aw yeah! This is the room!” Skull grinned. “So...which one’s for the security?”

They looked around, and noticed only one laptop was turned on, its blue screen illuminating the desk. Accessing the terminal, Joker clicked on “Disengage”. “Disengaging security protocol…” The terminal droned.

“Sweet! Now the lasers in the courtyard should be off for good. Well, that’s mission complete!” Skull gestured to the exit. ”C’mon, let’s get outta here!”

They left the room and walked into the main hall.

“Hey! Who’s there?!”

“Shit…” Joker cursed, head swerving around to see another security guard emerge from the inner gallery. “Let’s move!”

They ran out of the Treasure Hall Lounge and back out into the open garden. All of the electric fences receded back into the ground, shutting off.

“All right, looks like the security’s totally off!” Skull pumped his fist. “I hope those three managed to get away…”

“Noooooo!”

They looked up at the noise. Above them, the air wavered, a red distorted portal appearing. With a fwoom, Panther and Yusuke fell out of it. Landing on his feet, the artist held out his arms, catching the dominatrix. “Ngh..!” He winced at the sudden shift in weight.
The two male thieves gaped at the sight. How did they get here!?

With a yowl, Mona fell last, his giant bobble head slamming against Yusuke’s, and they toppled over onto the ground. “Gah…!” He flinched, still holding onto the dominatrix.

Mona blinked before getting up. “Aaagh..! Owwww!” He cried out, wincing at the fall and holding his tail gingerly.

“I thought I was gonna die…” Panther whimpered, before noticing the hands on her body. “…Hey, will you let go already?!” She shoved Yusuke away, and he fell to the ground with a groan.

She gasped, and crawled up next to him. “Oh no! I didn’t mean to push him so hard…Are you OK?” She shouted in his face. "Wake up!"

Wincing, Yusuke slowly opened his eyes before quickly sitting up. “Who are you all?!” He demanded, looking at them warily.

“Calm down, Kitagawa-kun! It’s me!” Panther held up her hands reassuringly.

He blinked slowly, recognizing her voice and hair. “…Takamaki-san?” He looked over at the other thieves. “That means you two are…” He glanced over at Morgana. “I don’t recall ever seeing this cat costume before though…” He held a hand to his head. “What is this place…? Where is Kimisawa-san? Did she not end up here as well?”

Gasping, Panther covered her mouth in horror. “Oh no! Airi!” She yelped. “We left her to the police!”

Skull looked at her in shock. “What?!”

She bit her lip guiltily. “Madarame called the police on us and Airi volunteered to lead them away. She said she would meet up with us here later…I hope she’s OK.”

Joker clenched his hands in his pockets. If she used to steal, then she should have experience running. Hopefully she’d make it out all right. ‘She better be OK.’ He glanced at the artist coldly. ‘If she gets arrested for this…’

“Aaaahhh!!”
“Kimisawa-san, this is bad...! Please, we have to leave now!” Yusuke urged, trying to find her in the dark and stuffy room.

“Why’s it so dark in here?” Ann complained, walking blindly after them with her arms held out in front of her.

“Yusuke?!” Madarame yelled out, his voice echoing in from outside in the hallways.

“S-Sensei’s home?!” He yelped, fear creeping into his voice.

Walking forward, a string hit Airi in the face, making her blink at the unexpected touch. “Are these the lights...?” She asked, pulling it.

In a flash, the light turned on, illuminating the small room, and they stared in shock. The entire room was filled to the brim with canvases. On every portrait was the exact same painting of a woman in red, a large moon behind her.

Sayuri. The painting that was said to be stolen.

“What the..?!?” Yusuke gasped, eyes darting around in disbelief and shock.

“They’re all “Sayuri”...” Airi whispered, furrowing her brow.

“Why are there so many of them..?” Ann questioned, taking a few steps closer to examine the canvases.

“I have no idea...” Yusuke replied uncertainly, hesitantly reaching out to touch one of them to affirm they were real.

“Get out!”

Madarame stomped into the room, a stormy expression on his aged features.

The Kosei student turned to look at his mentor. “Sensei, what is the meaning of this..?”

Exhaling heavily, the elderly man grasped his temple. “I suppose I can’t keep quiet now that you’ve seen this...Truth be told...I’m in severe debt.” He confessed quietly. “I handmade these “Sayuri” copies and have been selling them through a special connection of mine...”

Yusuke took a step back, holding a clenched hand near his chest. “But why..?”

Madarame shook his head. “The real “Sayuri”...was stolen by one of my pupils long ago. I assume they begrudged my strictness...That moment was quite a shock for me...Since then, I’ve been mired in a terrible artist’s block. Because of this distress, some of my pupils handed their ideas over to me from time to time...” He explained, his voice hitching just the slightest bit.

Ann grasped her chin pensively, listening to his explanation.

“I knew I couldn’t keep that up, so I attempted to recreate the “Sayuri” a number of times. “ He
winced. “However, it resulted in nothing more than replicas…That’s when someone came to buy
the paintings, knowing well they weren’t original.” Madarame hung his head shamefully. “…It’s all
my fault. I couldn’t pay the price of being famous. As expectations for me rose, it reached a point
where I had no choice but to keep making them…” He paused. “I...needed money to further your
talents...I ask that you please forgive your cowardly teacher…”

Yusuke reached out with both hands, ready to forgive him. “Please don’t!…” He pleaded.

Airi narrowed her eyes, taking the explanation apart in her mind. “Is that so, Madarame-san? Then
how did you have the money to show off such an extravagant exhibit? You must have paid off the
debt and then some. All these copies aren’t necessary...or ethical.”

The older man blinked in surprise. “The person who bought the copy sponsored the event...I don’t
receive any of the money generated from admission fare, the hall does.” He answered after a
moment.

“Wait,” Ann interjected. “Something doesn’t make sense. If the original painting got stolen, how
did you make copies of it?”

“I…” He paused. “Happened to find a finely detailed photograph of it in an art book.”

She pursed her lips, not believing his excuse. “So you managed to sell copies of a photo of the
original? I’m not sure how this works, but...Don’t people who buy paintings generally have a keen
eye for the fine arts? This sounds like a lie to me.” She announced grimly.

Airi nodded in agreement. “And people in the art community are all connected. If anyone bought a
“Sayuri,” they would have immediately bragged to their friends and on the internet. No one would
knowingly buy a fake.”

Madarame narrowed his eyes at them. “What would you know?!” He asked sharply.

“This doesn’t make sense!” Ann argued.

“Lady Ann! Airi! This one seems different!” Morgana whispered from behind a canvas rack,
gesturing to the covered up easel.

Turning around, Ann grabbed the fabric and tugged it off, revealing yet another Sayuri.

Yusuke took a step back. ““Sayuri”…?” He breathed in shock. He walked closer, scrutinizing the
artwork, at the brush strokes and blend of color. “This...This is the real “Sayuri”!” He exclaimed,
turning around to stare at his teacher. “But you just said a moment ago that it was stolen...!”

Madarame scrunched up his face, a bead of sweat rolling down his forehead. “That’s a replica!”

Yusuke scowled. “No, it’s nothing of the sort! “ He swept out his arm. “This painting kept me
going...It’s the reason I made it this far...” He whispered, staring at his mentor and guardian with a
betrayed look. “Sensei...Don’t tell me...”

Sweating profusely now, the elderly artist stomped his foot. “It’s fake...Yes, a counterfeit!” He
affirmed roughly. ‘I heard there was a counterfeit spreading around, so I bought it!’

Airi looked at him skeptically. “So you bought a counterfeit even though you’re the original
artist?...Really?” She drawled. “And where did this money come from, if you’re in severe debt?”

Yusuke looked at him disapprovingly. “You’re lying, Sensei...Please just tell us the truth…” He
pleaded. He wanted no more lies.

Madarame sneered. “You too...?” He huffed, taking out his flip phone. They watched warily as he pressed a button. “I’ve reported you two to my private security company!” He glared at the two girls.

“What?!” Ann yelped, taking a step back.

He smiled coldly. “I had it set up to deal with some problematic paparazzi, but I never thought it’d come in so handy.”

Taking a step forward, Yusuke held his hands out. “Please, wait! Let’s talk about this...!”

The elderly man rested his hands at his hips. “You can talk all you want to the police...That includes you, Yusuke.” He declared coldly with a sneer.

“Lady Ann! Airi! Let’s run!” Morgana urged, dashing out of the room.

“A cat?! Where did it-” Madarame sputtered as it ran past him, Ann and Airi following after. Quickly taking her phone out, the cellist snapped a photo of the room before sprinting out.

“There’s no point! They’ll be here within two minutes!” He yelled out.

“Takamaki-san! Kimisawa-san!” Yusuke called out, running after them. The three teenagers and one cat dashed out of the house and into the light rain with their bags, already hearing car tires skidding on the slippery roads.

“Stop!”

A security enforcer yelled out, chasing after them dressed in a black suit.

Glancing at their hunter, Airi cursed, an old tactic coming to mind. Thank you Takase for teaching her this. “Ann! Morgana! Kitagawa-kun! Run ahead, I’ll distract them!”

Ann turned her head to look at her with wide eyes. “What?! No way am I leaving you!” She argued.

Airi glared, matching pace with them. “Just go! Activate the app! I’ll follow in a minute!”

“Be careful, mom- Airi!” Morgana warned, dashing ahead.

“Please, wait...!” Yusuke pleaded, his long legs ensuring that he was able to follow behind them easily. “What is going on?!?”

“Hey, I said stop!” The guard screamed, baton raised in the air, ready to catch them.

Biting her lip, Ann grabbed the artist by his hand, pumping more power into her legs. “No time to explain! Good luck, Airi!” She yelled out as they turned at a corner, dodging with the feline and the artist into an alley.

Nodding, Airi furrowed her brow and looked back, noting there were now three security officers chasing after her. “Hey! Cash pigs! Can’t you catch one girl?!” She taunted, running after the others. ‘Sorry...’ She apologized guiltily. She had nothing against them as they were just doing their jobs, but her friends were more important.

“Wait- Nooo...!” She glanced at the alley where Ann screamed from, noting with relief that it was
empty. Now all that was left was to lose the agents and activate the app.

Running down another block, she sharply turned into an alley between two houses then jumped over into a backyard, hiding behind the tall cement fence. She held her breath, heart pounding furiously as she listened for the footsteps.

“Where’d she go?!”

“Dammit, did we lose her?”

“Weren’t there two other teenagers…? Fuck!”

Sliding her back against the fence, she bit her lip as footsteps splattered behind her, running down the alley. They stopped a couple feet away, fabric rustling.

Slowly inhaling and exhaling, she swallowed nervously, crouching in the yard. ‘Don’t catch me don’t catch me don’t catch me…’ She prayed, her heart beating faster with anxiety. She hadn’t done anything like this in at least two years, and she was afraid she was rusty enough that they might find her trail.

After a moment, she heard one of them curse. “We lost them.”

“We’ll have to report this back to Madarame-san…” They sighed and walked back, passing by the thief on the other side of the fence.

Once their footsteps faded away, Airi sighed in relief and sagged against the wall. Straightening up from her crouch, she brushed off her skirt. ‘I hope Ann and Morgana got Kitagawa-kun to safety and made it into the Palace…’

Jumping the fence, she walked over to an empty lot, looking around warily for any more agents. Noting that the coast was clear, she took out her phone, pulling out the app.

“Hey! You there!”

Her head shot up, locking eyes with an officer. “Hold it right there!” He yelled, taking out a pair of handcuffs.

The feeling of being caught was so familiar after years of similar activity that she moved without thinking. Tensing her legs, she sprinted down another alley, phone in her hand.

“Stop!” She heard from behind her.

Biting her lip, she turned the corner, almost slipping on the wet asphalt, and frantically pressed her finger against the MetaNav. The same strange sensation washed over her as she transitioned from the real world to the cognitive world, the weightlessness in her body as if she was flying through the clouds.

The last thing she heard was “Where did she go..?!” before falling through the ground, now actually free falling in the sky.

“Aaahhh!!!!” She screamed, clenching her eyes as the wind whipped next to her ears, her scarf billowing past her head.

Was she going to die?!

Just as she was about to hit the ground, two arms caught her, cradling her safely against a solid
She peeked with one eye, and was met with grey ones, covered with a white and black mask. “Are you OK?” Joker asked concernedly, fingers gripping her form securely.

She nodded hesitantly. “Y-Yeah...I thought I was going to hit the ground and die for a second there…” She laughed weakly, trying to calm her racing heart. “Thank you.”

He gently placed her on her feet, supporting her as her legs trembled from the fright. His hands lingered at her waist even when she regained her sense of balance, the warm touch sending shivers down her spine.

“Elegant! You’re OK!” Panther cried out in relief, tackling her in a hug.

“Oof!” Elegant exhaled at the impact, patting the dominatrix on her back. “Yeah, don’t worry. They didn’t catch me!”

“Can someone please explain?!” Yusuke demanded, staring at them in disbelief. “Where are we..?! Who is that?!”

Panther bit her lip. “We’re inside Madarame’s heart.” She answered softly.

He blinked, slowly looking around in bewilderment. “Inside...Sensei’s heart?” He repeated, getting up from the golden tiles. “I’m sorry, Takamaki-san...but are you sure you’re feeling OK?”

Skull idly kicked the floor as he stared sympathetically at the artist. “She ain’t lyin’. This is what that bastard truly feels. He’s nothin’ but a greed-filled money-grubber.”

Narrowing his eyes, Yusuke lashed out an arm. “Enough of this rubbish!” He yelled.

Elegant took a step forward, catching her breath. “Think back to what we just saw and heard, Kitagawa-kun. Madarame told us that “Sayuri” was stolen, but bought a counterfeit while saying he’s in severe debt. None of his excuses made sense.” She reasoned softly. “You recognized that the painting on the easel was the real “Sayuri.””

He looked down with a grimace. “That’s…”

Panther looked at him sympathetically. “You may not want to believe it, but this is another reality as viewed through Madarame’s eyes...This is his true nature.”

His eyes darted around, noting the gaudy building and the immense amounts of gold. “This repulsive world…?” He whispered, furrowing his brow in frustration. “Just who are all of you?!”

Skull rubbed the back of his head. “I guess you could say...we’re a group that changes the hearts of rotten crooks.” He answered honestly.

Joker nodded in agreement. “We’re only trying to help the victims by going against corrupt adults.”

“If everything you say is true…” Yusuke pursed his lips. “Then the Sensei I know doesn’t exist…”

Skull exhaled. “You gotta snap out of it.”

The artist grimaced, holding a hand to his chest. “Still...he has kept me safe these past ten years. My gratitude for that won’t just disappear.”

The pirate thief glared at him incredulously. “You’re gonna forgive him?! A this rate you’ll-”
Elegant held out a hand, stopping him. She smiled softly at the artist. “We’re not asking you to forget that. No matter what kind of man he is, he still raised you. We’re only asking you to see past that and realize his actions are wrong...That to the other apprentices, he was worse than being homeless.” She stated somberly. “I don’t know if you remember him, but a man named Nakanohara asked us to save you. He knew that if you stayed with Madarame, you would break…”

Yusuke gazed at her with wide eyes. “Natsu-nii? He…” He stopped. Gripping his head, he fell to the floor on his knees, grunting in pain.

“Are you OK?” Panther asked worriedly, kneeling next to him.

He panted, gripping the fabric over his chest. “I’m trying to be rational about this, but my emotions are overwhelming me…” He gritted his teeth, feeling his chest squeeze with hope and despair. “Natsu-nii remembered me...I had almost forgotten…”

Glancing around sharply, Mona held out a paw. “Sorry, but we don’t have time to dawdle. The security level’s gone through the roof! We need to get out of here, at once!” He urged.

Eyes sharpening, Joker nodded. “Let’s go, then.” He walked up to Yusuke, who was still panting harshly on the floor, and held out a hand. “Here, lean on my shoulder.” He wasn't fond of the artist, but he needed help and they were going to give it.

Coughing, the artist waved his hand away. “...No, it’s all right.” He shakily got onto his feet, and walked unsteadily.

“We need to get out of here, but we also have an amateur with us. Let’s try to avoid fighting as much as possible.” Mona warned, dashing at the front of the group.

Glancing at each other worriedly, they nodded, surrounding Yusuke and guiding him out of the gardens. They made their way back to the second exhibition room, walking through cautiously in case of any Shadows.

Glancing around the empty museum and seeing all the repulsive art, Yusuke looked on in despair. “So this...is inside of Sensei’s heart? A vain museum such as this..?”

Frowning morosely, Elegant placed a hand on his shoulder, silently urging him to keep moving. She felt for him, but they didn't have time to gawk. They had to get out before he was put into any more danger.

They left the room, going down another hallway. Gray eyes slid from painting to painting, stopping at one in particular. “Ah, this painting..!” Yusuke walked up to it.

“Do you recognize it?” Panther asked quietly. ”We were thinking these might be his past pupils or something...”

“Yukimi-nee…” Yusuke whispered sorrowfully. “But...why are there paintings of them here..?”

Mona flicked an ear. “Technically, those aren’t actually paintings. They’re the pupils themselves.” He clarified.

Skull nodded. “Madarame saw ’em as objects, so that’s what they are in here...Oh, and uh…” He looked away awkwardly. “We found yours too.”

Yusuke looked down at the floor, clenching his fists in silence.
“She’s Yukimi..?” Elegant whispered, noting the appearance of black hair and the Tokyo high school uniform. She looked a little familiar for some reason, but she couldn’t quite put her finger on it...

Joker glanced at her, hearing what she had said. ‘Does she know her?’ But the girl in the portrait looked familiar to him as well.

“We’ll talk more later. For now, let’s get out of here.” Mona advised, pointing to the end of the hallway.

Guiding the artist down the halls, they somehow made it all the way to the infinite spring statue without bumping into a single Shadow. Noticing how close the exit was, they hurried up, running down the ramp.

Just as they were about to go through the entrance, the way was blocked with black liquid, Shadows emerging from the darkness.

Mona bit back a curse. “The exit is right there!”

A loud laughter rang out, echoing around the room and up in the high ceilings. Tense, they turned around.

The Palace ruler walked up to them, flanked by two guards. Draped in a shining gold kimono was Shadow Madarame. His aging hair was pulled back in a chonmage*, sticking straight up into the air. His feet were adorned with yellow socks and yellow sandals, all in different shades, clashing terribly with his pale makeup and red painted lips. His molten eyes gazed at them with amusement.

“Is that..?” Elegant stared wide eyed at the distorted man.

“Talk about bullshit clothes!” Skull gritted. “First a king, now some kinda shogun?!”

Smirking at the intruders, Madarame held out his arms theatrically. “Welcome to the museum of the master artist Madarame.”


Panther glared. “Disgusting.”

The Kosei student slowly shook his head. “This...This is all one big lie, isn’t it..?”

Madarame hmphed. “My usual ragged attire is nothing but an act. Besides, a famous person living in that shack? I have another home...under a mistress’s name, of course.” He chuckled heartlessly.

Joker frowned, fingers twitching at the need to pull out his dagger. “This is absurd.” He growled.

The ruler burst out into laughter. “How naive!”

Yusuke winced, his chest pulsing with pain. “If the “Sayuri” was stolen, why was it in the storage room? And if you had the real one, why make copies?!” He asked desperately. “If it’s really you, Sensei...please tell me!”

Madarame scoffed. “Foolish child. You still don’t see?” He asked, not waiting for an answer. “The painting being stolen was just a false rumor I spread! It was all a perfectly calculated staging!” He flaunted.
Yusuke’s eyes widened. “What do you mean..?!”

The golden clad man hummed. “Let me see...How does this sound?” He grinned maniacally. “I found the real painting, but it can’t go public...You can have it for a special price though...” He laughed. "How’s that for preferential treatment?! Art snobs’ll eat it up, and pay good cash at that!”

“No..!” Yusuke breathed despairingly, gripping his head as he fell to his knees at the revelation.

“Kitagawa-kun!” Panther called out worriedly, hesitantly taking a step forward in his direction. Elegant followed after, hands poised and ready to summon her scythe to protect them.

“The worth of art is purely subjective...Thus, this is a legitimate business transaction!” Madarame stated smugly. “Though I doubt a brat like you would ever come up with such a scheme!”

Skull clenched his fists. “You keep goin’ on and on about money this, money that...No wonder you ended up with this disgusting museum!” He spat angrily.

Elegant nodded in agreement. “You lied and mistreated everyone around you for your own ego...” She scowled. “How can you justify abusing the children you were supposed to care for, for money?!”

“You’re supposed to be an artist, right?!” Panther yelled. “Aren’t you ashamed of plagiarizing other people’s work?! They trusted you!”

Madarame chuckled. “Art is nothing but a tool...A tool to gain money and fame! All those apprentices were my tools to art!” He glanced down at the panting teenager. “You helped me greatly as well, Yusuke…”

Skull gritted his teeth. “God...Pisses me off...” He looked down at Yusuke. "That’s your teacher.”

Digging his nails into the carpet, Yusuke looked up in despair and betrayal. “But what about the people who believe in you..?! Who think you’re a master artist..?!”

His golden eyes scrutinized his student. “…I’ll tell you this alone, Yusuke. If you wish to succeed in this world, I’d advise you don’t rise against me.” He crossed his arms as he chuckled. “Do you believe anyone could find success with my objection holding them down? Hahahaha!”

Yusuke let out a shaky sigh. “To think I was under the care of this wretched man..!” He grimaced in pain, physical or emotional he couldn’t tell.

Madarame shook his head in disappointment. “You thought I took you in out of the goodness in my heart? Plucking talented, yet troubled artists allows me to find promising pupils and take their ideas…” He chuckled darkly. “After all, it’s much easier to steal the futures of children who can’t fight back.”

Elegant glared harshly at the corrupt adult. Children were not meant to be used, they were meant to be the future of the world. He was everything that was wrong in her life.

“I can’t believe this…” Yusuke whispered, clenching his eyes. His Sensei...His father was like this.

“Livestock are killed for their hide and meat! This is no different, you fool!” Madarame sneered. “…But I tire of this little chat. It’s time that I-”

“You are unforgivable.” Yusuke declared quietly, the others turning to look at him.
“Hm?” The distorted artist turned back to his student.

“It doesn’t matter who you are…” Yusuke glared. “I won’t forgive you!” He shakily got back on his feet.

“So...you repay my keeping you around for all these years with ingratitude..? You damn brat!” Red lips smeared into a scowl. “Men! Dispose of these thieves!” Madarame ordered, the security guards advancing menacingly.

“Kitagawa-kun, get back!” Elegant yelled out, the team holding their weapons in preparation of the oncoming fight.

“How amusing…” Yusuke whispered, holding his abdomen.

“How?” Panther blinked in confusion.

A small chuckle escaped him and slowly escalated to laughter, the sound echoing in the hall. “It seems the truth is stranger than fiction, hm..?” He smiled bitterly. “I wanted to believe it wasn’t true...I had clouded my vision for so long…” He held a hand over his eyes, shaking his head. “My eyes were truly blind...Blind, and unable to see the true self behind this one horrible man..!”

‘Have you finally come to your senses?’

Chapter End Notes

-chonmage is a traditional formal japanese hairstyle for men. It's a topknot hair cut that was originally used by samurai to keep their heads cool under their helmets, then was used all over as a symbol of status. Madarame's isn't exactly a chonmage, it's a more formal and theatrical version.
His eyes snapped open, gazing ahead unseeingly. With a trembling gasp, he gripped his head as something tore within him. It pulsed, sending waves of pain, down to the marrow within his body.

‘How foolishly you averted your eyes from the truth…’

He flailed around, trying to disperse the burning agony in his mind. ‘What is this..?!’ He asked himself as he clenched his jaw, trying to hold in his screams. It hurt worse than any pain he had felt in his entire life. As if his body was being torn apart from within.

‘A deplorable imitation indeed...Best you part from that aspect of yourself!’

With a strangled cry, he fell to the ground on his hands and knees, fingertips red from the force he was exerting on his scalp. Was he dying? But there's no blood...

‘Let us now forge a contract…I am thou, thou art I...’

His arms trembling from restraining himself, he clenched his fingers tightly, leaving red scars upon its surface as nails dragged into the floor. I am thou...

‘The world is filled with both beauty and vice...It is time you teach people which is which!’

A calm overtaking him, Yusuke lifted his head, a white fox-like mask now covering most of his face. “Very well…” He answered, slowly standing up. With a graceful arch of his arm, he grasped his mask, the fresh blood from his nails staining its pristine surface. “Come, Goemon!” He announced, tearing his mask off in a spray of red. A vortex of power erupted around him, enveloping him from sight with blue and white wisps.

Everyone covered their faces as they were hit with the winds, their clothing billowing harshly. The large banners that hung from the ceiling were blown toward the walls, staying against the surface by the winds that kept them there.

As the power died down, the room echoed with the sound of wood clacking against wood as a kabuki dancer hopped into sight on his high wooden geta*. His white and blue rope knotted at his back, shoulders, and waist, acting as a belt. The blue robes billowed around him, covering his red jumper underneath. Holding a large white opium pipe in one hand, he reached out with another, palm out, shaking his white and red face at the enemies with his eyes crossed. Crackling with power, Goemon posed dramatically behind his user.
Yusuke, now clad in a dark blue jumpsuit with a white collar, arm bands, and boots, looked up daringly at his mentor. With a white and blue rope acting as a belt, a red ribbon wrapped white fox tail hanging behind, he held his arms out. “A breathtaking sight…” His finger pointed outward, sliding from one enemy to another. “Imitations they may be, but together, they make a fine spectacle. Though the flowers of evil blossom, be it known…Abominations are fated to perish!” He swept his arm, sending a torrential blizzard at the Shadows, killing them in one smooth stroke.

“Whoa, this is impressive!” Mona remarked, watching with wide eyes, the cold wind piling on his fur.

“It never gets old!” Elegant smiled brightly, twirling her scythe in her hand. The team watched in amazement at Yusuke’s awakened power.

Madarame brushed the ice shards on his kimono, a dispassionate look on his aged and painted face. “Hmph…Who do you think you are?! The price for your insolence will be death! Where are my guards?! Kill them all!” He commanded. In a burst of black, new Shadows spawned within the room.

“The children who adored you as “father”…The prospects of your pupils…How many did you trample upon…?” Yusuke asked quietly, watching as his mentor smirked in amusement. “How many dreams did you exchange for riches?! No matter what it takes…” A katana appeared in his hands, and he slowly unsheathed it, the clean metal frosting over from the icy winds of his power. “I will bring you to justice!”

Joker gripped his dagger. “Let’s see what you’re made of.” He smirked, twirling his weapon in preparation.

“Very well! Bring it on!” Yusuke shouted, grinning at his newfound power pulsing beneath his skin.

The guards convulsed, erupting into their true forms. Four Koppa Tengu danced around on their sandals, black wings fluttering behind them. Standing in the center was a Ippon-Datara, swinging its hammer ominously. “You are in the presence of Madarame-sama! On your knees, intruders!” It growled deeply.

Mona and Skull took a step back, letting the others participate in the battle.

Wrapping one hand at his hip and the other cupping the side of his face, Yusuke stared coolly. “I learned much from you, Madarame. In order to see authenticity…one must be dispassionately realistic. With Goemon by my side…I can now ascertain your true self without any reservations!” He enveloped a tengu in ice, knocking it down. Using the opportunity, he sent a bufu at the other enemies, one tengu at time.

They laid at the ground, dizzy, while the Ippon-Datara lifted his hammer, slamming it at Joker. He flinched, holding his head as his vision swam.

“Joker, you’re dizzy!” Mona warned from the back. “Your accuracy’s gone down!”

He nodded in understanding. “Jack Frost!” He called out, the little snowman appearing behind him. “Mabufu!” The air crackled as ice encased the enemies, killing some of the tengus and missing the others.

“Joker!” Elegant called out, running up to him and holding out an Alert Capsule.

Taking it, he swallowed the pill, immediately shaking off the dizziness. “Thanks!” He flashed her a
smirk before jumping back into battle once more.

“Carmen!” Panther called out, the fiery dancer appearing behind her. “Maragi!” She yelled, fire enveloping the enemies in a burst. Slightly burnt, the blacksmith and two tengus stayed upright, brushing off the flames that licked at their forms.

Dancing up to Yusuke, a Koppa Tengu lashed out with its sandal. "Rah!"

Yusuke grunted, but took ahold of his katana. Brushing one long finger against the blade, he invoked his ice specialty and struck out with one stroke, killing the Shadow. Joker ran up to the decedent smithy, slashing with his dagger to the side before bringing it down and then back flipped away. Elegant snapped her fingers, sending a ray of light at the tengu, and it dissipated into the darkness.

Taking out her TMP, Panther shot off a storm of bullets, embedding them into the last Shadow. It flinched, before swinging his hammer at her. She cried out in pain as it struck her shoulder, but held her ground, gripping her whip.

“Goemon!” Yusuke called out, the kabuki actor dancing behind him. Raising his arm, he sent a Giant Slice, knocking it down.

They rushed up as a team, attacking it several times with their weapons, each hit doing more damage than the last. Landing on the floor, Yusuke swayed gracefully, grasping the smooth plane of his cheek as the Ippon-Datara spewed black blood, disappearing. In the empty spot was now ¥5268, which Joker pocketed with a smirk.

Now that the Shadows were gone, all that was left was Madarame, watching them impassively. Yusuke took a couple steps forward, reaching out, but collapsed on his knees in exhaustion. “Ngh…” He winced at the impact.

The mentor hmphed. “Yusuke, you’ve just thrown your bright future down the drain.” He sneered. "I’ll destroy every chance you’ve ever had of becoming an artist!"

Clenching his jaw, the fox thief glared up at his surrogate father. “Madarame!” He shouted, flinching as his muscles ached with a pain that was wholly unfamiliar to him.

“You’ll forever rue the day you dared defy me!” Madarame declared, walking away with a flap of his golden robes.

Yusuke reached out a hand, trying to follow his former mentor. “Get...back here...!” He groaned, falling against the carpet once more.

“Kitagawa-kun!” Panther called out worriedly and knelt next to him. The team surrounded him, watching him with concern.

He clenched a hand on his knee, trying to force himself to walk. “Why can’t I move?!" He gritted.

“You just awakened your Persona, don’t push yourself.” Elegant advised softly. “Let’s take him somewhere for a breather.”

Nodding, Joker and Skull reached out, wrapping Yusuke’s arms over their shoulders. “What a disgrace I am...!” He muttered self-deprecatingly.

They hoisted him up and they slowly walked out to the information desk, setting him down on one of the couches. He sighed, slumping in his seat. Elegant sat down as well, Mona standing on the
couch in between them. Skull leaned against the sofa’s side, while Joker and Panther stood.

“You’ve known for quite some time, haven’t you?” Panther asked quietly.

Sighing, Yusuke slowly shook his head. “I’m no fool. Strange people have been coming by for years, and the plagiarism was an everyday affair.” He whispered, looking down at his lap. “As Kimisawa-san had yelled at me for, I always wondered why my fellow apprentices, my brothers and sisters, would leave one by one. But...who would want to admit that the man they owed their life to was doing such terrible things? Especially to his so-called children?”

Elegant blushed sheepishly, remembering how she had snapped at him. “Sorry for that, but it had to be said.” She gently placed a hand on his shoulder. “...Why didn’t you leave, too? Nakanohara-san had told us how bad it was. You could have escaped…”

Yusuke hugged himself loosely, hunching his shoulders. “So you are Kimisawa-san.” He murmured. “I had wondered but your mask covered your features too well...” He sighed. "Well, he is the one who painted the “Sayuri.” On top of that, I owe him a great debt…”

“You mean ’cause he raised you?” Skull asked quietly.

Yusuke nodded. “I...never knew my father." He admitted. "I was told my mother raised me by herself, but she died in an accident when I was three. That’s when Sensei took me in. I heard he helped my mother while she was still alive.”

Panther furrowed her brow. “Heard..?”

He sighed. “To be honest, I don’t remember much about my mother either. I did everything I could for Sensei. I thought of him as a father...but he changed.” He narrowed his eyes. “To think he would treat the “Sayuri,” the very foundation of his art, like that...!”

Skull looked away. “...A lot’s happened to you, huh?” He murmured.

“When you had mentioned plagiarism...deep down, I knew you were right.” Yusuke looked up at him and Joker. “That’s why I so vehemently denied you...I was simply running from the truth. I’m sorry.” He bowed his head apologetically before turning his head to Elegant. “You as well, Kimisawa-san...You were just trying to open my eyes and I lashed out at you unjustly.”

Elegant shook her head. “Don’t be. I understood, even if I was a little hurt.” She smiled softly. “Like I told you earlier, he may be a despicable person, but he’s still your father figure.” She patted his shoulder. "You can’t just forget that so easily.”

Joker nodded in agreement. “Yeah, don’t worry about it. You’re just like us, after all. We understand better than anyone.”

Yusuke smiled slightly at their easy forgiveness. “I’m grateful for the chance to face what I have been denying all this time.”

Skull scrunched up his face. “You’re way too serious, man. That’s why you’re always gettin’ stuck in your own head.” He grinned, crossing his legs. "Look at me! I just go with the flow.”

Panther huffed. “For real.” She gave him a knowing grin.

“What are you going to do now?” Mona asked solemnly.

Sighing heavily, Yusuke shook his head. “I don’t know…”
Skull uncrossed his legs, straightening up from his slouch. “We can’t help the fact that Madarame’s gone and changed. But...we can change his heart.” He stated determinedly. “We’ll make him pay for his crimes.”

The artist perked up. “That reminds me, you mentioned something about that ‘change of heart’ earlier...”

Skull rested his thumbs in his pockets. “Have you heard the rumors? The ones about the Phantom Thieves that steal hearts?”

Blinking, Yusuke looked at them, noting their outfits and abilities, before his eyes widened in realization. “Don’t tell me...”

The sound of black lava burst behind them, security guards spawning into the room. They quickly turned in shock, getting up from their seats. “Oh, crap!” Skull yelped, taking a step back warily.

“We’ll talk later!” Mona yelled. “We need to scram!”

Yusuke blinked, feeling the leather of his outfit on his skin when he stood up. He lightly touched his mask in befuddlement. “When did my clothes change..?”

The pirate turned and gave him an unimpressed look. “You just noticed that now..?”

“No time to talk! We need to leave!” Elegant reminded hurriedly, grabbing the artist by the hand and dragging him out of the Palace, the others following after. The Shadows chased after them, batons raised in preparation of catching them.

Running through the first exhibition hall, they lost them in the plethora of portraits, climbing up the escape rope and leaving the Palace.

Appearing back in the real world near Madarame’s shack, they ducked behind a nearby house. Airi placed a finger in front of her mouth, silently telling them to be quiet while Yusuke was on his phone. “We’re still in the neighborhood, and I don’t know if the security left yet.”

Akira nodded, eyes glancing around for those specific individuals. “Let’s try to make our way back to Shibuya.” He whispered. “There’s too many high school students there for them to pick us out.”

Navigating through a series of alleyways within the residential area, they finally made it back to Central Street. With so many people around as well as other Shujin students wandering about, they knew they wouldn’t be caught. Navigating through the crowds of shoppers, they went up to the Diner.

“Sorry for all the confusion, Kitagawa-kun. Why don’t we explain everything to you?” Ann offered as they were directed to a table in the warmly lit restaurant.

Yusuke nodded. “Please.”

Akira sat in a corner, placing his wriggling bag on the table. Airi and Ann followed after, squishing up in the booth. On the other side sat Ryuji and Yusuke. The waitress walked up to take their order, and Akira and Airi requested for coffee, while Ryuji ordered a soda pop.

The group told him how this all began, what Personas are, Kamoshida’s case, and why they’re the
Phantom Thieves. The waitress came back with their order, along with two ice waters for Ann and Yusuke. She bowed, a young woman a few years older than them with an empty smile, before walking away.

“...I see.” Yusuke murmured pensively, glancing at their server’s back. “And because of that, this PE teacher’s had a change of heart...” He grasped his water. “The Phantom Thieves who steal hearts...To think they truly exist.”

Akira watched him. “Is it hard to believe?”

The artist nodded, resting his elbows on the table. “Indeed. I have to believe your words. Especially after seeing a world like that...” He grimaced. “So your plan with Madarame-sensei—Madarame—is to force a change of heart, correct?”

Airi nodded. “Yes. We received the request from Nakanohara-san.” She frowned. “He asked us to stop Madarame before he ruined your future, like he did him.”

Exhaling, Yusuke looked up at the thieves determinedly. “Let me join...as a member of the Phantom Thieves.” He ignored their shocked faces. “Had I faced reality sooner, this may have been avoided. I must put an end to this for the sake of the others whose futures as artists were robbed, as well.” He sighed. “That...is the most civil thing I can do for the man who was...in some manner, my father.”

Ann gazed at him thoughtfully. “...Civil, huh.”

Ryuji took a sip from his soda. “Sounds fine to me. We’re gonna deal with Madarame anyways.”

Wriggling inside the bag, Morgana squeezed his face through the opening. “He may have a mental shutdown if we screw up.” He informed quietly. “We have ways to prevent that, but they aren’t fail-safe.”

Yusuke nodded in understanding. “Madarame is a man who has the art world under his thumb. He has many connections to many organizations. If someone like me raises my voice, it’ll only be snubbed out...We have no option but this.”

Airi frowned sorrowfully. “Kitagawa-kun...” She whispered.

Akira nodded, lifting his coffee to his lips. “It’ll be good to have an ice user with us.” He took a sip.

“It’s a deal then.” Morgana purred delightedly.

Airi beamed. “Welcome to The Phantom Thieves!” Now they had one more member with them to fight against the injustices of the world.

Ann grinned excitedly next to her. “I hope we get along, Yusuke!”

Ryuji leaned back in his seat. “You better not slow us down.” He teased lightheartedly.

Yusuke nodded. “I’ll do my best.” He smiled.

“Oh,” Akira piped up. “And no nude paintings.” He gave him a warning look, narrowing his eyes.

The artist blinked, connecting the dots. “So that was all a plan?...That’s quite daring, Takamaki-san, Kimisawa-san.”
Ann scrunched up her face. “It wasn’t our idea- it was theirs!” She yelled indignantly, pointing at the two male Shujin students.

Ryuji scowled. “What else were we supposed to do?! It’s his fault for goin’ on and on about the nude modelin’ thing!” He gave the artist a glare from the corner of his eye. "But yeah, no nude modeling!"

Airi rolled her eyes, a blush staining her cheeks. “Quiet down, you two. We’re in a restaurant.” She scolded. They slumped in their seats, grumbling to themselves.

“I haven’t given up on that yet though.” Yusuke announced impassively.

“Give it up!” Ann gritted, clenching her hands around her now lukewarm water at the thought, before relaxing. “Oh, that reminds me...I wonder what’s going on with the real Madarame. We were in a pretty tight situation...”

Airi inhaled sharply. “Right. Is it safe for you to return back there, Yusuke-kun?” Considering how angry the plagiarist was when they had escaped the house, she feared for Yusuke's safety if he went back.

Yusuke shifted in his seat. “Actually, I contacted him before we came here. He believes that I continued pursuing the both of you. And, just as you all explained, it appears he knows nothing about his Shadow.” He chuckled. “He was complaining to the security company how they couldn’t even catch two high school girls.” He sobered up. “However, he’s still furious about it, and said that he’s going to take legal action against everyone.”

The thieves looked at each other tensely. “Talk about bein’ completely on guard…” Ryuji groaned.

Ann leaned forward in her seat. “Legal action…He’s acting way too desperate. Maybe he still has more secrets.”

Airi sipped her coffee. “That’s exactly what I was thinking. If he was being rational, he would’ve thought, ‘who would believe a couple of teenagers?’”

Letting go of his water, Yusuke laced his hands together once more. “If he were to act, it’d be after the exhibit is over. Any scandal during the show would be his loss.”

Ann bit her lip. “Right when I think the talk about being a nude model is over, this happens..?!” She mumbled sullenly.

Morgana groomed his whiskers. “We’ll have to force a change of heart before then, if we’re to dodge this “legal action” thing.” He grinned. “Looks like our plan must be accomplished while the exhibit is still open!”

The Shujin students nodded. “When is the exhibit over again?” Airi asked, placing her empty cup down on the table.

“The exhibit ends on June 5th.” Yusuke answered. "I doubt he would be so foolish to taint his name with a trial during his exhibition.”

“So we should do it two days before…” Akira adjusted his glasses. “Our deadline to send the calling card is June 3rd then.”

“We’ll have to prepare accordingly, Joker.” Morgana advised.
Akira grimaced slightly, hiding it with a hand. Again with being called Joker in the real world. He had a name.

Yusuke blinked, gazing at the feline. “By the way...what is this?” He inquired politely.


Yusuke furrowed his brow. “But it’s talking.”

Morgana bristled at his obvious observation, ears sticking back and whiskers vibrating. “You have a problem with that?!”

He shook his head. “No, not really.”

Ryuji gave him an odd look, taken aback by his easy acceptance. “Why not?”

Airi sweatdropped. “He’s just on a different wavelength than other people. Must come with being an artist.”

Morgana brightened. “Ooh, do you wish to draw me? You better bring out the best of me in that case.” He smiled pompously.


They watched blankly as Yusuke sat back down after calling for the waitress. “I was thinking of ordering some black-bean jelly.” He announced and rested his elbows against the table.

Ryuji side-eyed him. “I bet he got that idea from a “black cat”...”

The artist stiffened. “Oh..!” He gasped. “I didn’t bring any money.”

Ann slumped. “...Never mind. He’s just weird.”

Airi bit her lip, shoulders shaking with laughter. “Don’t worry, Yusuke-kun. It’ll be my treat.” She smiled. “It’s the least I could do since we dragged you into this.”

He inclined his head, giving her a small smile. “If it’s not too much trouble.”

She waved him away, finishing her coffee. “It’s fine. Order whatever you’d like.”

The same waitress from before came up to their table, still wearing her blank smile. “May I help you?” She asked.

“I’ll take a black bean jelly.” Yusuke requested, gazing up at her. “Six sandwiches as well, please.” Airi added.

The waitress nodded, and with a swish of her short black hair, she walked away to the kitchens.

Gray eyes followed her thoughtfully, before sliding over to the class president. “Kimisawa-san. I had wanted to ask earlier,” Yusuke tilted his head. "But was it you who unlocked Madarame’s room?”

She blinked. “Oh, you caught that, huh? Yeah.” She smiled sheepishly, wrapping an arm around Ann’s shoulders. “Ann here was to distract you while I went to pick the lock.”
He rested his chin on top of his laced hands. “I see. You truly thought it out.” He chuckled. “Was that why she wore what seemed to be an entire wardrobe?”

The model pouted, crossing her arms. “Listen, I’m not letting anyone draw me naked.” She stated firmly.

Akira chuckled, finishing his coffee. “Honestly, I thought you would’ve ended up punching him.” He joked.

The waitress came back, holding a bowl of black bean jelly and a plate of sandwiches. “Please enjoy.” She stated politely.

Ruby eyes glanced at her name tag, reading “Yukimi.” “Thank you.” Airi smiled as the server walked away, turning to the food. “Dig in, guys. I’m sure we’re all hungry after a Palace run.” She grabbed one, taking a bite of white bread and ham.

“Oh, thanks Airi!” Ryuji grinned, nabbing one from the plate. The thieves dug into the meal, feeling the exhaustion of their earlier actions creep up on them now that they finally had food in their stomachs. It wasn't something they ever really talked about, but the bone deep exhaustion after every infiltration was a factor of their jobs they had never predicted. It meant that every time they went into the Metaverse, they knew they couldn't do much else for the rest of the day or else.

Sighing pleasurably, Yusuke took another spoonful of jelly, savoring the cool and sweet taste. “I haven’t had this in a long time. The last time was with Natsu-nii…” His eyes dimmed with past memories.

They glanced up at him with concern as he fell silent. Ann finished off her sandwich, wiping her mouth. “You call Nakanohara ‘Natsu-nii.’ Were you close..?” She asked hesitantly.

He pursed his lips. “I suppose...I've been the only one for a long time now. Several years at least. Natsu-nii was the last one aside from myself. To think he still remembers me…” He smiled bitterly at his bowl.

Airi bit her lip, wiping her hands of any crumbs. “Do you...want to meet with him? I can call him.” She offered quietly, taking out her phone.

Long fingers tightened against his spoon. “...No." Yusuke whispered. "At least...not yet.”

She nodded in understanding. “All right, that’s OK. Take as much time as you need.” She smiled gently. Typing on her phone, she pulled up the email she received last night. “If you don’t mind, can you look over this list and see if you remember any of them?” She held it out over the table.

Blinking at the offer, Yusuke hesitantly took the phone and read what was on the screen. His eyes widened. “This is...!”

The others looked on questioningly. “Uh...what’s goin’ on?” Ryuji asked, unaware of what was going on.

“...These are the names of the other apprentices.” Yusuke whispered in shock as he scrolled down the list. "Or, I assume so.”

They looked on in surprise. “Nakanohara sent you the list?” Ann asked the lady next to her.

Airi nodded. “I got it last night. I haven’t had time to do any research on them and it isn't every apprentice, but they’re most likely still in the city. Please help me find them, Yusuke-kun.” She
pleaded. Yusuke slowly looked up at her. “...Why would you want to do that?” He asked quietly, furrowing his brow.

“...They deserved better.” She answered after a moment, face set on a blank expression. “Especially Ayasakawa-san. I can’t...” She gripped her skirt. “I can’t just let this go. Not when we can do something.” Not when it reminded her so much of Rui. Of the helplessness she felt when she couldn’t help her only friend. This time, she could do something, anything, to help.

Yusuke blinked. “Ayasakawa...? I don’t recall that name.” He reread the list again, spotting the name. “It’s the only one in bold print.”

She looked down at her lap. “...He committed suicide. Nakanohara-san said it was because he couldn’t take his art being credited as Madarame’s.” She whispered. “The bold print is for those who passed, but...Ayasakawa-san is the only one he knows about.”

Ann covered her mouth in horror. “That’s him then...? Ayasakawa?”

Airi nodded. “Ayasakawa Sousuke. Nakanohara-san implied that Madarame knew...” Her eyes darkened. “...It’s too late to help him, but the others should still be alive.”

Ryuji slammed a fist on the table, rattling the empty dishware. "Dammit! How scummy can he get?!"

Akira shushed him. “Don’t forget, we’re in a restaurant.” He glanced at the other occupied tables. No one seemed to have noticed, but their waitress was staring in their direction. His eyes slid to his neighbor. “Do you think we can find them? Maybe they can give their testimonies against Madarame.”

Airi nodded. “If Yusuke-kun accepts, yes. They might not hear me out, but if he came with, they might be more inclined to listen because he knows what they went through.” She bit her lip. “I don’t know what else we can do...”

Morgana lifted a paw. “Don’t forget, the Palace is the more pressing issue.” He reminded grimly. "Their testimonies wouldn’t matter if Madarame takes that “legal action” thing against them.”

Ann nodded. “Right. We should steal the Treasure first.” She looked over at the Kosei student. “How about it, Yusuke?”

Taking a deep breath, he nodded. “Yes. I want to find them. I want them to be credited for their artwork as they were supposed to be.” He answered resolutely. “I only remember a few from this list, but I will help to the best of my abilities.” He handed the phone back.

Akira glanced at the screen, noting the time. “It’s getting late. We should head home.”

Ryuji sat up in his seat, taking out his phone. “Wait! Let’s give our info to Yusuke first so we can contact him!”

The group exchanged phone numbers and chat IDs, before calling the server over for the bill. She placed the check presenter on the table. Glancing at the total, Airi placed a handful of bills in it, closing the book with a snap.

“Thank you. Please come again.” The waitress smiled blankly, taking the check away. Yusuke watched her leave, slightly puzzled at how familiar she looked.
“C’mon, man. Get up!” Ryuji urged, trying to get out of the booth.

With a stumble, the artist stood up, shifting out of his seat. The group left the Diner, heading down the stairs. Immediately, the quiet of the Diner was replaced with the bustling noisiness of Central street.

“Are you going to be OK going home, Yusuke?” Ann asked worriedly, stopping in front of the crepe store.

He nodded. “As long as I seem to be creating a new piece, Madarame will not kick me out.” He exhaled and looked up at the orange sky, the rain clearing up from the earlier shower. “I’ve learned so much today…”

“And you’ll continue to learn, being with us.” Morgana bragged, leaning on Akira’s shoulder. “The Phantom Thieves take care of each other. As our newest member, you’ll be deferring to us.”

Yusuke nodded in understanding. “Please take care of me.” He bowed to the feline.

Akira sweatdropped. “Don’t worry about it, we’re all newbies. Morgana’s going to get an even bigger head if you do that.” He snickered, before crying out in pain as the cat swatted his ear.

“Don’t insult me! I am a modest human!” He scolded.

Scowling, the leader rubbed his ear, the appendage pulsing from the strike. Did he deserve all this abuse? First the twins and now this.

“Morgana!” Airi admonished disapprovingly, the cat wilting under her tone.

Ryuji leaned against the wall next to the diner entrance. “Let us know if Madarame’s gonna do somethin’.” He requested. “If he tries to threaten ya, maybe you could hide out at Airi’s.”

Airi looked over at him in surprise, before nodding. Why not. “Sure. If you need a place to stay, my house is open to you. To any of you, really.” She smiled. “We’re a family, right?”

They all smiled to each other. “Very well. Thank you for the offer.” Yusuke inclined his head. “I’ll contact you if anything comes up.”

With that, the teenagers separated, going home for the day.

Chapter End Notes

-Kabuki is traditional Japanese theater.
-Geta are wooden Japanese shoes where it has 1-2 blocks of wood as its base.
Parting with Airi at the end of the block, Akira walked into the cafe, the last of the sun's rays falling behind the horizon.

Sojiro glanced up from washing the few dishes in the sink. “I hope you aren’t up to no good.” He narrowed his eyes, stoppering the water. “Don’t forget you’re still under probation, got that? One misstep and you’re finished.”

Akira nodded obediently, deferring to his guardian.

“...No good?” Morgana whispered from inside the bag. “What’s wrong about changing the hearts of criminals? We’re doing the right thing.”

His lips twitched downward. It wasn’t like they could explain this to the man. No one would be able to understand their secondary profession without witnessing it firsthand. All that mattered was that they were helping people. As long as they knew they were doing the right thing, then it doesn’t matter what anyone else thought.

He bowed slightly to the surly man before moving up to his room. “Why did I take in a kid like this? I must be getting old…” He heard him mutter.

He glanced down at the comment, a stab of pain stinging in his chest. No matter how many times he heard people talk badly about him, it still hurt. It was so much worse at school, but having his friends with him all the time buffered the worst remarks away. Seeing Airi hang out with him helped to curb their class, but the rest of the student body still watched him warily. At least the boss treated him fairly, even though his words were on the rough side.

He placed his bag on the table, Morgana jumping out. Stretching out on the couch, his phone rang.

R: Legal action? This ain’t funny.
Ak: That sounds problematic.
R: If the police hear about this, they’ll totally get in touch with the school.
R: We’ll get expelled for sure this time.
Ai: Not only expelled, we’d be going to jail because we can’t afford a lawyer.
Ai: There’s no winning on this side.
An: Yeah. Unlawful entry, defamation…
R: Guess that means we really can’t afford to fuck it up this time.
An: Yeah, from here on out is what really matters! Let’s do it!

“We just need to change his heart before he presses charges. Try to focus on that problem for now.” Morgana advised, licking a paw.

He sighed, slumping on the couch. He stared up at the dusty ceiling beams, feeling simultaneously more alive and tired than he ever had before. ‘Can’t go back to being a regular teenager now…’ He huffed.

It wasn’t like he regretted it.
Sitting down in front of the laptop, Airi dried her hair with a towel. Pulling up the email Nakanohara sent her, she searched up the names, trying to find anything she could on them.

“Hattori Daichi…” She typed, scrolling through the results. Clicking the first link, a school page loaded in, showing a photo of a young man with dark hair and eyes. It was the average Japanese male teenager, but there was a certain darkness present in his eyes that differentiated him from other high schoolers.

Her eyes glanced down at the dates. “Graduated ten years ago...He’d be twenty-seven then.” She murmured. It listed an address, which was the same as Madarame’s shack, indicating that this was the same Hattori Daichi that Nakanohara and Yusuke knew.

Saving the portrait, she continued searching the other apprentices. “Matsuoka Toshiro...Hamasaki Chiyo...Oh!” She blinked in surprise. She recognized the girl in the photo, albeit much older now. Her brown hair and blank eyes were still the same as those who greeted her whenever she visited the hospital. To think that the receptionist was a former artist...

She looked at the list again, moving onto the next name. “Kamiya...Yukimi...?” She read, furrowing her brow. Yukimi? The waitress from the Diner flashed in her mind, and she quickly pulled up the student profile. The same face stared back at her, yet it was completely different. There was life in these eyes compared to the blank surfaces earlier.

‘I can’t believe I missed that..!’ She cursed herself. She’d have to approach her cautiously. She had seen the same expression before in the mirror. There wasn’t any point in living when Rui wasn’t there with her. When she had stolen her right to live. She was ready to give up and join her best friend and parents in the afterlife if Takase hadn’t reached out to her.

Now though, she was glad she hadn’t taken the easy way out because she served a purpose; to help her friends and others from selfish adults. ‘Please hold on, Kamiya-san..!’ They should approach her and Hamasaki-san first.

Procrastinating by putting in all the other names, she finally typed in the only bolded name on the list. “Ayasakawa Sousuke.”

His school profile showed up, as well as a small news article about his death. Madarame had no involvement in this, as the page wrote that the man had taken a full bottle of sleeping pills near the pharmacy he bought it from and had stopped breathing. Nakanohara Natsuhiko had discovered him on a park bench, but denied knowing him. His body was noted and cremated at Aoyama Cemetery, only a couple blocks away from Shujin Academy.

Exhaling shakily, she noted it down in her phone before turning her laptop off. Leaning back in her chair, she pressed her palms onto her eyelids and slowly exhaled.

There were so many apprentices on the list, some who had actually made it into the art world before quickly dropping out, disappearing off the face of the earth. Some names had come up with a news article, reporting their untimely deaths. Some might not have been on the list either. Nakanohara didn't know all of them, after all.

Why didn’t anyone look into this sooner? How could no one notice that they were suffering? Their teachers, classmates, or anyone..?

Letting her arms fall limp at her sides, she stared up at the light fixture. If no one else will help them, she’d do it. The team will do it. They helped each other because no one else would. They
had the power to change things for the better, and they’ve risen from their weakness as victims to protectors.

She bit her lip, a seed of doubt planted in her mind. Had she, though..? She always tried to help others after Rui’s death, whether it was something small like studying or something big like stealing food for the younger children. Did that really qualify her as being strong when she didn't even know herself..? Was she genuinely kind, or was she only following what Rui expected of her..?

Taking a deep breath, she padded over to her bedroom and sat down, her fingers caressing the polished wood of her beloved cello. Tightening the bow, she slowly dragged the hairs against the string. A C major resonated through the room, down to the marrow in her bones.

‘Stop throwing yourself a pity party.’ She scolded herself. ‘Yusuke’s situation is more important…’

The nostalgic theme of Princess Mononoke filled her ears, the deep and melancholy notes matching her mood. At least she hadn't recognized any of the names. She had yet to decide if that was a good or bad thing...

----5/20, FRIDAY, EARLY MORNING, SUBWAY

Covering her lower face with a surgical mask, Airi wriggled her nose, trying not to sneeze. It was another pollen outbreak and the entire train was filled with people sneezing and covering their mouths, white cotton disguising most of their features.

Akira shuffled a bit, hugging his bag to himself in the crowded train.

A teenager sighed, standing in front of the other doors. “I don’t wanna go to work today…”

“You still working at that beef bowl place on Central Street?” His friend asked. "I thought you liked that place ‘cause the pay was good. What happened?”

“Sure, the pay’s fine, but I’m the only one there at night. There was a new guy for that shift I missed, but he hasn’t come back. That job magazine said it was a “fun, friendly workplace.” Maybe I should just quit…”

Akira winced. He hadn’t gone back to work there since the first day over a week ago. With the Madarame problem as well as their exams, he hadn’t had time.

Morgana squirmed in the bag. “Like he says, work can be pretty trying…” He wiggled his whiskers. “If we have time, we should go back so that we can talk to that politician.”

Airi tilted her head, overhearing the feline. “What is it exactly that you need that man for?”

Akira turned his head to look down at her. “He’s a politician, which means he’s good at speeches.” He murmured, not wanting to be overheard. "If I can strike a deal with him, he could teach me how to negotiate better with the Shadows we encounter.” He shrugged. “He said he needs someone with work experience, so If I work at Ore no Beko when he visits, he could see I’m hardworking or something.”
She blinked in surprise. “Oh, I didn’t even know you were planning that. And striking deals..?” She asked quizzically. What did that mean?

He pursed his lips. “Apparently it’s something I have to do. If I develop stronger bonds with people, I get stronger as a thief. I can’t really say anything else…” He gave her an apologetic look. She wouldn't be able to understand that a long nosed man in his dream with two snot nosed brats told him he had to have strong bonds with people. It was strange since he couldn't ever remember ever having a strong bond with someone, but if it meant his friends' safety, then he'd throw himself head first.

She smiled. “Don’t worry about it. I guess it’s just an Akira thing.” She winked playfully. “If you need any help though, just let me know.”

He nodded. “Thanks. Actually, if you’re free sometime, can you…” He looked away awkwardly. “Can you come with me to the clinic?”

She blinked. “What for? Do we need more medicine?”

He shook his head. “No really, it’s just...I struck a deal with Dr. Takemi about that super drug. If I help her develop a new medicine by doing clinical trials, she’ll hook us up.” He grimaced. “But the last time I went, she told me I passed out after taking something, and I don’t really remember what happened in the meantime…”

Gaping, Airi stared at him incredulously. “...You...you’re taking experimental drugs?” She whispered. “I mean, I know you won’t die because it’s Dr. Takemi, but...OK.” She took a deep breath. “You want me to go with to watch over you? Just in case?”

He nodded shyly. “Yeah, if you don’t mind. It’s...a little scary being at her mercy.” He blushed in embarrassment. “Having you with me would help.”

She bit back a laugh. “She’s not that bad, but sure. Just let me know when so I can move my schedule around.”

“All right, class.” Kawakami clapped her hands together. “It’s lunch time. Your exam scores have been posted near the entrance on the first floor. I hope you all did your best and got the score you wanted.” She smiled slightly. “Kimisawa-chan, stay behind for a bit.”

Blinking, Airi nodded.

“Yeah, if you don’t mind. It’s...a little scary being at her mercy.” He blushed in embarrassment. “Having you with me would help.”

She bit back a laugh. “She’s not that bad, but sure. Just let me know when so I can move my schedule around.”

“*This is Aoyama-Itchome. I repeat, this is Aoyama-Itchome. The time is now 7:24AM, the next stop is...*”
Closing his notebooks, Akira looked over at his desk mate. “Do you want me to wait for you?” He asked.

Airi shook her head. “It’s OK. You should go look at your score.” She smiled. “I watched you a bit when we were taking our exams, you know. You looked like you answered every question correctly.”

He rubbed the back of his neck bashfully. “Well, it’s...really thanks to you, since you helped me and everyone else study.” He got up from his desk. “I’ll go ahead and take a look then.” Shoulder his bag with Morgana inside, he made his way out of the room.

Placing the bentos on their desks, the class president walked up to the front where Kawakami was waiting. “Sensei?”

The teacher turned around. “Hey, Airi. Just wanted to ask how you were doing?” She asked quietly, glancing at the empty classroom.

Airi fidgeted, playing with the edge of her blazer. “I’m all right. I payed the bills for this month already, and I’ve been able to afford more food too.”

Kawakami hummed, idly combing her curly brown hair. “OK, that’s good. I see you and Kurusu-kun have been hanging out a lot lately. In fact, you two have been glued to the hip since he transferred here. Is he..?” She trailed off.

Airi furrowed her brow in confusion. “Is he what..? Doing badly? He’s been studying diligently and hasn’t done anything illegal. His grades have been improving, too.”

Pursing her lips, Kawakami looked away awkwardly. “He’s not...pressuring you, right..? Into doing anything you don’t want..?”

Airi stared at her blankly, before widening with realization. “Wait, what? No! He’s a very nice guy!” She squeaked, her face resembling a tomato. “Were you implying he was…? No!” She covered her heated face with her hands.

Kawakami sweatdropped. “Ah, that’s good then. I worried, you know.” She cleared her throat. “Have the agents visited yet?”

Airi shook her head, the blush receding. “Not yet. I don’t think they’ll be coming this month. Maybe next month.” She looked down. “I’m sorry for all the trouble, Sensei…” Once every couple of months, agents from child service would visit her home to check up on her. Due to her not living with her, Kawakami has to send in a report dictating that she has visited and taken care of the ward under her. Airi understood when her teacher said she would just lie on her reports. She was grateful enough that she had even signed her name as her guardian and so she never pushed for anything more from her.

Brown eyes softened, and Kawakami exhaled. “...Don’t worry about it. It’s the least I could do since you were like Takase’s little sister...Besides,” She grinned, reaching a hand out to tussle the rose strands. “You’re like a little sister to me too, now.”

Airi pouted, fixing her hair. “Sensei…” Her face fell. “Principal Kobayakawa called me in last week.” She whispered.

The teacher furrowed her brow. “What..? I didn’t hear anything about this. What for?”

“He asked me about Akira, and also about the Kamoshida thing.” She frowned. “He didn’t even
seem to care that Shiho-chan…” She trailed off, looking down. The school seemed to have washed their hands of the ex-volleyball player and it left a bitter taste in her mouth.

Groaning quietly, Kawakami rubbed the back of her head. “Don’t say anything out loud about him, OK? I agree with you, he definitely doesn’t have the students as his first priority in this school. The last budget cut really sucked…” She grimaced. “I don’t know how I can keep this up…”

Airi blinked. “Keep what up? Your second job?”

“Err, yeah. Being a teacher doesn’t pay all my bills, so…” Kawakami looked away uncomfortably, fiddling with her sleeves.

Airi looked at her worriedly. What was she not telling her? “Sensei…”

Kawakami smiled wryly. “Don’t worry about me. I’m the adult here...I should be able to take care of my problems. You just focus on your grades and job, OK?” She reassured. “I’m going to go take my break. You should go look at your test scores too. No doubt they’re at the top again.” She teased, before leaving the room.

Airi watched the older woman walk away, sighing. ‘She seems more troubled than usual…I hope she’s OK.’ She fretted, leaving the room for the first floor.

Landing on the first floor of the school, Akira walked over to the announcement board right next to the school snack store. It was crowded with students, all peering at their test scores.

“How’d you do?”

“Damn...I’m dead...”

“Oh! I passed!”

“Phew! I’m above the average. That’s the real dividing line. My allowance is safe for now…”

“Of course Kimisawa has the top spot.”

“Shut up! You could’ve went to her study group too, you know.”

“And stay in school even longer? No thanks.”

“And that’s why you failed.”

Akira walked closer, trying to find his name out of the hundreds that were posted in tiny black print. ‘I wonder what score I got…’ Muttering an “excuse me,” he made his way to the front of the board.

Brushing shoulders with another guy, they turned to glare at him. “Hey! Don’t push-” He paled. “Oh shit, it’s him…” He held up his hands placatingly. “S-Sorry, man…” He apologized, slowly backing away.

The other students took a step back, watching him warily. A girl turned to her friend, covering her mouth. “That’s him…”

“You mean the transfer..? He’s kind of scary…”
“Don’t go near him. He only listens to Kimisawa…”

“Is he blackmailing her or something?”

“Who knows. I wish he left with Kamoshida…” They quickly walked away, the crowd of students dispersing in a hurry.

He watched them impassively, not wanting to show the hurt on his face. Every comment he could hear was like a dagger to his heart. Day after day, it was filled with words that meant nothing and everything to him. It hurt to be told he was a criminal, that he was no good, that he was a stain upon society.

He knew he shouldn't let this get to him. He had a team that wanted him, he had friends that relied and trusted him. But it got so fucking tiring to hear these things from people who didn't know him, what he went through. It's hard to keep up a positive outlook when they continually brought him down.

He wanted to shout at them, to tell them, ‘I’m not like that. You don’t have to be scared of me. I wouldn’t hurt anyone…” but he knew they wouldn’t listen. Why would they believe him over themselves?

Resigned, he put it out of his mind like always and looked up at the board, seeing Airi’s name at the top of their grade. He smiled slightly. Of course she would be.

His eyes slid downward and blinked. And blinked again. Right below Kimisawa Airi was Kurusu Akira, coming up as the second top scorer in their year. ‘I’m so close to the top!’ He marveled, eyebrows raised in surprise and elation.

He shifted his bag, letting Morgana see. “Oh wow, you’re the second top scorer!” He meowed quietly, giving him a pat with his paw. "You must be really intelligent!"

Akira smiled slightly, letting the giddiness wash away the cold comments from earlier. It was nice to see that he could succeed too.

“Um, Kurusu-kun..?”

Tensing, he turned around, Morgana hiding back in his bag.

Namikawa from his class walked up to him, fidgeting with her hands. “Um...con-congratulations!” She spoke softly, keeping her head down in nervousness. “You’re right underneath Senpai’s score. That’s pretty amazing since you just transferred here…”

He stared at her in surprise. What..? Someone at school who wasn’t part of the Phantom Thieves was talking to him? “Thank you…” He answered quietly.

Matsumoto walked up behind her, towering over her friend. “Hey, Kurusu-kun. Congrats on landing second place.” She smiled awkwardly. “Listen...I know the class, well…” She paused. “The school, hasn’t really treated you well because of the rumors and stuff, but...we’re classmates, and Senpai defends you whenever we talk badly about you, so…” The two girls bowed. “We’re sorry.”

Taken aback, he held up his hands to stop them, not knowing what to do. “No, it’s OK. You don’t...have to bow to me.” He uttered, blinking a couple of times. Was this really happening?

“But we do…” Namikawa frowned. “We treated you very badly because of those rumors. We
didn’t share our textbooks, or talked to you, or or…” She scrunched her lips, looking as if she was about to cry. “No one was nice to you except for Senpai…”

Matsumoto wrapped an arm around her shoulders, comforting her. “If our classmates treated me like that, I would’ve cried a long time ago.” She smiled uncomfortably. “But you have the whole school treating you like that, aside from Senpai, Sakamoto-kun, and Takamaki-san. You’re pretty strong to not say anything about it.”

He looked away, feeling the feline in his bag shift. “...I can’t convince people that I’m not violent if I act violently.” He shrugged. “...Thanks. For apologizing, I mean. I haven’t really made an effort to talk to people either, so…” He smiled shyly. It was nice to be treated like a human being for once in an environment that was completely hostile to him.

Namikawa smiled. “We’ll try to be better. The whole class agreed to treat you fairly from now on. So, um...if you need any help, you can come to any of us.”

Matsumoto gave him a wink. “I’m sure you won’t have to, though, since you’re so close with Senpai.”

He blushed at the comment, and quirked his lips. “Thank you. I’ll try to live up to your expectations.” He bowed slightly.

Matsumoto waved. “Well, we’ll see you around in class.” Namikawa bowed, and the two classmates walked away.

He watched their retreating backs, still astonished at what happened. Was he dreaming?

“Well,” Morgana purred. “Seems like your classmates are warming up to you. You must be glad.”

He nodded slightly. “Yeah. It’s nice to be treated normally.” He smiled. It was a start. Maybe the whole school would treat him normally, given enough time. Just gotta be patient. He’d show them through his everyday actions that he wasn’t out to hurt them.

“Hey.”

He turned around, seeing Ryuji and Ann walk up to him. “We saw all that.” Ryuji scratched the back of his head sheepishly.

“I’m really glad that those two apologized to you, too.” Ann grinned. “I’m honestly surprised how our class is turning around. They used to treat me badly, too.”

Akira exhaled. “Yeah, before Kamoshida, right?”

Ryuji laced his hands behind his head. “Well, sounds like it was Airi who’s been slowly pushin’ them to be better. I can still remember a couple weeks ago when Otani gave me the stink eye, but yesterday, she actually nodded at me!” He stated disbelievingly. “I’m still not sure if I was dreamin’ or what.”

Ann nodded in agreement. “Our class has gotten a lot better with the rumors, too. Matsumoto was the one who was spreading rumors about me, but I swear I saw her last week trying to stop some other students from spreading gossip.”

Akira rested his hands in his pockets. “Maybe we should be Class 2-A since we’re clearly the best.” He joked. Seemed like being an outcast wasn’t too bad now, what with having a class representative bolstering them. He felt a slight stab of guilt at once again being in her debt, but
brushed it off. He'd make up for it by protecting her, in reality and in the Metaverse. It was the least he could do.

She rolled her eyes. “Anyway, we came down to check our scores. Well, I did.” She side-eyed the punk. “Ryuji here didn’t want to.”

He hunched his shoulders. “Listen, I don’t wanna see if I failed or somethin’, because then I know Airi’s gonna give me that creepy smile.” He pouted.

“I’m going to give you what?”

Airi walked up to them, smiling serenely. Other students who stood about covered their mouths and whispered to each other about why a class representative with such a good reputation would hang out with the weirdos, and quickly walked away to enjoy their breaks elsewhere.

Ryuji pointed his finger in her face. “That! The creepy smile!” He yelled, then froze. “Oh shit, don’t look at my score…” He plastered his arms over the board, covering it from view.

“Get off, Ryuji! I want to see mine.” Ann yelled, pulling at his shoulder.

Airi smiled in amusement and pointed to his name, out for the world to see. “You’re not even covering it.” She peered closer. “Oh!”

Taking his arms off the paper, Ryuji crouched and gripped his head. “Don’t say I failed don’t say I failed…” He chanted, clenching his eyes shut.

“What?!” Ann’s eyes widened, catching the number. “Ryuji, you scored average?!”

He froze, before snapping his head toward the board. “You serious?!?” He quickly stood up, staring at his number in disbelief.

Akira leaned in to see. “You’re at the bottom section of average, but you passed.” He smirked lightly. “Congrats.”

Airi’s finger trailed the paper, stopping at Takamaki. “Ann, you scored right above average!” She cheered. “Congratulations, you guys!” She wrapped her arms around their shoulders, hugging them to her. “I’m so proud of my children.” She joked.

Ryuji slumped in relief. “I did it…” He breathed. “I passed. I haven’t scored this high since...I don’t even remember.” He shook his head. ”...Hold up, I should let Ma see this, too!” He snapped a photo of his score, before putting his phone back in his pocket.

Ann squealed, encircling her arms around Airi’s waist. “All my hard work has paid off..!” She grinned happily. “We have to celebrate with that spa visit!”

Morgana watched them with a bright smile. “Congratulations, Lady Ann! I knew you could do it!” He meowed. “And you too, Ryuji. You did better than expected. But don’t let this get to your heads. You have to continue to work hard.”

Huffing in amusement, Akira placed a hand atop the feline’s head, rubbing his ears. “Let us have this, OK.”

He purred before snapping out of it and swiped at the hand. “No! I will not let you demean me like this.” He stuffed himself back inside the bag.
Airi laughed. “We could go today, but let’s do it after we help Yusuke out.” She peered at the board again. “Oh, Akira, you’re at #2! Congratulations.” She beamed up at him.

He smirked, running a hand through his hair to hide how her smile could make his heart skip a beat. “Naturally.”

Ryuji snorted. “Dude, stop tryin’ to be cool. We saw you were shocked, too.”

Akira jabbed an elbow in his side. “We should go eat lunch before the bell rings.” He smiled innocently, ignoring Ryuji’s groan of pain.

Ann snorted. “Yeah, let’s go.” She laced her arm with Airi’s, guiding her away.

“Uh, but…” Airi glanced back at Ryuji who rubbed his ribs gingerly on the ground.

“Leave him. He has his own class.” Akira placed a hand on her shoulder, the two students guiding their class president away.
Chapter 78

As soon as the bell rang, most of the students left the school, excited for the upcoming half day. The three thieves turned to face each other in their chairs. “Should we go to the Palace today?” Ann asked, resting her chin on her arms as she sat backwards in her chair.

“If everyone’s OK with it.” Akira replied, putting away his books.

Morgana jumped up onto the desk, licking a paw. “We should inform Yusuke when we hold our hideout meetings then.”

“Hey!” Ryuji walked up to them to lean on an empty desk. “We goin’?”

Akira looked over at his friends, silently asking the question. They all nodded.

“I’ll let Yusuke know to meet us.” He took out his phone and sent a quick text to the artist, receiving a reply a few seconds later. He stood up from his seat, holding his bag open for Morgana. “Let’s get going then.”

Taking the train to Shibuya, they met up with Yusuke at the hideout. “Good afternoon.” He greeted them with a nod, a large paper bag placed next to him on the floor. They waved back and leaned on the railing, idly watching people pass them by as if they didn't exist.

Morgana left the bag and balanced on the bar of the safety railing. “Yusuke, we still need to explain the basics to you, don’t we?”

Ann perked up. “Oh, you mean about the Metaverse and the Nav. Yeah, I guess that stuff is pretty important.”

Yusuke inclined his head. “Please elaborate.”

Morgana nodded. “OK, let’s start from the beginning. First, the Metaverse spots where we act as the Phantom Thieves are called Palaces. Palaces are worlds that take form from someone’s cognition...A materialization of their reality.”

Yusuke grasped his chin thoughtfully. “So do we each hold Palaces within ourselves as well?”

Airi shook her head. “Palaces only manifest when a person’s desires are extremely distorted.”

Ryuji hunched his back. “They basically gotta be criminals.” He grinned. "Real bastards like Kamoshida or Madarame.”

Morgana flicked his tail. “On the other hand, Palaces can’t exist within Persona-users. It’s just impossible for them to form. Basically, your Persona is the true feelings of your heart, which arise from conquering your inner Shadow. Then since you have full control over your emotions, there’s no way your desires can get distorted.”

Airi blinked. “Wait, really? We defeated our inner Shadows for our Personas? I didn’t think that
was possible…"

Ann nodded in agreement. “S-So that’s how it works…”

Ryuji’s eyes darted around. “O-Obviously I knew that..!” He bluffed. “Oh yeah, and we use the Metaverse Nav app on our phones to get into that world!”

Akira nodded. “You say a person’s name, location, and distortion. The app remembers the location until the Palace collapses.”

Yusuke tilted his head. “Location…?” He asked hesitantly.

“Uhhh,” Ann tapped her chin. “So like Madarame’s would be “shack,” then his distortion is that he think it’s a “museum.””

He furrowed his brow. “How do you know what their Palace is going to look like if you have never set foot in it before..?”

Airi shrugged, grasping her elbow. “We don’t. You have to guess based on their desires. Kamoshida’s was that he thought the school as his own castle with him as the king, so his was “castle.” Madarame’s obsessed with art and his own exhibit, so we figured it out as “museum.””

Humming, Yusuke nodded slowly, letting the new information sink in. “I feel as though I have a good grasp on the basic concepts.” He smiled. "If anything arises which I fail to understand, I’ll rely on those more experienced than myself.”

“Yeah!” Ryuji grinned energetically. “I gotcha covered, newbie!”

Ann sweatdropped. “Uh...You should probably ask Morgana if you need anything. Or Airi if you don’t understand.”

Morgana twitched his whiskers. “Thinking back to Madarame though...I can’t believe he’d consider pressing charges.”

Yusuke nodded in agreement. “Yes, I’ve never seen him show such anger before. He is most likely quite serious about that.”

Airi huffed. “He probably wants us locked away so that we can’t blab. If even one tabloid publishes an article about his plagiarism, people will start to doubt him.”

Ann sighed. “What should we do..? There’s no way we’ll be able to win if that happens.”

Akira smirked. “We steal his Treasure.”

“Well yeah!” Ryuji pumped his fist. “We just gotta steal Madarame’s heart by June 5th. There’s no way we’re gonna let him press charges...We’ll show people who he really is!” He stated determinedly.

Akira straightened up, taking his phone out of his pocket. “We all ready?”

They all nodded, and he activated the app. The world warped around them, and Yusuke watched curiously, lifting his hands at the strange sensations.
Appearing at the very edge of the perimeter of Madarame’s Palace with a feeling of weightlessness, they turned to their new teammate. “Oh yeah.” Mona piped up. “We haven’t decided on the new recruit’s code name yet.”

Panther crossed her arms, looking over the dark blue jumpsuit with white accents and the traditional fox mask that covered his effeminate face. “It has to be ‘Kitsune.’ You know, with that kitsune mask and everything.”

Elegant nodded in agreement. “I like that too. Kitsunes are graceful creatures, which he fits well.”

Skull grinned. “Hell yeah. That really leaves an impression.”

Yusuke tilted his head and looked down at his vulpine outfit. “Are you talking about me?”

Joker rested his hands in his pockets. “What do you want your codename to be?”

Crossing his arms, the artist pondered the question. “I’d say “Da Vinci.” He answered after a moment.

“Nope.” Skull shot him down immediately with a scowl.

Yusuke looked up in surprise. No? Why not?

The pirate hummed, scrutinizing the artist. “Well, you’ve got that mask like Ann said...and there’s that weird tail.” He peered at the unattached appendage that hung from his belt. “All right, you’re “Abura-age”!”

Mona snorted, covering his mouth with his paws. Elegant sweatdropped. “Why would we name him after fried tofu...?”

Yusuke idly massaged his shoulder. “Very well.” He accepted graciously.

They looked at him in shock. “He’s agreed to it?!” Mona yelped.

Skull grinned, fighting the urge to snicker. “It’s decided then: Abura-age.”

Panther deadpanned. “Nuh-uh! Not happening!” She rejected vehemently.

Joker rolled his eyes, shoulders tensing from being out in the open for longer than necessary. They were taking too long. “Let’s just stick with “Fox.” It works with the theme of our names.”

Skull ooh’ed. “Just keep it literal, huh? Sounds good to me.”

Elegant turned to Yusuke. “How about it, Fox?”

Yusuke, now Fox, nodded. “It’s acceptable.”

Mona wiggled in place. “Now that we have a sixth member, we have to decide who else will stay as the backup. Joker here should decide who should be in the advancing group, and who should be in the second group.”

Skull rolled his neck. “And I guess we always gotta have our leader with us, right?”

Mona nodded. “We’ll let Joker choose the other three.”

Fox tilted his head. “And what should the backup do? Would it be best for them to stay outside of
Mona shook his head. “No, they should come in as well, but maintain a reasonable distance from the main group. The starting lineup is the first wave of our infiltration force. We can switch with members before entering the Palace and at every Safe Room.”

Exhaling slowly, Joker looked at his teammates. ‘The Palace has been full of Shadows that are weak to ice, bless, and fire so far…Not so much wind and lightning, so…’

Fox took a step forward toward his leader. “Please allow me to join the vanguard, Joker. I will not disappoint you. I promise.”

He nodded and opened his mouth. “Mona, Skull. You guys stay as backup.”

The feline nodded in understanding. “Understood, Joker.” Skull laced his hands behind his head. “You got it, leader.”

The samurai breathed out a sigh of relief. “Thank you. We will change Madarame’s heart, no matter what!” He promised. “If it’s not too much trouble… I’d like to see my portrait.”

They looked at him in surprise. “Are you sure…?” Elegant asked concernedly.

He nodded resolutely. “I have to see with my own eyes… how Madarame sees me.”

Panther pursed her lips. “All right. Let’s go, Joker?” She looked over at their leader who nodded.

They jumped up on the truck, landing on the other side of the wall. Running through the garden, they leaped up on the statues, hurdling to the open skylight on the side of the building. Even though they were being chased out of here last time, the rope was still bound to the AC unit.

Jumping down into the side gallery, Fox looked around. “There are even more apprentices…” He murmured wistfully. He walked up to one, gazing up at a man in a suit. “I heard this pupil has left the art world completely… Some foul rumors went around about them…”

He turned to another, one with a young man with dark hair and eyes in a school uniform. “They used to create the most tender paintings…” He looked down, clenching his hands. “And now this is what has happened… A number of them are on display at that exhibit… though Madarame has altered them some.”

Taking a couple of steps, he stopped in front of a portrait of a woman. “They had a style that was truly unique… though I suppose it was all stolen from them.” He blinked slowly, trying to stem his emotions. “A truly extraordinary artist, overflowing with talent… ”

Going through the door they opened last time, they slowly turned around in the larger hall and stared.

Fox took a couple of steps forward. “So this… is how he sees me. How ridiculous…” He whispered, staring up at the painting of himself, an unknown emotion shining in his eyes. This was the last piece of evidence that Madarame did not care for him, if he ever did care. All those years of living under the man who he thought of as a father were just years of indentured labor. Were there more words to describe the disappointment in his heart… “The color palette is horrendous.”

Elegant coughed, covering her mouth as she held back a laugh. “Yeah, who pairs strong purples and reds like that.”
Lips twitching into a smile, Fox turned back to his teammates who were waiting patiently. As she had said yesterday, they were a family of thieves now, and family was supposed to care of each other. “I’m ready. Thank you for granting my request.” He bowed slightly to Joker.

Smirking lightly, the leader nodded before gesturing for them to move on. Running past the information desk and the infinite spring, their boots barely making any noise on the carpeted floors, they entered a nearby Safe Room, Skull and Mona following them from a couple paces behind.

Taking his phone out of his pocket, Joker moved them to the latest Safe Room that was in front of the koi pond. They all took a seat, sighing.

“How close are we, Mona?” Skull asked, leaning against the back of his chair.

Mona stood up on the table. “I think we’ve reached the halfway point at least. There’s no knowing what lies ahead of us though…”

Panther leaned her elbows against the surface. “This is the perfect chance for Fox to show us his skills!” She grinned.

Fox inclined his head. “Indeed. My resolve has not wavered, so I will certainly give this my all.”

Elegant smiled, observing the artist. “Having another heavy hitter with us is good.” She observed his outfit with an intrigued hum. “It’s interesting how your design is so Japanese, while the rest of us are more western in style.”

Flexing his hand, he summoned his katana with a flash. “I suppose it must be because ukiyo-e* is my most favorite of art styles. There is something very elegant yet simplistic about the strokes of the brush.” He closed his eyes contently. “It soothes the artist within me.”

Joker snickered quietly. “Very “elegant.”” He glanced over at the noblewoman expectantly.

She rolled her eyes and lightly smacked his arm. “Let’s get going then.”

Getting up from their seats, they exited the Safe Room, running past the koi pond and into the open gardens. “The security stayed off.” Elegant remarked, a gust of wind in the open air gardens blowing the ends of her coat.

Panther sighed heavily. “Thanks to all our hard work…”

Fox looked at her quizzically. “...What do you mean by that?”

Joker rolled his eyes. “Don’t worry about it. Let’s keep moving.”

They headed into the Treasure Hall Lounge, noting a couple of security guards patrolling the room. Sneaking closer without being spotted, Joker ripped their mask off. “Show me your true form!” In a splash of red and black, the guard turned into three Corpse Birds. “Elegant, you’re up!” He shouted, jumping back toward his teammates.

With a small curtsy, Elegant stepped forward. “Jeanne!” The blindingly white lady appeared behind her, filling the room with light as she raised her staff. Kissing her fingertips, Elegant snapped her fingers, stabbing the enemies with ivory rays. “Makouha!”

Fox watched with wide eyes. “So this is a bless skill..?” He arched his fingers into a portrait frame. “The skills shown in this world are fascinating to watch...I would love to paint them.”
Panther sweatdropped from next to him. “Let’s save that for later, OK?”

Running deeper into the lounge, a flash caught Joker’s eye and he turned to a stand. ‘That brochure…’ Walking up to it, he grabbed the pamphlet, opening it up. “It says second out of two.” He read.

They peered at it, noting it was a different map compared to the first one they acquired. “This must be the second part of the Palace map!” Elegant cheered.

Panther smiled hopefully. “Now we can use it to figure out where the Treasure is, right?”

Mona and Skull ran up to them and inspected the map. “I suspect it’s in the most innermost point of this place. If that’s the case…” Mona trailed off, his paw tracing the paper to a certain point. “The most suspicious spot seems like this main hall here.” He tapped the last hall shown.

Fox leaned in closer. “Hm, we will need to pass through the lounge and the gallery in order to reach it…”

Elegant idly grasped her arm. “Which means it’s not far off. Let’s be careful, OK?”

Putting the map away, the first group ran further into the lounge, stopping at the giant golden statue of Madarame. Fox grimaced at the repulsively opulent sight. “Ngh...To think there even exists a thing such as this here...It is nothing short of an abomination.”

Skull snorted, sneering at the monument. “I guess Palace rulers like makin’ statues of themselves.”

Panther nodded, turning to the artist to explain. “It was the same with Kamoshida. I guess this one’s a little better-made though.”

He furrowed his brow. “I-Is that so…?”

Shaking her head, Elegant placed a hand on his shoulder. “It’s probably because of their egos. It could be representative of their desires to be well loved.”

Joker glanced at her in amusement. “Have you been reading up on psychology?” He teased.

She raised a brow. “I have actually. Yuuki-kun gave a psych book to me on my birthday.” She replied with a smile. “It’s really helped me understand the Metaverse better. I should let you guys have a read, too.”

He frowned at the mention of their Phan boy but didn't say anything about it. Now wasn't the time.

They moved past the ostentatious statue, climbing some steps. In front of them was a barren room, locked off with shutters. Taking a left, they opened a locked chest in a corner that had a sealed off door, pocketing the treasure. Retracing their steps, they took a right this time, smashing the small sculptures along the way.

Destroying another one, a red gem popped out and began floating away. “Get it!” Mona yelled from afar.

Running after it, Joker slashed it with his dagger. Erupting into inky liquid, a Regent hovered above, its limbs floating like paper. Remembering that it was weak to critical gun shots, he took out his 9mm and shot it. The bullet injured it, but didn’t knock it down.

“Shall I?” Fox took a step forward, holding an assault rifle in his hands.
Joker smirked, gesturing with a wave of his arm. “Be my guest.”

Taking a deep breath, Fox switched the safety off. Gripping the handle and the guard, he launched a barrage of bullets at the Shadow, knocking it down. They rushed up, aiming their firearms at it.

“To think you would coerce me into giving in...How brilliant.” Regent chuckled, the sound reverberating like static. “I already exist within your heart. There cannot be two of the same being in one soul.”

Joker frowned, before signalling an all out attack. The thieves slashed and hit it multiple times, each weapon doing more damage than the last to the strange Shadow. Landing on his feet, Fox crossed an arm, the other hand framing his jaw as the Shadow exploded, leaving ¥5000 on the ground.

Pocketing the money, they ran down to the end of the hallway, ignoring an open door for now. The narrow passage was lined with security brackets with the lights off, implying that they weren’t powered. Taking a cautious step forward, Joker stumbled back as the lasers turned on instantaneously.

He sighed, turning around. “We’ll have to find another way.”

“How about that room we passed?” Panther suggested, pointing at the open entrance.

Peeking from the doorway, they immediately sneaked up on the curator. Another guard immediately spawned, noting her absence, and attacked them from behind.

Landing in a heap, the thieves were surrounded by two Onmoraki and one Inugami. The dog spirit immediately attacked, swiping a giant slice at Panther. She yelped in pain, falling back onto the ground with her catsuit slashed open.

The Inugami then sent a pulinpa at Joker, but missed. An Onmoraki cast Mudo on Elegant, a straw doll appearing before her body with a piece of metal being nailed through. It missed, and she breathed out a sigh of relief. The last corpse bird tried a Mudo on Fox, but the attack failed.

Narrowing his eyes at the situation, Joker took out his 9mm, putting a bullet through each enemy. The Onmoraki fell to the floor.

Running up to the dog spirit, Fox slashed at it with his katana before Panther followed up with a high five and her whip, flogging it several times. It dissipated into nothing, leaving Elegant with her sniper rifle, shooting the two enemies left.

Exiting the room, they ended up in another hallway, one that went in both directions. Glancing to the right, they walked over to see it was blocked off with more lasers.

Turning back, they went down the other way, ending up inside the giant hall which they couldn't enter before from the lounge. There were shutters blocking off most of the entrances with multiple security poles hindering the way. Security guards patrolled in similar patterns, walking back and forth.

“Look.” Elegant whispered, pointing at a guard that was walking close to the wall, then away. “I think these lasers might be invisible. Joker, be careful. You’re the only one who can see them.”

He nodded, using his third eye ability to canvass the area. Dodging the lasers, they picked off the Shadows one by one. Tearing the last one off, it convulsed into a Night Chimera, the red dots shining from the void of its face staring at them viciously.
Joker summoned Arsene, sending an Eiha at the enemy. It was blocked, the chimera completely unaffected by the cursed energy.

Rearing up on its hind legs, it attacked Fox, tearing its claws into the artist. “Ngh!” He winced, holding his katana up as a crutch as he hunched his shoulders.

“Fox!” Panther cried out. “Agi!” She sent a blaze of fire at the Shadow but with a curse, she realized she had missed and the ball of fire sped past to dissipate into thin air.

“Let me!” Elegant shouted, running up to slice it with her scythe before jumping back.

Rearing up, the Night Chimera let out a roar, sending a Maeiha at them. They winced, with Elegant falling to the ground in pain. She tried to get up, her hand clenching around her scythe, but the curse weakened her body, freezing her muscles with its taint. She collapsed back onto her knees, panting. “Shit..!” She swore.

Having knocked her down, the Shadow then proceeded to send a Skull Cracker at her. “Agh!” She screamed at the impact and skidded against the ground, unconscious.

“Elegant!” Joker yelled, eyes wide with panic, before glaring at the enemy. How dare it..!

“Carmen!” Panther called out, the beauteous dancer whipping her skirts. “Agi!” The flames burnt its fur this time, knocking it down.

Not even bothering to take out his gun, Joker initiated the all out attack with a viciousness he had always held back, and they destroyed the Night Chimera in a spray of black blood. Landing from her attack, Panther twirled and did a peace sign, sticking her tongue out at the remains.

Now that the room was cleared, they rushed to their injured teammate. Kneeling down, Joker gently lifted Elegant up by her shoulders, supporting her upper body with one arm. There was a large bruise on her cheek, and a bit of blood dribbling out from where her teeth had cut the insides of her mouth. Something inside him ached at the sight purple-red marring the milky white of her skin, knowing that she should never have been hurt like this.

With a wince, her eyes slowly opened beneath her mask and Joker let out a slow sigh of relief. “Are you all right?” He asked concernedly, holding out a Recov-R in his other hand near her lips.

Opening her mouth, Elegant swallowed the pill, instantly feeling better. “Yeah...I haven’t been hit that hard since I was eight.” She huffed, the bruise disappearing rapidly. “Thanks.” She sat up, and he slowly rescinded his arms, making sure she was fine without his support.

Panther knelt on her other side, her hands outstretched, not knowing whether to touch her. “That was really scary...I think that’s the first time any of us has been knocked unconscious.” She breathed shakily. “You’re that weak to curse?”

Elegant smiled wryly, idly holding her scratched arm. “I guess I can’t handle all that edgy-ness.”

They snorted at her lame joke. “Are you positive that you’re feeling all right? No concussion?” Fox pressed as he took a Recov-R as well, his wounds knitting back together.

Shakily getting up, she dusted her vest coat. “Yes, I’m fine now, thanks to the medicine. Sorry for worrying you guys.” She reassured, feet firmly on the ground.

Sighing in relief, Joker moved to a small corridor. “C’mon, let’s keep moving so we can get to a Safe Room.” He gestured them over. No more carelessness.
Ukyo-e - a traditional Japanese art form. The famous painting of waves and the one with geishas are prime examples of Ukyo-e style.
Turning the corner, they opened a treasure chest in the small alcove before moving back into the large hall, going down another hallway. They stopped when they noticed it was blocked off, the shutters preventing any further passage. Mona and Skull joined up with them, the way behind them cleared of any enemies.

“Over there, beyond the shutters…” Fox pointed ahead. “Is that a security room?”

They peered closer, and noticed that yes, it was a security room. There was no clear concise way to get to it though.

“Just like before, we should be able to turn off any systems that are giving us trouble there.” Mona advised.

Skull groaned. “Though it’s prolly gonna be tough gettin’ in at all…”

With no other way forward, they walked back and gazed up at the large portrait that took up most of the wall, at least 12 feet tall. It was a painting of bamboo shoots near hills, all colored with warm tones. The frame waivered slightly, as if a breeze was gently blowing it like water.

“What a giant painting…” Panther remarked.

Fox took a step closer, peering at it. “Indeed. It bears such a bizarre texture as well. It’s as though I could simply slip inside…” He trailed off, reaching a hand out to touch the surface. The portrait pulsed, and the textures moved aside as it engulfed his limb. “Wh-What the?!” He gasped, staring at it with wide eyes.

“You OK?” Joker asked from behind him, not seeing what had happened.

Fox turned to look at him. “M-My hand...It actually entered the painting…” He whispered faintly.

Elegant walked up and lightly pushed her hand through. The textures moved, bending around her fingers. “So we can go inside...is this another pathway?” She wondered.

Mona stared up at it. “Well, I don’t see any other path for us to take. Let’s give it a try!” He suggested.
Taking a deep breath, they jumped into the painting, standing upon the painted hills. They looked down as the “grass” crunched underneath their boots. The world inside stayed as a flat surface, while they continued to exist as three dimensional. It was almost surreal and dizzying to see their surroundings.

“How dare you trample on my tranquil bamboo garden with those grimy feet!” Madarame’s voice boomed above them. “You shall not leave alive!”

Skull panicked and looked up at where the voice came from, bat in hand. “What the heck was that..?!”

Mona flexed his paws. “We’re probably just hearing Madarame’s thoughts. There’s no need to panic.” He advised, looking around at their surroundings cautiously.

“Madarame…” Fox whispered, sadness glinting in his irises before he blinked it away.

The group ran around, balancing on the flat thresholds. Once they hit the edge of the painting on the left, they ended up in another frame, now at a higher altitude. Elegant blinked in surprise. “Oh, we’re in another painting!”

Fox hummed thoughtfully and looked at the previous painting they were in. “So this space is not merely one, but a multitude of paintings.”

Skull glanced at him.”...You’re tellin’ me they’re all connected? Which one goes where?”

“That, we will have to continue walking to find out…” He replied vaguely.

Listening to the artist, Mona turned to look at his leader. “Hey Joker, can’t you spot the connections with your skills?”

Concentrating, Joker spotted entry and exit points on the edges of the paintings. “Yeah, we can get out that way.” He pointed.

Jumping the gap, they landed on the other hill, before falling out of the canvas onto a ledge.

Straightening up, Fox frowned, staring back at the painting. “So he dares call us thieves who dirty his heart...The one who has sullied the very nature of art itself has no right to accuse us of such a thing..!”

Mona gave him a warning look. “Save your emotions for later. We have to keep moving!”

Running along the edge, they spotted a ventilation shaft and crawled through. Joker at the front, followed by Skull, Fox, Mona, Elegant, and Panther at the end. “Hey, don’t go starin’ at my butt.” Skull grunted.

“What are you talking about?” Fox asked naively, coming up behind him.

“Can you guys flirt later?” Elegant scolded, blushing slightly at the mental image. Concentrate.

The six thieves traversed the narrow tunnels, emerging on top of a stack of boxes. Jumping down, they opened the locked door to their right, the shutters receding into the ceiling. Opening the door, they stopped and hid behind the wall.

In front of them was a security guard, holding a nightstick and a flashlight. Instead of the usual black uniform, this one was wearing a red one, signifying it as one of higher clearance. Behind it
was the security check in, beckoning them to access its terminal.

“H-Hey, there’s a strong-lookin’ one over there! We’ve seen that kind before…” Skull murmured, trepidation in his voice.

Fox nodded. “His stance conveys the notion that he is no ordinary foe.”

Mona waddled up front, observing the enemy. “I think the control room’s behind him. He’s probably guarding it to make sure nobody gets too close.” He concluded. “However, we’ll need to disarm the security if we want to ensure we have a safe infiltration route.”

“How about it, Joker? Should we go for it?”

“Everyone’s ready to go?” He looked at his teammates who nodded in confirmation. Flexing his hands, he ran up to the security guard, twirling his dagger.

“Step aside.” Joker commanded, his blade glinting in the warm lighting.

The guard scoffed. “You expect me to move just because you tell me to? I’m afraid you’re sorely mistaken!” Hunching over itself, black sludge covered its body, transforming into a towering warrior, seemingly made out of origami. The Bringer of Misfortune stood silently, its paper skirt fluttering in the breeze.

Running up, Joker slashed it with his dagger, cursing silently when he noticed he did no damage. “Guys! Null physical!” He yelled out.

In a flash, the Shadow struck out, knocking him down onto the ground. He grunted at the hit, already feeling a bruise forming on his face.

“Joker’s down..! Come on, you gotta hold on!” Mona yelled, watching from a vantage point.

Taking advantage of its success, it immediately attacked Panther, injuring her slightly. Holding a hand near his face, Fox called out, “Goemon!” Summoning the kabuki dancer, he sent a shard of ice at the Shadow, only doing the barest of damage.

“Jeanne!” Elegant summoned her Persona, her wintery fabrics billowing. “Kouha!” Snapping her fingers, she blasted a ray of holy light at it. “Shit!” She cursed when the bless skill had done no damage, deflecting off of its body. “I’m going to be useless for this fight, so I’ll play support!”

“Carmen!” Panther called out, the beauteous dancer behind her. “Agi!” She sent a blast of fire at it, damaging the Shadow a little more. With a groan, it attacked Fox, him wincing at the hit.

Clasping her hands together in a prayer, Elegant announced, “Media!” Healing the entire party with a spark of gold light.

Clenching his mask, Joker summoned Jack Frost, the snowman prancing in place. “Bufu!” A shard of ice shattered around the Bringer of Misfortune, and it froze, encased in an icy prison.

“I have this then!” Fox smiled coolly, running up to the towering figure. With a graceful arch of his blade, he slashed it several times before jumping into the air and bringing his sword down, slicing it in half.
With a scream, the Shadow dissipated into nothing, dropping ¥5300 and a Media skill card.

They relaxed, putting their weapons away. “Phew, that guy looked tough…” Skull sighed, running up to them. “I guess that’s just par for the course in a Palace…”

Panther nodded sullenly. “It really was on a totally different level from the other enemies though…”

Humming, Fox walked up to the pile of cash and pulled out the stiff paper. “He dropped some sort of card.” He scrutinized it, turning it back and forth.

The team crowded around it, peering at the piece of paper. “What’s this for? I’ve never seen anything like it…” Mona squinted at it.

“Ain’t it just some kinda loot? C’mon, let’s get back to explorin’.” Skull coaxed, taking a step back.

“Hold on,” Elegant interjected, taking the card. “It says “Media” on it. That’s a healing skill.” She remarked. “Can you use this somehow?” She looked at the others. “I don’t think I can since I know it already…”

Each person took a turn trying to make use of it, but to no avail. Stepping up last, Joker held the card and it shone. His eyes widened as he could instinctively feel the potential of having the power, the card resonating with the Personas who had the capacity to learn more. “I think I can use this to teach any of my Personas to use Media…” He speculated. “But only once.”

“You lucky bitch.” Skull grumbled, grinning to show he was joking. “Of course leader here gets all the cool shit.”

They laughed, ribbing Joker for being the special one. He smirked slightly, running a hand through his hair.

Moving on, they opened another treasure chest before walking into the security room, Joker slamming his hand against the button. They walked up to the only lit monitor where the screen showed a blank input bar, prompting a password.

Skull groaned. “Ugh, another one..?”

“We’ll just have to look for a guard who might know it.” Panther deducted. “Just like last time!”

Leaving the monitors, they opened another blocked door south from the security room, unlocking a shortcut from the lounge. Turning the corner, they ducked behind a wall and watched as two security guards chatted to another.

“How do they keep doing this?” Skull snickered quietly.

“I hear the intruders already got past the central garden security…” A guard stated.

“Yeah, I just got a call earlier to change the password here too…” The other guard complained.

“What to? It better not be simple.”

“Well, I was having some trouble coming up with a good one…For now, I set it to the numbers for Madarame-sama’s feet.”

“Madarame-sama’s feet? What are you talking about?”
“Let’s get back on duty. There’s a chance the intruders are nearby.” The guards walked away to patrol the halls, unaware that a group of intruders were listening to their every word.

The thieves relaxed and looked at each other, confused. “Madarame’s feet? The hell is that supposed to mean?!?” Skull questioned incredulously.

“Maybe...his shoe size?” Panther suggested hesitantly.

“Fox, do you know his size?” Elegant asked, idly grasping her arm.

Fox shook his head. “Unfortunately, I have never heard him mention it. Are we sure that is the proper password..?”

Mona tapped his chin with a paw. “Madarame’s feet...What do you think that could mean..?”

Joker exhaled. “Let’s look around. Maybe we passed by it earlier.”

They backtracked, looking for any hints of Madarame’s feet. Making it back to the lounge, Elegant stopped, staring up at the golden statue. “Oh, did we ever read the inscription for this?” She wondered. The team walked up, looking at the inscription plaque. “Here we praise our most holy lord Madarame Ichiryusai, the one ray of hope in this depraved world.” She read flatly, fighting back the urge to roll her eyes. “He stands alone as his two adept hands paint into the future. None shall ever match his excellence.”

Skull snorted. “He’s really puffin’ his chest out here, ain’t he..?”

Fox took a step closer, peering down at the inscription. “Hold on a moment...Could this be the spot of ‘Madarame’s feet’ that the security guard mentioned?”

Panther perked up. “Oh, right! But isn’t the password supposed to be a number of some kind?”

“There are numbers.” Joker tapped the plaque.

“Yes.” Fox agreed. “‘One’ ray of hope stands ‘alone’ with ‘two adept hands.’ ‘None’ shall match him...That means...”

“1120.” Elegant concluded.

Mona jumped up in glee. “Yeah, that must be it!”

Skull grinned. “Sweet! Let’s head back and shut down the security!”

Running back to the security room, Joker inputted the password into the monitor. “Password accepted...Disengaging security protocol.” The computer droned. With a start, all the shutters receded into the ceilings and the infrared lasers turned off, leaving the giant hall bare of any obstructions.

Skull gaped at the security monitors. “Whoa...That opened all sorts of stuff...”

“We’ll definitely be able to go to more places now!” Mona cheered. “Come on, let’s get moving!”

Running through the now empty hall, they passed through the small exhibit room, ambushing another curator. Tearing off the mask, the Shadow convulsed into three Onmoraki.

Elegant stepped forward, about to cast a bless skill, but Joker held out a hand. “Hold on, I want one of these.”
She nodded and stepped back for him to deal with them. Panther and Fox held up their weapons, ready to help just in case.

Holding up his 9mm, Joker shot a bullet into each corpse bird, knocking them down before rushing up to surround them with firearms. “Lend me your power.” He demanded.

“I can’t believe you’re fighting a kid like me...Pick on someone your own size!” The Onmoraki pouted, its identical copies staying silent. “You’re a big bully! Don’t you think that’s ‘immature’?” It asked, stumbling on the last word.

He furrowed his brow. “No, I don’t think so.”

The Onmoraki sighed dramatically. If it had eyes, it would have rolled them out of its sockets. “Mister, you’re not very nice. You don’t have a girlfriend, huh? It’s ‘cause girls don’t like you.”

Standing to the side, Panther choked, holding her stomach as she laughed, her grip on her TMP shaking. Joker scowled at the dig at his single status, and glared at his laughing teammate.

“Oh, yeah!” The Shadow perked up. “Hey, mister, you know when grown-ups say kids are cute? Do you think they really mean it all the time?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

It blushed. “Aw, really? You know, mister, I kinda see myself in you...Wait, what the-” It froze. “I think I remember something!” Floating up in the air, the Onmoraki let out a cry. “You know, I’m not really a Shadow! I came from the humans’ sea of souls! My real name’s Onmoraki! You and I are the same, mister!” Shining in a ball of light, it merged with Joker’s mask.

He smirked at the newest addition, still slightly irritated at being told girls don’t like him. He knew that already, he only wanted one girl to like him.

Running past the deactivated lasers, they made their way to a new Safe Room, taking a breather inside. Taking advantage of the break, Elegant sat down and began applying adhesive bandages to the last of her scratches, Panther helping out with the one on her back.

“Dude…” Skull sighed, leaning back in his chair. “I still can’t believe we went into those paintings...Palaces don’t make no sense.”

Fox raised an eyebrow, leaning against the edge of the desk. “Is that so? Paintings bear a close relation to cognitive imagery. Given this place is a world of cognition, it is only fitting that we can pass through them.”

Joker nodded, crossing his arms thoughtfully at the theory. It made sense to think that since paintings come from a person’s mind, that they would play a big role here.

Skull glanced at the artist, looking lost. “I, uh...I see…”

Experimentally stretching her now healed limbs, Elegant leaned her elbows on the table. “He means that because art comes from someone’s thoughts and feelings, then artworks would be extra special in a Palace, which is a person’s corrupted thoughts and feelings made real.” She explained patiently.

He ooh’ed in realization. “Gotcha...” He grinned at her. "I can always count on mom to clear all them fancy words for me.”
She sighed at the nickname, not bothering to tell him to stop. She may as well accept that she was a teenage mother with teenage children. With one feline looking child.

Fox tilted his head. ""Mom"? You are much too young to be a mother…"

Mona jumped on the table. "Skull only means that Elegant here mothers us a lot, especially him since he’s the real child." He snickered. "She’s nominated team mom."

Skull glared at the feline. "Shuddup! I just don’t get why you guys always gotta say stuff all fancy and shit." He pouted. "Shoulda’ just said that paintings were special to a painter."

They looked at him in surprise. "That...actually sums it up pretty nicely." Panther raised both brows, impressed.

"How is everyone doing?" Joker asked. "Elegant?"

She smiled, showing the unmarred fabric on her arm. "I’m OK now, thank you. I’ll make sure to be more careful."

The others nodded, showing they were good to go. Leaving the Safe Room, they opened the next door, walking out onto a terrace. In the hall below and extending all over the walls was a conglomerate of paintings, elevated platforms surrounding the frames as if they were being renovated.

"Huh. More big paintings just like the ones we saw before…" Skull remarked, squinting his eyes while staring out from the veranda.

Fox furrowed his brow, observing the artworks. "There is something off about these though…"

"Why don’t we go take a closer look?" Panther suggested, gesturing down the balcony.

Smashing a nearby statuette, they ran down the terrace, opening the door to jump on a platform in front of a painting. It was a depiction of a desert, three camels traversing the rough sands.

"Ain’t this just like last time?" Skull questioned. "Y’know, with the secret passage inside and everything."

"Hm…" Panther crossed her arms. "It looks like these ones are all completely different."

"Look," Elegant pointed to the top two frames on the other side of the hall. "Those are empty, and one of them is the closest to the door over there." Her finger moved to the other side of the hall where a door was.

“That is strange, but we don’t have a choice. Let’s go, Joker." Mona looked up at their leader who nodded.

Tensing their legs, they jumped into the portrait, the sensation as if they splashed through water before landing on the dry sands. "Alas, this world is a desert filled with laymen who cannot understand true beauty!..!" Madarame’s voice echoed from above. "The slow drain of my skill is inevitable when I am surrounded by such mediocrity…"

Elegant rolled her eyes. "Way to blame everyone else for his own faults."

Skull tsk’ed. "That bastard never had any real talent to begin with!"

They ran to the right side of the painting, avoiding the statuesque camels. Leaving the frame, they
ended up in a cloudy sky, a large Torii* erected in front of Mt. Fuji. They slowly walked forward, wading through the fast moving mist.

“The gods, even in their dormancy, are worshipped constantly.” Madarame spoke. “People gather under shrine gates, offer their money, and return home fully satisfied. Art is practically the same. In the end, it is all just a matter of imagination...”

Panther scrunched up her face in disbelief. “Huh?! Even if that’s true, that doesn’t give you the right to be deceiving people!”

Joker scoffed. “He wants to be worshiped like a god when his art isn’t even his…”

They moved on to the right, passing the gate, and ended up back in the desert. “Wait, this camel…” Skull took a step back. “We’re back at the first freakin’ one!”

Mona surveyed their flat surroundings, ignoring the fake sand. “So they’re not connected exactly as they seem...We’ll have to keep trying until we find the right way.”

They ran to the right again, ending back at Mt. Fuji. This time, they entered the Torii, finding themselves inside a grotto filled with greenery, sunlight shining softly through the opening.

“Hard work is not what makes a sapling grow thick with green leaves.” Madarame lectured. “Too many young people do not see the true value in youth these days. What fools…” He chuckled. “Is it truly wrong for an expert such as myself to capitalize on that youth before it wastes away?”

Mona scowled. “What the heck? He’s basically saying he’s jealous of young talent…Look at me!” He gestured to himself. “I was turned into a cat, but I’m still fighting. Age isn’t a valid excuse.”

Elegant clenched her hands. “He’d rather take children’s talents for himself than help them succeed. How selfish…” She murmured bitterly. “If he had morals, he would’ve known they would credit him in the end for helping them.”

Fox sighed next to her. “Indeed...we all would have been glad to have credited him later on in life, should our careers have succeeded.”

Walking a little further to the right, they jumped out of the portrait and onto a construction platform, a giant red button situated on a machine. Joker slammed his hand on it, and one of the empty canvases shuttered like a TV screen, a painting occupying the previous blank space.

“Look! Another painting!” Skull pointed at it.

“So passing through one hidden route leads to the formation of another…” Fox mused. “What an elaborate ruse. It’s highly likely there is a new path through the paintings. We should investigate, Joker.”

Joker nodded. “Got it. I saw another path in this painting,” He gestured his thumb at the grotto. “So let’s check that out.”

They jumped back into the painting, climbing up the small cliff face. They ended up back in the desert.

“That path might’ve lead to the blank canvas.” Elegant theorized. “Let’s try the shrine path from earlier?”

The thieves ran to the edge of the painting, ending up at Mt. Fuji again. They ran to the right again,
falling onto a small fishing boat in the middle of a torrential ocean, tentacles reaching up on the other side of the raft. The rain poured from the sky, the two dimensional paper drops sliding off their shoulders.

“Could a ship skirt across the ocean if its crew had to constantly worry about what sea life may lie below?” Madarama questioned. “Art, life, water...They are all identical. The one who ascends to the summit is the victor!”

Skull grimaced. “So he’s usin’ all those pretty words, but he’s basically sayin’ people are like steppin’ stones.” He glowered. “That’s just like what he did to all those kids- crushed ’em for his “art”! What a piece of shit!”

Avoiding the giant octopus, they jumped down and out of the painting, landing on a higher platform. To their left was another red button, which Joker activated.

The sound of static fizzed, and the last blank canvas filled in with a new painting. “Ah, there are no longer any empty frames at this point.” Fox remarked.

“Which means we can reach the other side.” Elegant concluded.

“Probably in the grotto then.” Joker stated, jumping off the platform onto the lower one, diving into the desert again.

Arriving at the grotto, they jumped up onto the cliff face, finding themselves in the new painting. It was a traditional Japanese veranda, with a view of the rock garden in the distance, maple leaves falling in the background.

“Beauty is merely a mirage...Transforming that into money is what brings true happiness.”

Madarama explained. “My fine mansion, my lifestyle among the chosen few...Those things are the true “art”!”

His lips twisted bitterly, and Fox looked down. “So running your atelier out of a shabby, run-down shack was simply an act after all…” He slowly shook his head. “How foolish I was to have been deceived for so long…”

Panther glanced at him morosely. “Fox…”

Focusing on the task at hand, they ran to the other side of the portrait before jumping out, right next to a door. “Sweet, this has gotta be the end!” Skull grinned.

“How despicable…” Fox whispered. They all turned to look at him. “We have encountered so many of his paintings, yet not once did he mention a love for art. These are no “paintings”…” He clenched his gloved hands. “They are just meaningless self-assertions placed into picture frames..!”

Elegant nodded in agreement. “Maybe he loved art when he began, but now…” She exhaled. “I wonder how he’ll be after we steal his Treasure. Would he go back to being a genuine artist?”

Mona shook his head. “We won’t know unless we change his heart. Now, let’s hurry!” He gestured to the door.

Chapter End Notes
- Torii are the giant red gates in Japan. They're used as gateways from regular land to sacred land.
Chapter 80

Chapter Notes

I saw clips of the PERSONA P-BOMB concert that happened yesterday and I'm so sad I couldn't go -cries- They had dancers dressed up as P3, P4, and P5 characters, and they even got Lyn and DJ Waka to perform!! A lot of my Japanese twitter friends went and I'm so jelly...

COUGH anyway, long chapter today!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They opened a door and ran down the hallway, ending up at another exhibition room. Ambushing the Shadows that patrolled the hall, they quickly cleared the way. “Easier than cleaning my brushes.” Fox adjusted his gloves with a slight smirk.

Opening a treasure chest on a pedestal, they ran down another hallway that sloped, stopping at yet another exhibit hall. Clearing the room of Shadows, they checked the bathrooms for any treasure, killing a curator as well. “Again with the bathrooms…” Panther sighed sullenly, Elegant smiling sheepishly next to her.

Leaving the restrooms, they opened the next door and ran through the passageway, stopping at the end. “Shit...What the hell is up with this place?!?” Skull covered his eyes with a hand, squinting hard to see.

The entire room, if it could be called that, was akin to a labyrinth. Staircases lead everywhere and nowhere, upside down and sideways, with rice paper partitions floating in the air. Everything was colored gold, with the occasional portrait of former apprentices hung haphazardly on the walls. It seemed to exist in a white void, the light shining onto the reflective surfaces to blind them with its gaudiness.

Panther winced, trying to keep her eyes open. “There’s so much gold…!”

“It’s hurting my eyes…” Joker blinked rapidly, adjusting himself to the harsh glare.

“The distortion is especially bad here...It’s barely holding up.” Mona grimaced at their surroundings. “Plus, it’s not even on our map…”

Fox grasped his chin. “So we must ascertain the truth through our eyes alone…”

Elegant took a step forward, the light not bothering her in the slightest. Must be because of being bless skilled. “Let’s be careful to not fall off…” She peered down the side, seeing it fade into the light. “I don’t think there’s a bottom…”

The staircase in front of them cut off to nowhere, so they went to the right, smashing a statuette. Jumping down onto another bridge, they ran up the stairs and jumped onto another catwalk, opening a treasure chest. They ambushed the lone security guard and took a sharp left, entering a blue doorway.

Taking a step out, they looked around, now in a different part of the labyrinth. “Whoa! Did we just
warp?!” Skull yelped, looking back at the door they came out of.

“It seems even the path beyond these apertures are distorted in the same way as this room…” Fox remarked calmly.

Running down the stairs, they entered another blue doorway, teleporting to a lower portion. Standing at the crossway were two canvases of “Sayuri,” one in blue and one in red.

Panther blinked. “Huh…? Why is this painting here..?”

“It’s probably some kind of illusion. We’re in a Palace, after all.” Mona theorized, waddling up to one of them. “Well, I guess the painting itself might be correct though.”

Elegant glanced down at him. “Aren’t they all counterfeit? But I wonder if the one we saw in that room was actually the real one…” She peered at the two paintings. “Why is it here though? We haven’t seen any “Sayuri” on the way here. Does it have something to do with this room?”

“Most likely.” Mona confirmed. “It has to be connected in some way. Joker?”

Their leader walked up and scrutinized the paintings. Why would they be here..? “Let’s leave them for now.” He pointed in front of them toward another doorway. “There’s another door there.”

Climbing the ledges, they entered the blue doorway and found their surroundings too familiar as if they had come through here before. “W-Wait…” Panther began slowly, looking around the bright void and golden stairs with an unsure expression. “Are we...back where we started from?”

Fox exhaled. “It seems this is a trick after all...He would not let us proceed that easily…”

They walked back down to the platform with the two paintings and Joker walked up to one of them. ‘This painting...Is it the “Sayuri”? ’ He tapped the edge of the canvas with a thoughtful finger.

Panther furrowed her brow. “Isn’t that a fake? I mean, this is Madarame’s Palace…”

“There is an obvious difference if you look closely." Fox explained patiently. "It shouldn’t be too difficult to tell them apart.”

“Yeah, maybe it’s obvious for you…” Skull muttered before turning to his leader. “What do you think, Joker?”

Joker nodded. “This is the one. I remember it being red.”

Fox smiled satisfactorily. “That is correct. It seems you have quite the eye for detail, Joker.”

Skull blinked. “For real..? That’s amazin’…”

“The vibrant crimson clothes, her beautiful hair, the sublime balance between subject and background…” Fox described admiringly, smiling fondly at the painting. “This may only be an illusion, but it is without a doubt a spitting image of the true “Sayuri.””

At that, the painting glowed, condensing into a ball of light. It flew to the gate they tried earlier, the blue turning into a golden hue.

“Did that open the way..?” Elegant wondered. “We should go check it out.”

Climbing the ledges again, they entered the golden doorway and appeared at a different platform at
what they assume was a higher altitude. Four more portraits of Sayuri were lined up, each of them appearing slightly different from one another.

Panther smiled hopefully. “Oh, isn’t this somewhere new?!”

“Seeing past the false image has opened a path to the truth…” Fox mused thoughtfully. “Hm, this golden place filled with counterfeit work is a prime example of the alchemy of Madarame’s brain. And here, just as in reality, he entraps those who cannot see through his lying facade…”

Mona nodded in agreement. “You might be right...No wonder the distortion is so strong here.”

Skull glanced at Elegant. “Hey, so...what does that mean?”

Elegant turned toward him. “It means we have to find the real “Sayuri” because Madarame has lied so much about it.” She explained. “When we do, it should open the next path for us to take.”

“Gotcha...” Skull nodded his head in understanding. “So do we just gotta check all of ‘em?”

Panther gave him an odd look. “Why would we do that..? Let’s just look for the real one.” She looked back at the portraits and grimaced. “Assuming we can differentiate it…”

They walked up to the canvases, peering at each one and comparing them. Fox took a step back, letting them work it out on their own.

“We know her shirt is red…” Elegant reminded. “And there’s a cherry tree branch behind her.”

Joker scanned each one, before stopping at the third one. “This one.” He tapped the top of the canvas.

Fox smiled. “Yes, this is the true “Sayuri.” It may be an illusion, but there can be no mistaking its allure. Nicely done, Joker.”

Like the first one, the portrait compressed into a ball of light and flew into the blue door next to them, changing it into a golden hue.

Entering the new doorway, they appeared onto a catwalk with several depictions of “Sayuri,” in blue, red, with or without branches, and so on. Passing by the first four with but a glance, they climbed up the ledge with yet another two canvases.

They ignored these as well and continued, jumping down onto a different staircase that also housed a doorway. The two paintings here were the closest to the original, as far as they could see. Fox took a step back, letting his leader decide.

Joker furrowed his brow at the two canvases in front of him. They looked identical to him. He glanced at his other teammates who watched him expectantly, waiting for him to choose. ‘Fuck…’ He cursed mentally. This might turn out to be another roadblock if he wasn’t careful.

Taking a deep breath, he further analyzed the paintings, making note of the exact same branches, exact same moon, exact same woman. The only thing different was her hair length, one had her ponytail behind her and the other had it hanging over her shoulder.

“This one.” He chose the latter.

Fox nodded with a smile. “Yes, this is the true “Sayuri.” Nicely done, Joker.”

Glowing, the portrait transformed into a ball of light, flying downward passed them and into the
white abyss.

“Huh...?” Skull leaned over the edge with a frown. “Where the shit did it fly off to?!”

They peered over the edge, trying to make out where it went in the sea of golden light. Panther sighed and shrugged. “We’ll just have to go through the door…”

Stepping through the blue doorway, they were transported back to the first crosswalk. “Argghhh, goddammit!” Skull furiously rubbed his head with a scowl. “What the hell’s goin’ on here?!”

Fox looked around. “We have seen all of the false images. Something must have changed somewhere…”

They ran down the steps and turned the corner. The doorway farthest from them was now gold, but they knew from memory that it used to be blue. Entering it, they were transported to an entirely new section of the labyrinth that they had never seen before.

“The distortion is growing much stronger the deeper we go…” Mona remarked, a frown on his round face. “Let’s be careful.”

They ran down the steps to their right and opened the treasure chest before going into a new hallway. The walls were all lined with Madarame’s banners, his face smirking at them as if he knew he was better.

They opened the door at the very end, emerging in a large hall. Fox gasped when his eyes caught sight of what was in front of them. “A-Ah, that is…!”

Several meters before them was the Treasure in all its hazy glory, guarded with several infrared lasers that boxed it in the center of the room. Madarame stood in front of it, his hands in his sleeves and his golden eyes watching for any approaching intruders.

Fox growled, his gloves squeaking from how hard he clenched his hands. “Just as I expected...Madarame!”

“Then is the Treasure behind him?” Panther asked, glancing behind the artist.

“It’s kinda hard to tell from here. Let’s get a closer look!” Skull suggested.

They sneaked around the hall and hid behind a corner, watching the Palace ruler. “There it is…” Mona confirmed, gesturing to the Treasure.

Panther blinked, peering closer at the entrapped orb. “Doesn’t it look a bit hazy?”

“We haven’t sent a calling card yet.” Elegant reminded quietly.

Mona nodded in agreement and turned to the dominatrix. “Once we send the card and make Madarame aware it’ll be stolen, it’ll materialize like “Yoohoo!”” He snickered.

“I wonder what form it will take…” Fox mused quietly.


Pursing his lips, the artist slowly shook his head at the thought. “The source of what distorted Madarame’s reality this much…”

Skull turned to the others. “So, what now? Think it’s safe to say we got our route set?”
Joker shook his head. “No, it’s too risky going in from here.”

Skull gave him a confused look. “Huh? Why’s that?”

Fox crossed his arms. “You must be talking about the infrared lasers surrounding it.”

“That, and the outer perimeter is swarming with guards.” Mona added. “Forcing our way through will be difficult.”

Panther sighed. “So we’ll need to find a way to steal it too...This is tougher than it was with Kamoshida…”

They took off to the left hallway, stopping to check in at a Safe Room. Taking a breather, they sat in some of the chairs lying around. “Well, at least now we’ve figured out how big the Palace is.” Panther piped up optimistically.

“But he’s guardin’ the Treasure real tight…” Skull grumbled, slouching in his seat.

Mona nodded, slumping on the table. “Yeah. Unlike with Kamoshida, the security this time is quite severe...We can’t really say we’ve secured a route until we manage to find a way to break through it…”

Elegant huffed in amusement. “True, but we’re Phantom Thieves. We’ve deactivated the other lasers, I think we can do that for this one, too.”

Fox nodded in agreement, leaning against the side of the table. “We should investigate the layout of the area and find the security terminal that controls it.”

Joker exhaled. “All right. How is everyone doing?”

Panther grinned. “I think we’re all good to go!” The others nodded as well.

Exiting the safe room, they ran straight ahead, ending up at a security room. “That was fast.” Elegant smiled triumphantly.

Skull looked around the empty terminals. “Think we can turn them lasers off here?!” They walked up to the only lit monitor in the room. “Hey, we don’t need a password for this one! Whaddya wanna do?” He looked at Joker.

Gray eyes surveyed the options available shown on the screen and Joker pursed his lips. “Let’s open the shutters.” He clicked on the last option. They watched through the security feed as every shutter slowly rose up with none of the guards noticing.

Mona smirked. “Now there are more places to explore.”

“Let’s try the other options, too.” Panther suggested.

Clicking on the option to shut down the main power, all the lights turned off, leaving the hall outside in a blanket of darkness.

Madarame looked around in alarm, the security lasers behind him still active. “Wh-What is the
meaning of this?!”

“I-I am not sure! It seems we have lost power…” A security guard stammered. “The backup generators should bring it up in no time!”

Just as they said that, the lights switched on as if nothing had happened.

“What a nasty surprise…” Madarame muttered, placing his hands inside his sleeves as he narrowed his eyes. “Hm...Could this also be...? Hey, someone!”

“Tch.” Skull frowned as they watched through the one-way windows. “It came back on pretty damn fast…”

Fox sighed. “Yes, and the infrared lasers remained active even during the power outage.” He held a hand to his temple, shaking his head.

“So we’ll only be able to turn the power off in there for a few seconds.” Mona concluded.

Panther froze when a thought hit her. “Wait a second...Aren’t those guards that just ran out headed this way?!”

Elegant bit her lip and glanced toward the glass doors. “Let’s try the last option before that guard comes in here to chase us out.”

Joker nodded, clicking on the last option available. They stared out the window, watching as the lasers stayed on. “Huh? Nothing happen…” Skull scrunched his brow.

“Error!” The computer blared. “Only Madarame-sama can access this terminal due to maximum security protocol!”

The pirate glared at the screen in outrage. “The heck? There was no point in even comin’ here then...!”

Fox crossed his arms. “Hm, it seems disabling the infrared lasers is not within the realm of possibility for us…”

Joker sighed. “All right, we’ll have to find another way-”

The door slid open, a security guard barging through. “Hm?! So, you’re the ones who tampered with the electricity!” In a flash of black liquid, it convulsed and turned into three Makami, the dog spirits floating in the air.

Skull cursed, taking a step back. “Crap, we got company!”

Elegant summoned and spun her scythe in her hand. “Let’s take care of him before he alerts Madarame!”

Fox summoned Goemon and launched an ice attack at one, the frozen shards injuring its fur. Joker high-fived him and followed up with several slashes with his dagger, every cut wearing the Shadow down.
"Captain Kidd!" Skull shouted, the undead pirate appearing behind him. "Zio!" He sent a flash of lightning at one, knocking it down. Taking advantage of the extra time, he sent another Zio at it and killed it.

Howling, the last Makami used Mafrei, blue wisps of nuclear energy burning the thieves. They winced, with the exception of Elegant who twitched at the attack.

Kneeling down on one knee, the noblewoman raised her sniper rifle and knocked it down with a bullet. Putting her firearm away, she initiated the all out, and the thieves attacked it several times. Landing, she pirouetted once before curtseying. "Rest in peace." She smiled serenely as it burst into nothing.

In its place was ¥1542, which Joker pocketed. They put away their weapons and relaxed now that the room was clear once more of any enemies. Panther sighed in relief and dusted off her skin tight suit. "Phew, that was a surprise."

“All we really managed to do was open the shutters…” Skull grumbled, resting his thumbs in his pockets.

“On top of that," Fox continued after him. "We can only turn the lights off briefly, while the lasers remain unaffected."

Joker sighed. “Let’s check out what the shutters opened. Maybe it’ll lead to a different path to the Treasure.”

They left the security room and ran down the hall, turning the corner back to the entranceway. Taking the right hallway this time that was now open to them, they slowly ascended up. Ambushing Shadows along the way, they opened a treasure chest and continued up, the pathway circling around the Treasure room. At the end of the hall was another Safe Room as well as another door, and they marked the Safe Room down in the app.

Opening the last door, they peeked in before properly entering the room. It was some sort of technical closet filled with CPUs and monitors. Ropes and levies decorated the ceilings, along with a small corridor in the wall that was accessed by a ladder.

“Is this some kinda security room too?” Skull asked, glancing around at the technology.

Fox shook his head. “No, it is most likely where all the mechanisms in the exhibition hall are controlled from. Given the number of hanging works, it would make sense to have a room dedicated to controlling them.”

Panther stared at him in surprise. “The observational skills of an artist are out of this world…”

Elegant smiled, taking another step into the room. “I’m sure he’s seen stuff like this before, right Fox?”

He nodded. “I’ve had to help Madarame with a number of his exhibits, and I’ve witnessed the behind the scenes of each and every set up.”

They walked further into the room, examining everything. None of the computers were on, but there was a lever for a steel wire coil. Joker walked up to it, eyes tracing where the wire led to.

“Hm? Do you think this moves the wires for all the hanging art..?” Mona asked, waddling up to him.
Panther grinned. “It looks like Fox’s deduction was on point!”

Following the wire, they jumped up onto the alcove, walking onto the scaffolding among the lights and vents right above the Treasure room. Jumping onto the next scaffold, they peered down from their positions. “Hey, ain’t this right above the Treasure?” Skull whispered.

“Oh, look! There aren’t any lasers above it!” Panther pointed out. The top of the infrared cage was left bare, with no danger of tripping any of the alarms.

Fox furrowed his brow. “This is quite a large hole in their security...but what do we do? Jump down to retrieve it?”

Mona shook his head. “We wouldn’t be able to get out if we did that though. Look up.”

The thieves looked up, noticing a large hook situated on steel wire hanging in the air. “A crane with a hook…” Fox marveled.

They dove back into the tech room and walked up to the lever. “Joker, give it a try.” Mona urged.

He nodded, pulling the lever down. They watched as the hook descended lower and lower...and lower.

“Wait, stop!” Elegant quickly patted his arm in panic. “We don’t want Madarame to notice!”

Eyes widening, Joker quickly flipped the switch back up, the hook ascending back into place. They let out a sigh of relief from the close call.

Mona crossed his paws, ideas running through his head. “Hmm, this could be useful…”

Fox tilted his head. “Do you plan on descending on that hook? Would they not spot you the moment you were lowered down?”

The feline grinned. “No...Not necessarily. There’s something I can do to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

Joker raised an eyebrow. “Use the darkness?”

Mona nodded cheerfully at his leader’s deduction.

“Oh, right…” Panther gasped in realization. “We were able to turn the lights off over in that other control room!”

Elegant idly grasped her arm. “Is that enough time though?” She bit her lip worriedly. “It only turned off for maybe ten seconds at most.”

“Yes, and there would not be enough time to make it all the way here.” Fox added regretfully.

“That’s why we’re going to split up the tasks and work together to pull off this heist!” Mona smiled. “One person will shut the power off here, one person will lower the crane, and I’ll grab the Treasure!”

Skull narrowed his eyes skeptically. “You sure that’s gonna work? Seems to me like they’d realize what’s going on at some point.”

The feline huffed. “Sometimes bold moves have the greatest payout. Unless someone has a better idea?”
Joker nodded in acquiesce. “Sounds good to me. Who wants to be distraction and who wants to pull the lever?”

Panther crossed her arms. “I think you should pull it since you’re the leader. Skull and I could be the distraction since he’s so loud.”

Said thief gave her a dirty look, but shrugged. “Yeah awright. Plus, I can lead the Shadows away by runnin’.” He boasted with a smirk. "No one's better than me."

Fox nodded. “I can signal between you and Joker. I suppose Elegant can tie Mona to the hook?” He looked over at her.

Elegant smiled and nodded. “Sure, leave it to me.”

“All right, it’s settled.” Mona stated firmly, tail standing up. “Our infiltration route is secured! It’s time for the calling card!”

They all nodded in confirmation. Leaving the tech room, they entered the Safe Room right next door and used the app to teleport to the Palace entrance. The parking lot was bare of any souls, Shadow or human, leaving only a few cars to occupy the spots.

“Well,” Skull rolled his shoulder. “I’m still kinda worried...but we gotta do this.”

Fox pursed his lips. “I cannot even begin to fathom what Madarame’s Treasure may be…”

Panther gave him an encouraging smile. “Either way, we’ll steal it for sure. Oh,” She perked up. “And you all did great today!”

Elegant nodded in agreement. “Yes, especially since this was your first time, Fox.” She beamed. "You did really well!"

Fox inclined his head. “Thank you for your kind words. I will continue to do my best as the newest thief, “mom.””

She sweatdropped. “Please don’t…” She argued weakly. “I have too many children already.”

Panther blew a raspberry at her. “Really feeling the love, mom.”

Fox tilted his head. “Then, perhaps “Nee-san”? If being called “mom” from me makes you uncomfortable…It seems to be a group tradition to call you a fond nickname, and I wish to participate as well.”

Elegant blinked in surprise. “Oh, well...if you want to!” She smiled, feeling a bit of fondness for the quirky artist. Being called mom by the others was a little weird, but she knew Skull and Panther long enough that it seemed all right. For Mona, he was so cute that she’d allow it from him. Being called it by their newest member was too awkward, since he seemed too mature to need a mother.

Being called sister though? It reminded her of the younger kids who looked to her for support. It was nice to know Fox would want to regard her in the same way. “I’m honored you would call me sister, but I’m not sure if I’m older. Are you younger than me?”

He tilted his head. “My date of birth is January 28th.”

She sweatdropped. "Then I'm younger than you. My birthday is on April 16th."

Fox hummed. "I see...Would you mind if I still called you "Nee-san"? I don't feel it is appropriate
The two continued chatting as the group left the Metaverse and into an empty corner in Shibuya station, their clothes melting into their school uniforms.

Akira glanced at the two as they were immersed in their conversation, Ann occasionally joining in, and felt a stab of jealousy in his stomach. Had she ever paid him that much attention?

Shouldering his bag with Morgana inside, he turned to his friends. “Should we go home for the day?”

Everyone nodded. “Thank you once again, Akira-san.” Yusuke inclined his head. “As the leader, I’m grateful you allowed me to join, giving me a chance to change my old mentor’s heart.”

Rubbing the back of his neck, Akira quirked his lips. Even if he was jealous, he wouldn’t take it out on the poor artist. “It’s no problem. We’re glad to have you with us.”

Nodding, Yusuke bowed slightly and left the station, heading home for the day.

Ryuji yawned, stretching his arms into the air. “I’m gonna go home and crash. It’s been a long day…Oh!” He perked up, a grin overtaking his face. “I gotta show Ma my exam grades! She’d freak!”

Airi clapped her hands together and smiled. “Tell us how it goes! Sakamoto-san’s been doing OK, right?”

Scrunching up his face, Ryuji shook his hand back and forth. “I guess. She’s been busy with work since…well,” He rubbed the back of his head uncomfortably. “Since dad left a couple years ago, so…I mean, we’re good with just us. Better now that he’s gone, the prick.”

Ann widened her eyes. “He left…? Ryuji, did he…” She trailed off, furrowing her brow. Did she know nothing about her middle school classmate, now fellow thief and friend? How much of him did she get wrong, or didn’t bother to learn..?

Ryuji slumped. “If you’re askin’ if he beat me…then yeah.” He avoided looking in her direction, clenching his fists. “He yelled at Ma, too…I was fuckin’ ecstatic to see all his shit was gone one mornin’. Ma cried, but I know she’s better without him.” He sighed heavily. “She’s been workin’ hard to support us, and her health is good, so…yeah. Can’t say it’s bad.”

Akira frowned slightly, and placed a hand on his shoulder. “If you need anything, let us know.” He stated quietly. Their home lives may not be ideal, but they had each other’s backs.

Airi grabbed a clenched fist, enveloping it with hers. “Akira’s right, Ryuji.” She smiled gently. “We’re family, right? If Sakamoto-san needs any help too with cooking or anything, you can call me.”

Lips twisting into a scowl, Ann stomped forward and grabbed the front of his lapel, gripping the uniform blazer in a fist.

They stared at her in shock. “Hey!” Ryuji yelped, tugging her wrist. “I only have one jacket-”
“You’re not letting him win, Ryuji!” She shouted, glaring determinedly. Stunned, he gaped at her outburst. “You’re a strong guy, and your mom’s even stronger for putting up with you, so…!” She bit her lip and looked away, a slight hue in her cheeks at her actions. She let go of his blazer, turned away and crossed her arms. “You’ve got us!” She hmphed. “We’re the Phantom Thie-”

A hand covered her mouth. Airi sweatdropped, glancing around to see if anyone heard. “Not so loud, Ann.” She took back her hand.

“Right.” Ann smiled sheepishly. “Well, anyway…yeah.” She kept her head down, her bangs shadowing her eyes. “You’ve got us, so…I’llsee youguystomorrowbye!” She walked away in a hurry, not looking back.

They watched her leave with sweatdrops. “…What the hell was she on?” Ryuji grumbled, dusting off his uniform. “Did the Palace vibes start screwin’ with her brain?”

Akira snorted. “I’m pretty sure she was herself. Nothing Ann-usual.” He snickered at his own joke.

Airi groaned at the terrible pun, covering her eyes even though her lips twitched into a smile. “This is our leader…”

Ryuji deadpanned, smacking Akira on the shoulder. “Dude…” He sighed, resting his thumbs in his pockets. “I got what she was sayin’ though…” He smirked lightly. “I didn’t think I’d ever hear Ann of all people say shit like that to me…” He yawned again, tears in the corners of his eyes. “I’m goin’ home…” He waved to the two as he walked to his train.

Wincing at the hit, Akira waved back and adjusted his bag. “Let’s go home?” He turned to Airi.

She nodded, and they walked to their line. It was late enough in the day that there were available seats on the train, and they sat down with a sigh. “We infiltrated another Palace..” She whispered, smiling tiredly. “I can’t believe how much progress we’ve made already.”

He nodded in agreement, the train rumbling as it began its journey. “Yeah. We were just normal high school students, and now we’re taking down corrupt adults.” He smirked lightly. “How many teenagers can say they’ve taken down a rapist and soon an abusive artist?”

Airi beamed, feeling pride at their actions as a team. “We’ve even gained a new member, and he’s not even from our school.” She hugged her bag closer. “Kosei High School, huh…”

His smirk fell into a grimace. “You…sound like you want to transfer there.” He looked away. “You two really clicked, huh.”

Airi scrunched up her face. “What? No…Even if I wanted to, I’m at Shujin on scholarship. Kosei only gives scholarships to their arts division, as Yusuke-kun told me earlier. He…” She bit her lip. “He reminds me of the younger kids…”

Akira glanced at her curiously. “Scholarship?”

She exhaled, leaning back in her seat. “Shujin granted me a scholarship when I applied. It pays for all my school expenses, uniforms, and school trips as long as I keep up my grades and volunteer. It’s not like I really had the money to attend otherwise.” She smiled wryly. “I know Ryuji got in with a track scholarship, but now that the team’s gone…I guess Sakamoto-san is paying out of pocket.”

Her face fell. “I’ve been so busy with my own problems that I’ve neglected both him and Ann…I didn’t even notice Kamoshida’s actions until I realized Yuuki-kun kept getting more and more
“bruises…” She gripped her bag tighter, sighing. “Maybe I’ll pay Sakamoto-san a visit, help her out a little…” So much had happened, so many people hurt, all because she never paid close enough attention to the people who were supposed to be the closest to her.

Slouching in his seat, Akira lightly hugged his bag to his torso, conscious of the napping feline inside. “I didn’t even know there were scholarships…” He admitted quietly. “Who’s paying for me then…?” He grimaced and shook his head. His father. “Whatever. You were saying Yusuke was like one of the younger kids? From the orphanage I guess?”

She smiled. “As long as you’re getting an education, I don’t think it matters who’s paying for you. And yeah.” She looked down shyly. “I miss those kids a lot from the sanctuary. The first one was a blur of bad memories, with all the...yeah.”

Her lips tightened. Don’t think about it. “But...I can admit I was kind of happy being surrounded by kids who looked up to me for support, even if we didn’t have much.” She covered her mouth as she yawned. “Yusuke-kun just reminds me a lot of them. He knows what he’s doing regarding art, but clueless about anything else, especially social interactions.” She blushed slightly. “It’s cute.”

Akira pursed his lips, another stab of jealousy at his heart. “Cute, huh..?” He muttered. At least she didn't say the artist was handsome, but that didn't really reassure him.

Airi nodded happily, not noticing his spiraling mood. “Yeah, like a little brother! He called me “Nee-san” earlier. I think…” She ducked her head. “He hasn’t had any mother figures in his life, one that he could remember at least.” She smiled softly. "He’s a bit too mature to be calling me mom, but I could be a big sister even though he's older.”

He blinked, the flames of jealousy going down. That made sense. “Oh. Well,” He rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. “He seems to look to you for guidance, other than me and Morgana. I guess he could be like a little brother for you…”

“This is Yongenjaya. I repeat, this is Yongenjaya. The time is now 6:57PM, the next stop is…”

Getting up from their seats, they stepped out of the train and up the stairs, leaving the station. “Are we sending the calling card soon?” Airi asked as they turned the corner.

Akira nodded. “Yeah, we’ll meet up maybe tomorrow after school to talk about it.”

She hummed as she checked her phone. “OK. Let me know so I can move my schedule around.” She grimaced. "I’ve missed a lot of work this week…” She was going to be behind on her savings.

He gave her an apologetic look, guilty of taking up her time. “Sorry...I know you need the money. We’ll finish this as soon as possible.”

Airi waved him away with a smile. “Don’t worry about it. I have some savings.” They stopped at the alley leading into Leblanc. “I’ll see you tomorrow?”

He nodded with a smile, waving bye. Walking into the cafe, he felt Morgana shift in his bag. Bowing to his guardian, he quickly walked upstairs to his room, letting the feline out. His phone rang out once he took a seat on the couch.

An: All we have to do is send the calling card to Madarame.
R: All right! It’s finally time!
R: Now all we gotta do is decide when we’re gonna do it.
An: Shouldn’t we talk to Yusuke about that first?
R: Uhh, why?
Ai: Oh, you’re right. I was about to jump the gun too.
Ai: I feel bad for forgetting.
An: Slow down, Airi.
An: Madarame was his teacher.
An: It’s not our place to be deciding something like this.
R: Oh yeah…
Ak: Let’s talk to Yusuke.
Ak: We have his contact info.
R: Yeah, this problem’s bigger than the four of us.

-Added Kitagawa Yusuke to the chat-

R: Hey man. When do you wanna send the calling card?
Y: Oh. Hello. I was not expecting a group chat.
Y: If it’s all right with all of you, as soon as tomorrow would be ideal.
Y: I had returned home to see Madarame had been on the phone with a lawyer.
Ai: Oh no.
Ak: Let’s meet at the hideout tomorrow.
Y: Understood.
R: Gotcha.
An: Right!
Ai: OK!

He put his phone away with a sigh. Looks like they were going in soon. He should go to the good doctor for a supply run. He pursed his lips. ‘I should let Airi know, too.’

Morgana jumped up next to him on the couch, curling up in his spot. “I…” He began quietly. “I had no idea that Ryuji had such a sad home life.”

Akira glanced down at him, letting him speak. He thought the feline had been asleep when the ex-runner had revealed his home life.

Ears slumped against his scalp, the feline exhaled. “Mom was right. I shouldn’t be so harsh on him, even if he is dumb and rash.”

Smiling slightly, the bespectacled teen patted his ears. “I don’t think anyone would think of Ryuji as having a sad home life…As long as he’s going to keep moving forward, I think he’ll be OK.” He explained quietly before furrowing his brow. “…When’d you start referring to Airi as “mom”? Didn’t you call her “Lady”?”

Morgana blushed, hiding his face with his tail. “…I called her “Lady” Airi because I thought of her as such.” He pouted. “Just like Lady Ann, Airi has a certain grace and beauty to her. But…” An eye peeked out at him. “You’ve been getting pretty cozy.” He accused teasingly.

His cheeks heated up and Akira coughed, looking away. S-So what if he was? Was it a crime to want to spend time with someone who treated him so nicely? Who was also really pretty...

“After observing your interactions,” Morgana continued. "I decided I should let you have a chance. She treats me more like her child anyway. There’s still her for me.” His tail swished back and forth. “…I told you, I don’t remember anything before Kamoshida’s Palace. I don’t know where
I’m from, I don’t know if I’m human…” His ears drooped. “…I don’t know if I ever had parents.” He exhaled, letting his chin rest against the plush couch. “Airi feeds me, she shows me affection, she cares for me…She’s the closest thing I have to a mother right now.”

Smiling softly, Akira gently picked up the feline and placed him in his lap, lightly running a hand through his sleek fur. “I think she’ll be really happy to hear that. Does that make me the dad?” He joked.

Morgana stilled, and turned to give him a glare. “As if! I’m more mature and experienced than you! I’m mentoring you in the phantom thief ways, and your adviser to boot. You should be calling me father, not that I want you to.” He huffed. “Plus, you’re not even married to mom.”

Akira's eyes widened. ‘Marriage..? With Airi?’ His heart skipped a beat at the thought. It was way too soon to even think about those sorts of things. They weren’t even in a relationship.

He glanced at his left hand, empty of any accessories. For a split second, he envisioned a simple silver band on his ring finger. His cheeks heated, and he swallowed nervously. “W-Well...maybe one day.” He muttered under his breath. For now, that'll stay in his dreams. He didn't even know if he really liked her like that.

Ears twitching, Morgana zeroed in on him. “Oh really..?” He grinned mischievously. “Well, I’ll look forward to you being a father.” He jumped off his lap and onto the couch again, languidly grooming himself.

Exhaling, Akira slumped. Why’d he have to say that.

His eyes slid to the CRTV, and he turned it on.

“An exhibition of Madarame Ichiryusai’s works opened in Shibuya earlier this week.” The newscaster droned. “Many of his pieces- from when he first started, all the way to the present- are on display. Praised by critics, the exhibition also shows the evolution of the master’s style through the years.”

Morgana frowned. “Everyone’s totally fallen for his lies. They’ll find out soon enough, though, eh?”

Akira nodded. They were going to change his heart one way or another. For Yusuke and to avoid a lawsuit. He couldn’t afford to get in trouble with the law during his probation, he thought bitterly.

Getting up from the couch, he went downstairs to grab a cup of water. Sojiro was at the counter, cleaning the last of the dishes. There was one customer present, a woman in a pink jacket, eating a plate of curry.

The barista looked up at him languidly. “Don’t go near the busy places, you hear?” He advised. “I’m not at fault if you get involved in any shady business.”

Akira nodded in understanding, downing the water. “Yes, sir.” He washed the cup and placed it on the drying rack.

“…How have you been adjustin’?” Sojiro asked after a moment, turning the faucet off.

“Things have been good.” Akira replied quietly. “I...scored second place in the midterms.”

The barista raised both eyebrows at that. “...Really?” He replied skeptically, pursing his lips. “...Well, that’s good. Keep it up, and maybe your probation would end earlier. I doubt it though.”
He sighed, fingering the pack of cigarettes in his pocket. “You pissed off someone high in the chain, I hear.”

Akira frowned at the reminder of *that man*. “I’ll keep doing my best at school.” He answered quietly. “I...kinda don’t want my probation to end. It’s nice here.”

Stilling, Sojiro turned to regard him for several moments. “Well, as long as you don’t cause me any trouble, do what you want.” He stated quietly. “...Why don’t you put on an apron? I’ll teach you something now.”

Akira nodded, grabbing a green apron from the closet. His home life wasn't something he wanted to talk about, and his guardian seemed to sense it. Tokyo, for all its faults, was more a home to him now than his hometown ever was.

Chapter End Notes

Sojiro rank 2

-I thought about adding Ann and Ryuji as a side relationship??? But now I'm not so sure because sometimes they act more like siblings and sometimes they act like heated partners.

-Yusuke doesn't have an official birthday, like most of the group, so might give him one... EDIT: His birthday is Jan. 28!
“It’s possible to apply math even to an abstract concept like beauty.” Usamu-sensei lectured in front of the classroom, crossing her arms over her beige suit. “The golden ratio used in the Mona Lisa and the Parthenon is a famous example.” She adjusted her glasses. “But a different ratio has been used in Japanese art and architecture since ancient times. Do you know what it is?”

Her sharp eyes landed on the bespectacled student. “Now then, Kurusu-san. Take a look at this.” She drew a diagram of an ancient Roman building as well as an ancient Japanese building on the blackboard behind her.

Akira blinked, sitting up in his chair.

“What is the name of this ratio that Japanese architects and artists have liked using?” Usamu-sensei asked, pointing to the latter.

He pursed his lips. ‘If that is gold, then…’ “The silver ratio?” He answered hesitantly.

The math teacher clapped. “Correct.” She pointed to the drawings. “You can see it’s closer to a square than the golden ratio, right? One theory says it’s because Asians have rounder faces than Westerners, so they prefer a similar shape. This ratio was used in things like ukiyo-e paintings and the pagodas at Horyuji Temple.” She erased the board. “One you should all be familiar with is B4-size paper. Those proportions are the silver ratio.”

“Wow, really?”

“Kurusu-kun seems kind of smart, doesn’t he?”

“He did score second place on the exams.”

He blushed slightly at all the compliments from his previously cold classmates, and rubbed the back of his neck modestly. It was nice to be met with something that wasn’t hostility and wariness.

“Wow, you must be really smart to be able to answer a question like that!” Morgana commended quietly, his tail hitting his thigh.

“Oh yeah,” Usamu-sensei continued. “I hear that mascots that are seen as cute have faces that are close to this ratio. In other words, if you use this ratio, you can make cute things.”

Morgana hummed. “It is true that mascots tend to have round-ish faces…”

Akira gave him an amused look.

“Huh?” The feline blinked. “Why’re you looking at me like that?”

He shook his head and payed attention to the lesson. Mona as their mascot, huh? He’d be fine with that.
Taking the train to Shibuya once school ended for the day, they met up with Yusuke at the hideout. “We can now take him down, yes?” He inquired, watching the pedestrians pass by with nary a glance at them.

Morgana jumped out of the bag and sat on the railing overlooking Shibuya crossing. “Madarame’s going to be a changed man.” He stated firmly. “There won’t be any way to revert it though. Are you sure you’re OK with that?”

The artist nodded. “I have thought it over carefully, and I cannot think of a future in which he does not pay his dues.” He crossed his arms. “He has preyed not only on the art world, but on countless talents...so I humbly request your help.”

Akira nodded. “All right. Then we’re sending the calling card.”

Yusuke inclined his head. “I apologize for making you do this…”

Airi shook her head. “Don’t be sorry.” She smiled reassuringly. “We wanted to wait for your decision.”

Ann nodded in agreement. “We didn’t want to impose if you weren’t feeling up to it, Yusuke.” She grinned. “But if you’re already determined to do it, then there’s nothing more for us to say.”

He smiled slightly. “If I recall, our next step is sending a “calling card,” correct? What a suave maneuver.”

Morgana gave him a stern look. “It’s not about acting cool. The calling card is a way to trigger a change in his cognition.”

Yusuke grasped his chin thoughtfully. “A change in cognition…” He perked up. “That reminds me, you went through some trouble regarding that before…”

Airi smiled sheepishly. “Yeah...There was a large door blocking the courtyard that we couldn’t open.” She explained. “It had the exact same design as Madarame’s storage, which had a hefty lock. By seeing it unlocked, the courtyard door opened as well.”

“The Palace is a cognitive world, so changing it’s ruler’s cognition changes the topography!” Ann added. “...I think.”

Morgana purred at her explanation. “Very nicely put, Lady Ann! You’re absolutely correct. This will be a vital tactic from here forward.”

Yusuke shifted his feet. “Actually, may I ask a truly basic question? You continue to mention cognition quite readily...But why does this world formed from materialized cognitions even exist to begin with?” He furrowed his brow. “Don’t tell me...Has it always existed, while we go about our daily lives completely oblivious?”

They all looked to Morgana and he sighed, his ears drooping. “Honestly, I’m not sure. At the very least, I know it existed before the Kamoshida incident...but that’s all.”

“I see…” Yusuke pursed his lips at the explanation.

Ryuji’s face fell. “Crap, he totally caught me off guard with that...It’s kinda weird thinkin’ there might be whole worlds we just don’t know a damn thing about...” He looked over at Akira. “Did the thought ever cross your mind, Akira?”
He nodded solemnly. “Of course it did. We’ve been walking all over inside people’s heads, and like Airi said before, we’re bringing metaphysical objects to the real world. Making thought into reality. It’s...kinda scary.” He admitted quietly.

Airi nodded solemnly. “Yeah...It’s interesting how close our mental worlds and the physical world are. How Shadows are people’s reflections, and that each one we’re killing is probably changing someone.”

Ann looked at her questioningly. “How do you mean..?”

Airi leaned against the railing, looking out into Shibuya crossing. “Morgana said Shadows are reflections of people. Mostly negative emotions, right?” She looked over at the feline who nodded.

“And each time we’ve taken a Treasure, they have a change of heart and become almost completely different from when they were distorted. The Shadows that patrol the Palaces and Mementos don’t have Treasure to steal, but they’re still connected to real people and they do drop money and items, which could be a baby Treasure.” She furrowed her brow. “…Doesn’t that mean that every time we wipe a Shadow, we’re changing a part of a person, even just a little?”

They quieted, mulling over her words. “You present a valid point.” Yusuke confessed, grasping his chin as he mulled it over in his head. “I had honestly not thought much about taking care of those enemies, merely clearing the way to the Treasure…”

Ryuji furiously rubbed his head. “Gahh! Now I’m hesitatin’ on takin’ them out too! What if we change someone in a bad way by doin’ this?”

Akira placed a hand on his shoulder. “Calm down. She said they’re negative emotions, so if we’re killing them, it means we’re getting rid of the bad vibes. But…” He adjusted his glasses. “It’s unnerving to think we’re kind of changing so many people.”

Ann nodded hesitantly. “Y-Yeah. How many Shadows have we killed? I can’t even count…”

Morgana looked at his teammates, frowning softly. “Don’t be so anxious. You’re still helping people even if you kill Shadows. The Shadows that roam the Palaces and Mementos are more like culminations of dark emotions than actual Shadows like Kamoshida or Madarame. They are from the Sea of Souls. Even if you kill a million Shadows, so long as people exist, the Sea of Souls exist to birth new Shadows. You’re not hurting anyone.”

Ryuji furrowed his brow. “Yeah, but...do we even know what we’re doing..?”

The feline shook his ears. “You don’t even know everything about the city you live in, after all. All that’s important is that we know how to make use of that world and how to traverse it.”

They nodded reluctantly, the thoughts still clinging to their minds. “So,” Akira began. “Let’s send the calling card.”

Yusuke pursed his lips. “Will he take it seriously? He is famous, after all...He has often received slanderous letters till now, as well.”

Ryuji grinned, taking a seat on the floor. “He’ll know best whether the crime written on it is for real or not.”

Morgana squinted as a thought occurred to him. “Wait. Are you going to write it again, Ryuji? That last one was questionable at best…”
Airi sweatdropped. “It wasn’t *that* bad...I think. Well...the drawing could definitely use some work.” She smiled apologetically to the ex-runner.

Ann grinned, turning to the artist of the group. “You should do it then, Yusuke! Make it really artistic and stuff!”

He shook his head. “No. It’ll end with him figuring it out. He knows my drawing and writing styles all too well.”

Ryuji shot up from his seat. “Oh, then I’ll think it up, and you make it cooler!”

Yusuke swept some hair out of his eyes. “Designing a calling card, hm…” He smiled. “Interesting. It shall become proof that the Phantom Thieves do exist.”

Akira nodded. “All right, you two take care of it then. Finish it by tonight and we’ll post it at the exhibit. He can’t ignore that.”

Morgana jumped down onto the ground. “You guys better come fully prepared!”

Everyone nodded. “Since we’re done,” Ryuji swung an arm around the artist’s shoulders. “Me and Yusuke are gonna go make the cards.”

Airi idly grasped her arm. “How will we distribute them at the exhibit? I’m sure there’s plenty of security cameras...Actually,” She blinked. “How did you manage it last time, Ryuji?”

He gave her a shit eating grin. “I snuck in durin’ the middle of the night when no one was around. It was easy.” He shrugged. “Art club room always leaves their window open to let the paints dry, so I jumped in through there and posted it on the billboard.” He snickered. “Man, I loved Kamoshida’s face when he saw it…”

Ann crossed her arms. “Be careful, guys.” She warned. “We don’t want anyone to know that we’re doing this before the calling card is sent.”

Yusuke inclined his head. “Of course. We will be on our utmost best behavior.” He smiled cunningly.

Akira shouldered his bag. “All right. Let’s get home and get a good night’s rest. May 22nd Sunday is the date.”

Everyone nodded. They were doing this.

She slowed to a stop, letting the bow fall from the strings. Tomorrow was the big day. They were going to change Madarame’s heart. They were going to help all those apprentices who couldn’t go against him.

Airi exhaled, letting the cello rest against her body. After tomorrow, she should ask Yusuke to accompany her around the city to find those other pupils. He would be able to convince them to give their testimonies, and she could put them in contact with that reporter, Ichiko Ohya.

She should also visit Shiho again, make sure she was doing OK. It’s been a while since she went to the hospital, and she could confront the receptionist. Once this was all over and they had some
down time, she was definitely taking that spa trip with Ann. Maybe invite the boys. They deserved a relaxing treat after all they’ve done.

The semester wasn’t even over yet and they’ve already managed to improve their grades, imprison their abusive rapist of a gym teacher, and now an abusive plagiarist.

Airi smiled. They were doing good in this world.

Her phone rang, and she placed her cello back on the stand before grabbing her mobile.

R: Yo, I tried changing the chat icon.
An: Looks the same to me.
R: Maybe it’s just for the group and doesn’t show up in here…
R: Well, you should take a look later.
Y: Indeed. I put in quite the effort to improve Ryuji’s initial sketch.
R: Hey! Mine looked OK…
R: All right, it was crap compared to the one you drew for us.
Ai: How did it go with the calling card?
R: Great!
Y: Yes. The final copies have just finished printing.
Ak: Good job.
R: Anyways, this is our first job for the Phantom Thieves. We really can’t screw this up, k?
An: I know.
Ai: Of course.
R: Yusuke, get lots of rest, OK?
R: You were pretty tired earlier.
Y: Understood. I will make sure to pace myself.
Ak: Everyone get a good night’s sleep.

She placed her phone back on the night stand and exhaled.

Walking out of her room, she went downstairs to her parents’ portrait. “Kaa-chan, touchan…” She whispered, clasping her hands together. “I’m going to help free someone from an abusive household. He’s not very smart with interactions, but he’s an amazing artist and one with a good heart, I can tell…Wish me luck.” She clapped her hands twice, bowing her head. “I love you…”

“Kaa-chan, you play so good!” Airi at five years old toddled up to the mature woman in a simple dress, playing her new cherrywood cello.

She smiled at her daughter. “It’s ‘you play so well,’ and thank you, my baby!” She leaned down to brush her nose against a much smaller one. “You look so cute and tiny next to it!”

Airi giggled, rubbing the appendage with a chubby hand. “Can I play, too?”

Her mother hummed, getting up from her seat and moving to the storage closet.

Ruby eyes watched her curiously, mouth in a permanent pout, as her mother dragged out a much smaller version of the instrument out and dusted it off.

Taking a seat again, she gestured to the kiddy chair next to her. “Here, Ai-chan. Sit next to kaa-chan.”
She took a deep breath, trying to calm her racing heart. It was pounding in her chest like a hammer as the MC called up the next contestant to the stage. She was so nervous. This was her first time performing in front of people that weren't her kaa-chan and tou-chan and a judge.

The local council planned a community talent contest to help bring people together or something like that. All she knew was that her parents signed her up and didn't tell her until a week ago. She threw a huge tantrum and could only be pacified with promises of cake.

She smiled dreamily. Cake...

Something bumped into her and she yelped, tumbling to the ground.

She looked up and saw it was another girl, her mouth pulled into an ugly expression. "Why do you have pink hair?" She asked rudely.

Airi pouted, dusting off her pink dress. "I don't know. Kaa-chan and tou-chan said it's "je ne tik."" She stumbled on the still foreign word.

The other girl crossed her arms. "Well, we don't need an ugly baby like you here! I'm going to win, OK?!" She walked away to where the other contestants were, leaving Airi sitting on the floor, watching her with teary eyes. Why was she so mean?

"Ai-chan? Ai-chan, where are y- Oh, baby, what happened?"

She looked up pitifully at her mother who walked up beside her, kneeling down to pick her up under her arms. "Someone pushed me because I have pink hair..." She sniffed. "Is it really ugly...?"

Her mother sighed and brought her into an embrace, wrapping her larger frame around her's. "Oh Ai-chan, it's beautiful. No one else in Japan has hair like yours, you know? You're that one special jasmine flower blooming in a field of regular grass." She planted a large kiss on her still chubby cheek. "No matter what someone looks like, it's the inside that really counts."

Airi blinked, rubbing her tears away with the back of her hand. "Inside?"

She nodded, pointing at her chest. "Your heart, Ai-chan. It's the most important part of yourself. It helps you know when something is wrong, or when something is right. Sometimes, there will be people who won't agree with you, like the person who pushed you. But, you know in your heart that they were wrong. You have to decide for yourself if you're going to do something about it."

Looking down, Airi nodded. What her mother said made sense. "I think they were wrong. My hair
is very pretty, and I love it because it came from you and tou-chan!"

Her mother beamed. "That's my Ai-chan! If you really want to prove them wrong," Her smile turned mischievous. "You should beat them and win the contest!"

Airi grinned. "OK! I'll beat them into submission until they beg for mercy!"

She sweatdropped. "We really have to stop letting you watch action movies with your dad..."
Chapter 82

Chapter Notes

Long chapter to get the Palace out of the way!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

---5/22, SUNDAY, MORNING, YONGENJAYA

Putting on a dark purple bishop blouse, A-line black skirt, and black leggings, Airi braided her hair into a bun, leaving the flower clip on her vanity. Today was too full of uncertainties for her to wear something so important.

She grabbed her bag, keys, and phone, going downstairs to put on a pair of heels. Locking the door behind her, she walked over to Leblanc. Today was dreary, looking as if the dark clouds in the sky would unleash a torrent of rain but just barely holding it in. It did nothing to calm her nerves.

Turning the corner at the second hand shop, she saw Akira was waiting in his usual black sports jacket, white shirt, and blue jeans, browsing his phone as usual. She instinctively smiled once she caught sight of him and in the back of her mind, she idly wondered when had it become so normal that she had someone like him to depend on. “Morning.” She greeted once she walked up next to him.

Airi smiled nervously. “As I’ll ever be.”

Morgana popped out from his leather bag and leaned over his shoulder. “Good morning, mom! Are you ready for today?”

Airi nodded. “Yeah. Everything’s planned out. Morgana’s going to distribute the calling cards.”

Said feline purred. “Humans won’t pay attention to a cat, so I’ll be able to execute it purrfectly.”

They walked down to the station, turning the corner within the cramped back streets. Swiping their wallets at the turnstile, they walked down the stairs to wait for the train. “Everyone knows to meet up today?” She asked.

Akira nodded. “Yeah. Everything’s planned out. Morgana’s going to distribute the calling cards.”

The train pulled up to the station platform, doors opening a moment later, and they walked in to take a seat. There weren’t too many passengers since it was a Sunday, but everyone on the train seemed to be going to the exhibit. Older women with lots of makeup on gossiped to each other in their seats, holding the exhibit’s brochure in their manicured hands.

Akira glanced over at Airi, eyes zeroing in on her bun and its lack of accessories. “You’re not wearing the clip today..?” He asked quietly, slightly disappointed. "You usually wear it when you have your hair in a bun."

Airi blinks, bring up a hand to lightly touch her hair. “Oh, well since we’re going to the Palace today, I didn’t want to risk it coming loose. It’s really important to me.” She blushed at her own
confession. “Thank you again for it...Honestly, I’m still kind of shocked that you got me that when you only knew me for a week.”

He smiled shyly, a slight hue in his cheeks. “Yeah, well...I don’t regret it. I stand by saying that you look beautiful with it.” He rubbed the back of his neck bashfully. “I didn’t know if you were even gonna like it...”

She bumped shoulders with him. “How could I not? It’s very beautiful.” She looked down at her lap. “I haven’t gotten gifts like this in years, so...I’d cherish any gift from you, from any of you. And I’ll be giving gifts, too.” She grinned up at him. “We should all go to the spa after this. I think we deserve a nice treat as a team.”

Akira blinked. “Eh? I’ve never been to a spa before...Just the sento.” He pursed his lips at the thought. “I guess we could go once we’ve seen Madarame’s change of heart.”

"A spa?" Morgana breathed excitedly inside the bag. "I want to try it for myself!"

“This is Shibuya, I repeat, this is Shibuya. The time is now 12:46PM. the next stop is...”

They got up and left the train, walking up the escalators to the underground walkway. They had all agreed to meet at the juice bar within the station since not a lot of people ventured near it.

Turning the corner once they swiped out of the turnstiles, they spotted Ann and Ryuji waiting for them in their usual casual outfits. “Hey!” Ann waved a greeting as they walked up.

“Yo!” Ryuji grinned, getting up from the tiled floor. “I got the stuff right here.” He gestured to his sweater pocket where they can see the tip of red poking out, the calling cards freshly printed last night.

Akira glanced around the walkway, not finding their newest member. “Where’s Yusuke?”

Ann crossed her arms. “He said he had to go to the exhibit to help out. He’ll meet us there.”

“Hello!”

They turned around. The fruit stand employee behind the counter waved at them with a smile. “Would you be interested in a juice? We have a special drink since it’s Sunday!”

Airi tilted her head. “What kind of drink?”

The employee perked up. “Oh! Well it’s a special health drink named Aojiru, blended with only organic and health boosting ingredients! A lot of students drink them for exams, but people drink them for any occasion to help their bodies! It’s only available on Sunday and only one per person!”

Akira blinked. Maybe he should try it. He’d been eating curry and ramen for breakfast and dinner. Airi’s bento were probably the most nutrition he got. “…How much?”

The salesperson smiled. “It’s ¥5000, but it’s worth the price!”

He glanced at his friends, taking in their doubtful expressions, before shrugging. “Sure, I’ll take it.” He handed over the bills to her.

She accepted it, inserting it into the register. “Thank you! Your drink will be ready in a minute!” She moved to the back of the kiosk to prepare the smoothie, taking multiple different fruits from the fridge display.
Ryuji gave him an odd look. “Uh, dude... You just bought a ¥5000 drink…”

Akira shrugged. “Might as well try it once. If it works, then great. If it doesn’t, then…”

Ann raised a brow. “Do we even know what’s in the drinks?”

They peered over the counter, watching as the employee put in carrots, blueberries, bananas, a fish head, wheat grass... wait. Fish head? “Oh…” Airi cringed, giving her neighbor a pitying look as the blender screeched in their ears, churning the ingredients together. “Um... good luck.”

The salesperson turned back to the counter and placed the finished beverage on the counter. “Here you go!” She chirped with a bright smile.

Akira hesitantly grabbed it and peered at the murky gray liquid that looked more like sludge than a smoothie. Morgana stood with his forelegs on his shoulder, blanching when he caught sight of the smoothie. “Uh, that doesn’t look edible…”

Taking a deep breath, Akira held it up to his lips. “Bottom’s up.”

The instant the drink touched his tongue, his gag reflex kicked in. Choking, he forced it down his throat, swallowing as much as he could before he recoiled and took the cup away from his face. He covered his mouth as he hunched over, fighting the urge to vomit. ‘What the hell...!’

Airi gave him a concerned look, holding out a napkin. “Are you OK...?” She rubbed circles into his back. That was almost painful to watch.

“Dude…” Ryuji groaned, holding a hand to his eyes. "I knew it was gonna be bad."

Ann gave him a pitying look. “So was it a waste of money...?”

Coughing a bit at the lingering aftertaste, Akira blinked. Once the gag reflex went away, he felt... fine. Better than fine. “I feel great.” He confessed, taking the outstretched napkin to wipe any residue off his lips.

“Are you sure?” Airi asked worriedly. “You look like you wanted to throw up. That can't be healthy...”

He waved her away, throwing the empty cup in the trash. “Yeah, once the gag reflex stops, the health drink kicks in.” He experimentally flexed a hand. Somehow he could feel a boost in his energy and health in general. “I feel like I can take on anything after that. I should buy one every Sunday.”

Airi looked at their other friends, all sharing a concerned look. “Well... If you say so.” She answered slowly. “Let’s head over to the exhibit. Do we have enough tickets?”

Ann nodded, taking them out of her bag. “Yep! We can reuse the ones Yusuke gave us a week ago.”

They walked out of the station and over to the exhibit hall just across from the station square. After an exorbitant amount of time waiting in line near the 109 building, they were finally at the counter at the museum, giving the attendant their tickets. “Please enjoy.” She bowed, giving the ticket stubs back, and they walked inside.

Airi looked around since it was the first time she had attended. It was crowded as to be expected, and a variety of canvases were hung up on the walls with special lights on each of them. “Look at
how many paintings there are…” She whispered morosely, staring up at a portrait of a sun. “And none of them belong to Madarame…”

Morgana squeezed his head out of the small gap in his bag. “Don’t worry, mom. We’re going to right this by stealing his heart!”

She smiled, reaching over to him a couple scritches. “Yeah. You’re right.”

“You’re here.”

Yusuke walked up to them wearing a pink shirt, a beige pinstriped sports jacket, and black slacks. “Madarame is over there, talking to some reporters.” He informed them quietly, his eyes tracking back to his mentor before returning to look at his leader. “Now would be the perfect time to distribute the calling card.”

Akira nodded and they walked over to an empty corner, looking around for any cameras that would rat them out. There was only a custodian's closet here, and the crowds mingled near the paintings so no one noticed the group.

Unzipping his bag, Morgana landed on the floor and groomed a paw. “Leave it to me.” He purred.

Ryuji knelt down and held out the stack of cards he printed last night. “Here. Careful your teeth don’t poke holes in ‘em.”

Morgana clamped his mouth over them, making sure his fangs don’t breach it. “I’m off!” He said, voice muffled, dashing off in a blur of black and running through the crowds unnoticed.

Standing up, Ryuji rested his hands in his jacket pockets and checked his phone. “So now we gotta wait for the signal.”

They walked out of the corner and over to a partition that wasn’t too crowded, watching from afar as Yusuke reunited with his former mentor. “Are we sure the cameras won’t pick up on Morgana…?” Airi fretted, biting her lip.

Ann placed a hand on her shoulder. “It should be fine. Morgana always goes on about how he’s the best for infiltrations, so this should be a breeze…”

They stood there for a while, waiting for a sign that the calling cards were found.

An hour later, Morgana darted back to them, running up Akira’s legs and into his bag. “It’s done!” He announced, snuggling into the small space.

“You sure?” Akira asked quietly, glancing around to see if anyone noticed the feline.

Morgana puffed up his chest. “Of course! Do you doubt my meowster skills?”

They sweatdropped at the pun. Akira sighed but decided he could trust the feline to have done his job well.

“Pardon me, sir.”

Their eyes snapped over as an exhibit staff walked up to Madarame, taking him to the side. “There’s a matter we need to notify you about…”
The elderly artist nodded before turning to his associates. “Please excuse me for a moment.” He inclined his head, following the staff member. Yusuke watched coolly, not reacting to the interruption.

“What is it..?”

The staff hesitantly handed him a red card. “We found this outside…”

Madarame raised an aged brow. “A letter?”

He sweated. “It’s...uh…”

Madarame accepted it, scrutinizing the card. It was a red and black hypnotic design with a mask wearing a top hat, one eye hole on fire. The back side featured the same background, but had a message typed out in blocks instead.

“Sir Madarame Ichiryusai, a great sinner of vanity whose talent has been exhausted. You are an artist who uses his authority to shamelessly steal the ideas of his pupils. We have decided to make you confess all your crimes with your own mouth. We will take your distorted desires without fail. From, The Phantom Thieves…” The staff member recited nervously, glancing at the artist with trepidation.

Sneer darkening on his aged face, Madarame tore the card into pieces and shoved the remains in his sleeve. “Who’s doing is this..?!” He asked sharply.

“We don’t know!” The staff member stammered, backing away in fear. ”The same letter has been posted everywhere…”

“What about the security cameras?!!” Madarame asked roughly.

“There were no signs of the culprit...” He replied quietly. ”All we saw was a cat in the recordings…”

Madarame glared harshly at him. “Remove these at once!”

The staff nodded his head hastily. “Of course! But um...”

Scowling deeply, Madarame turned to the inept worker, a vein pulsing dangerously near his temple. “..What now?!”

The employee walked closer, shielding his mouth from onlookers. “It’s about this affecting the exhibit...We believe it’s just a prank, but what of the mass media?”

Madarame stomped his foot. “Are you insinuating that this slander is true..?” He asked darkly, keeping his voice low so that none of the reporters could hear.

The staff member shook his head. “Of course not!”

The air shimmered like TV fizz before the surroundings were enveloped in darkness. Standing out like a beacon was Madarame, his Shadow self replacing his real body.

Yusuke watched on impassively, observing the proceedings from behind his former mentor.

“It’s those damn brats’ doing, isn’t it?” Madarame growled, the dual tone in his voice native to the Metaverse. “Well, it means nothing...They’ll only be able to do as they please until this exhibit is over…” With a flash, the world turned back to normal, no one noticing what had happened except
for the thieves.

Turning around, Yusuke walked up to his fellow Persona users. “Will that do..?” He asked uncertainly.

Ann nodded with a smile. “Yup! It was perfect! The composition was way cooler too!”

Morgana peeked out of the bag. “The Treasure should appear right about now.”

Ryuji glanced out of the corner at the aged artist. “You better enjoy the air of freedom while you still can, old man.” He muttered before turning back to his team. “Anyways, d’you guys check online? People are already talkin’ about that callin’ card.” He grinned excitedly. “We’ll show ‘em...We’re gonna surprise ‘em all!”

Airi blinked. “That was fast. It’s only been an hour. Is Yuuki-kun nearby or something posting about it?”

Akira exhaled. “That doesn’t matter right now. We’ve got one shot to do this. I’m counting on you guys.” He gazed at his teammates.

Ryuji grinned. “Right back at ya.”

“We’ll be counting on you too.” Ann replied determinedly.

“You’re really sure, Yusuke-kun?” Airi asked, placing a hand on the artist’s shoulder.

Yusuke nodded. “Yes. Let’s do this.”

They left the exhibit and walked over to an empty alley. Taking his phone out of his pocket, Akira activated the app, transporting them to the Palace. As they transitioned to a realm that no other could venture, they disappeared from view as if they were never there.

Gripping the phone, Joker stared up as the air pulsed with animosity. The building's golden exterior was accompanied by a red tinge, yet even from here, he could see that the throng of people waiting in line to go in hadn't lessened. “The atmosphere in here seems significantly different…” Fox remarked, looking around the parking lot at the new development.

Skull grinned, the teeth on his metal mask turning his smile into a savage image. “I mean, we did basically declare war on him by sendin’ that card.”

“Don’t worry though.” Elegant assured, the golden lights of the Palace reflecting off of her silver mask. “We’ve covered all the bases with our plan.”

Mona nodded in agreement. “We’ve secured a route, and we’re ready to go. We’ll take the Treasure in style! Are we all ready?”

Fox nodded. “There will be no turning back once we begin the operation.”

Panther pursed her lips, fingering her whip. “And if worst comes to worst, we might have to fight…”

Joker glanced at his teammates. “Let’s do this.”
Opening the app again, he transported them to the second to last Safe Room. “Skull, Panther. Good luck.”

Skull gave him a grin. “Right on!”

Panther smiled, giving him a victory sign. “You can count on us!” They left the room and dashed to the security terminal that controlled the lights.

Using the app once more, the leader transported the remaining members to the last Safe Room and opened the door. Looking around cautiously, he ran up to the controls. “Everything looks good here.”

Elegant, Mona, and Fox jumped up onto the catwalk, getting their part of the plan ready.

They peeked through the glass door, watching the security guard patrol the room. “There’s an enemy inside, just as expected…” Panther stated glumly.

“I mean, we’ve done a ton in here. It ain’t surprisin’,” Skull remarked, glancing back at her. “Anyway, I’m gonna try and draw it out, so I’ll leave the switch to you.”

Panther bit her lip worriedly. “Will you be OK..? What if it catches up to you..?”

He gave her a thumbs up. “Heh, don’t underestimate an ex-runner. I’m definitely gonna shake it off..!” He grinned reassuringly. “All right, you hide, and I’ll get its attention.”

Anxiety easing up from his reassurance, Panther nodded. “Good luck, Skull!” She ran behind a plant, curling into herself so she was out of view.

Taking a deep breath, Skull stood up and banged his fist against the door. “Heyyy, there’s some weird people over heeere! Hey, I need some helllp!” He yelled out before running down the hall.

Snapping its head in his direction, the guard opened the door. “Hm?! What’s the matter?!” It ran after the pirate, baton raised, never noticing there was another person around.

Standing up, Panther glanced down the hallway and frowned worriedly. “You’d better make it, Skull…!” She whispered before running into the room. She stood in front of the terminal and looked up at the catwalks, awaiting the signal. They only had one chance to pull this off and she'd be damned if Skull would get hurt for nothing.

Tying one final knot, Elegant took a step back on the catwalk and admired her handiwork. “Is it OK, Mona? Not too tight, not too loose?”

He purred with his paws outstretched, ready to grab his target. “Yeah, it’s perfect!”

Fox glanced at their direction from the edge of the tech room. “You seem to be enjoying this.”

Mona grinned widely, his eyes shimmering with excitement. “Only the best can appreciate these critical moments. Plus, this feels like we’re really phantom thieves!”

Elegant smiled. “We’ll be counting on you and Panther!” She stood up and waved her arm in the
“Fox, tell Joker to get ready!”

He nodded, turning to look down into the room. “Joker, we’re all set.” He called out.

The leader nodded. “Got it.” He grasped the lever, ready to pull.

“There’s Elegant’s signal...!” Panther looked up, seeing the noblewoman wave her arm in the air. “That means they’re ready to go!” She nodded to herself, a determined expression painting her face. “Good luck, everyone! Let’s do this...!” She typed into the terminal, turning off the generators.

She ran back to the Safe Room, teleporting to the one next to the tech room.

“Joker, now!” Fox called out as the lights flashed off.

With a nod, the leader pulled the lever, and the hook lowered down into the room. Elegant waited, flexing her hands, ready to untie the feline once he came back up.

“Hyaaaaah!” Mona breathed with determination, paws outstretched, ready to grab the Treasure.

“Sorry for the wait!” Panther apologized once she ran into the tech room, slamming the door closed behind her.

Joker lifted the lever, retracting the steel wire. Fox jumped down to join them just as the lights flashed back on, illuminating the hallways and rooms.

The door slammed open again, and Skull panted as he joined up with the group. “My bad! It took me ages to get that guy off my trail!”

Panther sighed in relief at seeing he was safe and sound with no injuries, and looked around. “Wait, where’s Mona and Elegant?”

“Guys!”

They looked up at the catwalk where Elegant was waving them over. “Mona’s coming up right now!” She ran back down the catwalk.

They jumped up on the ledge, joining her. The wire lifted all the way to the top and Mona appeared in their view, holding a large frame covered in purple fabric. “Hehehe!” He grinned at them. “How’s that for a skilled plan?”

“That was amazin’, Mona!” Skull admired with a big grin.

Taking a step forward, Elegant grabbed the Treasure, handing it off to Joker before turning back to untie the feline from the hook.

“Madarame-sama! Th-The piece is gone!”
“Ngh...How dare those vermin...But now we'll corner them like the rats they are!”

“Lock all the doors at once! They have nowhere to run!”

The thieves looked down at the Palace ruler, hearing everything he said as the guards rushed around. “So?” Skull asked, turning back to Mona. “What’d the Treasure turn out bein’? I’m guessin’ it’s a paintin’ based on the shape.”

Fox glanced around at their surroundings. “We can look into that later. For now, we must escape.”

Joker nodded. “Let’s go before they catch us.”

Tying the portrait to Mona’s back, they ran back into the tech room. Joker slammed his shoulder against the door, but to their horror, it stayed shut.

“Dude!” Skull exclaimed, panicking. “It’s not openin’?!”

Mona blanched. “Seriously?!”

“I heard sounds coming from the crane! Check above!”

“Wh-What do we do?!” The feline fretted, staring at the door with dread.

Skull turned to look at him incredulously. “You don’t got a plan about how to get outta here!? What kinda master thief are you?!?”

Holding her hands out, Elegant stopped them. “Both of you, quit it!” She yelled sternly. “We don’t have time to argue. There was a window big enough to leave through up in the supports!”

Panther nodded hastily. “OK, let’s try that way then!”

They jumped back onto the catwalk, avoiding the gaps, to the window on the far side of the hall. “Wait, where’s it go...?” Skull furrowed his brow.

“Now is no time to be lost in thought. We must go!” Fox urged, diving out of the window.

With a shrug, they followed him, ending up on a flat rooftop high in the Palace. The night sky loomed over them, the stars washed out by all the golden lights. The harsh winds at this height blew their clothes around, forcing them to squint through the sharp gales.

“Whoa, this shit’s real high up...” Skull muttered, looking over the side. The sheer drop greeted him, the ground several meters away. If they fell, it was game over.

“But at least we’re outside!” Mona frowned, gripping the fabric that tied the Treasure to him. “Is there a way down out here?!”

Joker’s eyes darted around, zeroing in on a diagonal block pattern in the building that made a makeshift staircase. They jumped down the blocks and ran to another edge, more blocks leading down a path to a red doorway.

“Is this another portal to an unknown destination?” Fox questioned.

“We don’t have time to lose,” Mona reminded grimly. “Just go through it! Now’s our chance!”

They dashed through the door and down the long staircase, ending back in the open courtyard that had once stumped them in their progress. “Is this the courtyard?!” Panther’s eyes widened, looking
back at the path they took that led them here.

“Convenient.” Elegant drawled slyly, eyeing around the empty rooftop garden.

Mona jumped in glee. “I knew it! All that security would’ve been meaningless if it just led back inside!”

Glancing back at the Treasure Hall Lounge entrance and the lack of pursuit, Fox turned back to his teammates. “It seems we managed to escape their siege.”

They ran a little further ahead before Mona stopped in his spot. “Mrr….Meowww…” He purred reluctantly, trying to stop himself.

Elegant turned and sighed, gazing at him with fond exasperation. “Oh no…”

“Dude…” Skull sweatdropped. ”Why’s Mona gettin’ excited now of all times..?”

Wiggling his hips, the feline danced in his spot. “I just can’t take it anymore! Let’s take a look at this Treasure..!” He drooled. Untying the knot at his neck, he dropped the portrait on the floor and unfurled the fabric around it, showing the back of the frame. “Treasure!” He mewled delightfully.

The others watched, curiosity overtaking their need to escape.

With a grin, Mona flipped the portrait and his face fell. “Huh?!” Instead of any magnificent painting, the portrait featured a henohenomoheji, mocking the thieves with crudely drawn hiragana characters.

“This is the Treasure?!” Skull exclaimed disbelievingly.

Elegant cringed, taking a step back. “We’ve been fooled…”

Hearing static begin to charge, Fox snapped his attention to their surroundings, noticing the lasers were ascending from the ground. “Get back!” He shouted, and they all jumped away from the portrait, just in time as the electricity ran through the poles and trapped the Treasure in its field.

Joker landed from his backflip, silently cursing. ‘This was a trap.’

“Meddlesome vermin.”

They turned to see Madarame enter the courtyard from the Treasure Hall, a contingent of guards behind him. The thieves regrouped together, hands flexing in preparation of a confrontation.

“Is this what you’re looking for?” Madarame jerked his chin at one of the guards who held a golden frame in its arm.

Mona fumed. “What nonsense that you used a mousetrap on me!”

Skull clenched a fist. “So you had a fake prepped, huh?!”

The corrupt artist lifted a brow. “Counterfeits are accepted in the world of Japanese art.” He explained coolly.

Lips pulled into a grimace, Fox took a step forward. “What made you change like this?! Is it because you became famous?!“ He howled, staring at his former mentor with grief in his eyes. “Can’t you understand how much it pains me to inquire about the crimes of my foster father?!”
Madarame regarded him with hooded eyes. “...Now that I think back, the only reason why I took you in was due to my ties with your mother. That woman never lost her passion for painting even after her husband died. Her skills and talents were quite astonishing...That’s why I decided to look after her.”

Elegant’s eyes widened, her mind connecting the dots. “No...You mean...!” She gritted her teeth, glaring at the artist. Even Yusuke's mother was a victim?

Fox clenched his hands, praying that he wasn’t going to say it, but deep down inside...he knew.

“That’s right.” Madarame grinned viciously, watching his adopted son's look of horror. “Your mother and the artwork she created- they’re all MY works of art!”

Panther glowered. “How low can you sink...?”

Madarame chuckled darkly. “I suppose I can grant you a gift before you die- a glimpse of the genuine “Sayuri”...!”

Fox froze. “Genuine...?”

Madarame gestured to the guard and it walked forward, lifting the portrait for them to see. It was of the same woman, same moon, same background. The difference was that her lower body wasn’t clouded over with mist. In her arms, she cradled a baby lovingly, smiling down at her son.

“That’s...the real “Sayuri”...?” Fox breathed, observing every detail with wide eyes, specifically on the child. "This can’t be...!” He flinched away when it hit him. “Mom..!”

The team stared at him in surprise. “Huh!?” Skull gasped.

Elegant took a step closer to him, shielding him from the truth. “Fox…” She whispered, glancing back at him sympathetically.

Joker tightened his lips at the revelation. So this was how far one man was willing to go. Adults were disgusting.

“Indeed it is.” Madarame confirmed. “This was painted by your mother. It’s a portrait of herself. A woman who knew her death was coming painted her last wishes, for the son she would leave behind.” A grin overtook his face. “That is the truth behind the mystery of “Sayuri”’s expression!”

Skull stomped his boot, cracking the tiles. “You stole something THAT personal...?!” He snarled.

The Palace ruler smirked at their reactions. “I knew at first glance. I knew it’d be a huge success if I added a touch to the painting and announced it under my name!”

Fox stared listlessly, his eyes glued to the painting. “But the baby in the picture...Why did you paint over it..?” He asked in a whisper.

“...It was all to stage it.” Madarame simpered, resting his hands inside his sleeves. “If the babe is erased, the reason for the woman’s expression will become a mystery...! That is what the general public is drawn to! Each of those parasitic critics wrote the same thing!”

Panther shook her head in disgust. “I always felt something was off about all this...Now I know what it is.” She glared at him. “If you really treasured that painting, you wouldn’t even think about replicating it for profit!” She pointed a finger at him. "You don’t love art at all!”
Mona nodded in agreement, mouth in a frown. “Though you have a real Treasure, your true skills are nothing more than those scribbles on that fake!”

“It makes me laugh, asshole!” Skull growled. “To hear you think of yourself as a real artist, when you've been stealin' from real ones for years!”

Madarame sneered at the intruders. “So you'll defy me no matter what...Well then, since you're my work of art, Yusuke, I'm going to reap you for the sake of my future...Along with those insolent friends of yours there.”

Joker narrowed his eyes. “We're not letting you have him.”

Panther scrunched up her face. “I can’t believe you’re treating both mother and son like they’re objects...You’re inhuman!”

Elegant glanced to her left. “Fox?” He hasn't said anything in a while.

Fox stood still, eyes wide open with realization. “I’ve heard that you destroy your “art” once they outlive their usefulness…” He whispered. “...Did that include my mother as well?”

They stared at him in shock, a chill going down their spines at the thought. Murder..?

A grin spread across his wrinkles. “She just so happened to have a seizure in front of me.”

Madarame revealed slyly. “That’s when a thought crossed my mind...If I don’t call for help and leave her be, I could obtain her painting without any strings attached.”

“No...” Panther breathed out in horror. “You let her die?!?”

Madarame chuckled. “She was physically weak. No one would doubt if she just dropped dead because of a seizure. Above all, Yusuke,” He turned to his foster son. "Didn't you think it was odd that I discovered your talent when you were only three?” He asked mockingly. “The reason why I kept you around was to keep you from realizing the truth behind “Sayuri.””

Clenching his fists tightly to the point where his nails pierced through his gloves, Fox growled darkly. “You killed her...!”

"The artistic talents you inherited from your mother were a delightful miscalculation though.”

Madarame continued. “If I’m to steal ideas, it’s much easier robbing the future of brats who won’t talk back than adults. It’s thanks to you that I came up with the idea.” He smiled slyly. “You have my gratitude.” He mockingly bowed.

““You...” Elegant breathed shakily at his callous words. He was just like that criminal. He... “You murderer!” She shouted at him. "You would go so far as to let someone die just so you can have more money?! You’re no better than the shit that’s spewing from your mouth!” She glared coldly. This pathetic man never deserved to be called Sensei or Father. He stole everything from the children he was supposed to take care of. “You’ve ruined so many people’s futures for something so worthless...They can never get that back!”

Joker held out a hand, stopping her. “Calm down...” He advised quietly. They couldn’t afford to lose their tempers at such a crucial moment, no matter how much he’d like to.

She bit her lip, eyes burning a hole into the plagiarist.

A chuckle broke the silence, and they turned to watch as Fox put his face in his hand. “Yusuke..?” Panther whispered hesitantly.
A few more bitter chuckles escaped him before he let his hand fall. “I thank you, Madarame...!” Fox glared at him, pupils shrunken in rage. “Every reason for me to forgive you has disappeared without a trace at this very moment! You aren’t some rotten artist...” He spat. “You’re a despicable fiend who wears the skin of an artist!”

Madarame sneered. “All you good-for-nothings..! Barging into my museum and doing whatever the hell you want...” Black liquid pooled at his feet, and the thieves warily took a step back. “Those who have the connections make the rules; those who don’t, follow them.” It shined red as it bubbled, lighting the gold fabrics on his person into an ugly orange hue. “Not to mention, the value of art is all subjective! I make the rules in the art scene!”

His face twisted into an ugly sneer, garish red lipstick spread thin on his lips. “I am the supreme being! I am the god of the art world!” The rumbling increased the further his ire grew.

“This isn’t good.” Mona warned. “Get back!”

The thieves stepped back, watching as the artist began to laugh maniacally. His mouth began to get wider as his features morphed, the details of his face turning into brush strokes. In a geyser of black, he transformed from a man into four portraits, featuring two eyes, his nose, and a giant mouth. “I’ll paint all over you!” His mustache fluttered above his too many teeth, mocking a pair of wings. “Now...let’s begin, you vermin!”

Mona and Skull jumped back, letting the others fight. Fox gripped his katana with one hand. “You used others for your own despicable desires, Madarame...You aren’t even worth the art you “create”..!”

“Don’t lose focus!” Mona warned from far back. “Who knows what he’ll try!”

Holding his mask, Joker called out, “Shiisaa!” The chinese styled dog pounced around. “Rampage!” The Persona darted around, attacking all the portraits. The frames recoiled with the exception of the mouth, seemingly healthier than before. He narrowed his eyes. “No physical at the mouth!” He yelled to the others.

With a shout, the right eye sent a thunderclap at Elegant, shocking her slightly. It then cast Tarukaja, a veil of strength enveloping its multiple bodies.

“Carmen!” Panther summoned her Persona. “Maragi!” She sent a blaze of fire at all the targets, the nose absorbing the damage as if it was a recovery spell.

“The nose absorbs magic!” Morgana watched avidly, shouting out advice. “You’re going to have to take out some even if one is going to absorb the attack! Then attack the one remaining with the opposite type!”

Nodding, Fox clenched his mask. “Goemon!” The kabuki dancer clacked his wooden sandals. He sent a vicious strike at the portraits, taking all except the mouth down.

Elegant twirled her scythe in one hand. “Shall I?”

Fox smiled coolly and high-fived her. “Be my guest.”

Snapping her fingers, she sent a Kouha at the mouth, damaging it. She then twirled back and accepted Joker's hand, letting him take charge. “Arsene!” Joker called, his own Persona appearing behind him with a flutter of his black wings. “Eiha!” He sent a blast of cursed energy at it and the portrait fell to the ground with a clack. It bubbled into black ooze and Madarame reappeared as a man again, shakily getting up.
“Madarame’s out!” Mona yelled. In a rush, they surrounded him with their firearms, safety off.

“Dammit...I’m the great Madarame…” He panted, sweat pouring down from his chonmage. “The Madarame who gathers a full crowd every time he opens an exhibit! I’m not someone that worthless brats like you are allowed to defy...!”

Fox scoffed. “You still have the nerve to say such things?! You will fully taste the wrath of those who were preyed upon by you!” With that, they jumped back and initiated an all out, attacking the plagiarist several times with their weapons. He cried out in pain, shoulders slumping.

“Now’s our chance!” Mona advised. “Attack the main body!”

Panther ran up, flogging him several times with her whip and leaving deep black rope marks on his kimono. Fox took out his assault rifle and with a grim frown, filled his old mentor with lead. Elegant rushed up after, slicing with her scythe in an arc. Joker called out, “Bereth!” The knight on a horse awaited his commands, and sent a Sledgehammer at the artist.

With a growl, Madarame’s eyes shined gold. Sending a Madara-Megido, dark orbs exploded in front of them and left them with slight burns.

They flinched, but brushed the attack off. Fox called out, “Goemon!” The Persona appearing behind him. He sent another Vicious Strike, injuring the old man further.

Brushing his kimono, Madarame sunk into the black liquid at his feet, the portraits replacing his human body. “Grr...impertinent brats...!” He growled through the canvas of his mouth. “It seems you need a good whipping to make you understand!”

Joker smirked. “Don’t count on it!” He retorted, summoning Shiisaa again, Rampaging at the portraits. Clasping her hands in a prayer, Elegant concentrated. “Media!” With floating green lights, she healed the entire party.

With a cackle, the right eye used The Artist’s Grace, covering her in black paint. She flinched and slumped, her entire body now shadowed in black.

“What is this attack?!” Mona yelped, eyes wide as he tried to decipher the new effect. “There has to be more than just our color changing! We should be cautious!”

Elegant winced as the paint weighed her down like tar. “I feel vulnerable somehow, but it’s not fear...!” She gripped her scythe tighter. “Jeanne!” The white lady descended, the fabric billowing like wings. Kissing her fingertips, she snapped her fingers. “Makouha!” It attacked all but the nose.

Laughing, the right eye used Rakunda on Fox. “Fox! Your defense is down!” Mona advised.

“I am thou!” Fox called, Goemon behind him. He sent a Vicious Strike, and all but the mouth fell to the ground. “Agi!” Panther sent a ball of flame, knocking the last portrait down as well.

In a pool of black ooze, Madarame reemerged, standing up on weak legs. They rushed up to surround him with their guns. “Dammit...Dammit…” He cursed hysterically. “Stop it, you brats, or else...!”

Fox narrowed his eyes behind his mask. “You think we’ll be daunted by such threats...?!”

They attacked once more as a team, and he cried out in pain, clutching his chest. Dropping ¥12,000, he fell to the floor in a slump, conceding defeat. Shaking her head, Elegant recovered from whatever had afflicted her, and they watched as Fox slowly stepped forward.
Getting up on his hands, Madarame hugged the “Sayuri” painting to himself, using it as a shield between him and his former pupil. He shrieked in fear when Fox came closer. “No one cares for true art…” He explained shakily, drops of sweat falling down his face and smearing his makeup. “All they want are easily recognizable brands..! I’m a victim in this too..! Wouldn’t you agree?!”

Skull scoffed, resting his thumbs in his belts. “Excuses now..?”

Madarame trembled on his back. “The art world revolves around money after all...You can’t rise up without any money...” He looked up at his adopted son pleadingly. “Yusuke, you understand, don’t you?! Being a poor artist is truly miserable..!” He teared up. “I just didn’t want to return to that life!”

His lips tightened, and Fox reached down and gripped his collar, choking him. “A fiend like you has no right to speak about the world of art!” He glared coldly. “You’re done for, along with this abominous world!”

Madarame shrieked, tears leaking from his eyes. “No, please! Just...don’t kill me..!” He dropped the portrait.

With a sweep of his arm, Fox flung him back down. The plagiarist coughed, holding his throat from where his kimono cut into. “Return to yourself in reality and confess your crimes- all of them!”

Madarame looked up at him hesitantly. “Y-You’re not going to kill me..?”

Elegant stepped forward. “You’re going to apologize to each and every one of your former pupils for ruining their lives!” She demanded. “Including Ayasakawa-san and Kitagawa-san!”

“And you’re going to credit them for each and every artwork you stole from them!” Panther added firmly.

Fox glared harshly. “Swear it!”

Madarame shrieked at their combined threats. “All right...All right!” He breathed shakily, looking up at them. “Wh-What about the other one though? The one with the black mask?”

Fox blinked, taken aback from the change in topic. “Hm..?”

Joker raised a brow. “Who..?” No one in the group had a black mask unless Mona counted, but he was with them.

Panther tilted her head in confusion. “A black mask? Wait, who’s he talking about..?”

Mona stilled as realization struck. “It can’t be...There was another intruder besides us within this Palace..?!”

As he said that, the floor underneath their feet rumbled, and they stared up in shock at the Palace shook. “There’s no time! Hurry!” Skull urged, gesturing toward the exit with his hand.

Running a few feet away, Mona jumped into the air and transformed into a bus, landing with a bump. “Get on!” He shook his exterior.

They ran onto the bus, Elegant waiting just outside with the door open for Fox as he slowly cradled “Sayuri” with the utmost care.
Madarame gulped. “Hey, Yusuke...What should I do?” He reached out with one hand.

The teenage artist stilled. “...Put an end to all this and use your own artwork for once.” Fox glanced back at his former mentor, sadness and acceptance clouding his heart. It pained him to see his father figure like this, to know that he was reduced to a pathetic sniveling old man who couldn’t see his actions as wrong.

“Yusuke-kun!” Elegant hurried, furrowing her brow as a piece of the building fell from the heavens.

He nodded, walking calmly to the waiting vehicle.

“No, wait!” Madarame called out desperately, still on his knees. “Please! Yusuke! Yusuukeee!”

Ignoring his wails with a heavy heart, Fox leaped onto the bus and Elegant took the wheel, slamming her foot against the gas. She swerved through the hallways as the building collapsed behind them, finally breaking through the front doors with a crack, glass shattering around them as the car sailed through the air and landed in the parking lot.

“Sorry, Mona!” She apologized as the group got out, and the bus turned back into the feline.

“Don’t worry, let’s just get out of here!” He assured as they ran out of the Palace and into the real world.

Chapter End Notes

-Sento is a public bathhouse. A lot of old Japanese neighborhoods don’t have baths/showers in their apartments, so they go to these cheap bathing houses every day to wash up. They usually include washers and dryers so you can do laundry too.
-henohenomoheji is a face comprised of the hiragana characters for he, no, mo, and ji. It’s something that kids do for fun when learning the alphabets. If you watch Naruto, Kakashi uses it as his signature.
-chonmage is a traditional Japanese men’s hairstyle. Thank you to Madeleine Meyers for confirming it for me!
They stopped, taking a deep breath. They were right outside the atelier, their thief clothes melting into their regular outfits. Akira took his phone out of his pocket when he felt it buzzed.

“The destination has been deleted.” It informed.

Morgana jumped into the bag. “It would be bad if people started getting suspicious of us. We should leave at once.”

Ryuji nodded and turned to the artist who held the painting carefully. “Yusuke, c’mon.”

Yusuke slowly nodded. “Right…” He gazed down at the portrait in his hands with acceptance in his eyes. “Goodbye, Sensei.” He whispered, whether it was to the house, to his relationship with the man, or even to his own impression of his Sensei that had burned to ashes.

They walked over to Shibuya station, Yusuke clutching the painting to him as close as possible in the crowds. They stopped at their hideout on the passageway, Airi buying some drinks for everyone at a nearby vending machine.

Ryuji sat down on the ground with a sigh, opening his can of tea. “I guess the mission was a success. All that’s left is to see if he had a change of heart or not.” He took a gulp, recoiling from the taste. “Ugh, so bitter..! Why’d you get it black?” He complained, scrunching up his face while he stuck his tongue out.

Airi gave him an amused smile, sipping her jasmine tea. “Tea is good for you. You shouldn’t be drinking so much sugar.”

“The “Sayuri”…” Yusuke whispered, gazing at the portrait of his mother. All this time, the painting that had inspired him to become an artist was from his own mother. He could barely remember her, only her gentle smile, mired with a dash of paint.

Ryuji gave him an odd look. “You’re not gonna get all teary-eyed and say stuff like “Mom..!” are you?”

Gaping at his insensitivity, Ann kicked him in the side. “Ryuji..!” She hissed. "Don't be such a jerk!"

Yusuke only chuckled. “To think that this painting was the source of Madarame’s distorted desires.” He closed his eyes. “The only saving grace is that my mother won’t know of what transpired…”

Morgana squeezed his head through the zipper. “The genuine painting at his atelier has been altered, after all…” He remarked morosely. “Ironic as it may be, this one here is her true self-portrait now.”

Ann smiled, peering at the woman’s face within the portrait. “It’s a wonderful painting, and...although it took you some time, it’s in your hands now, Yusuke.”

Airi smiled as she observed the painting as well, cradling her jasmine tea. “I’m sure she’s happy to
know you've finally seen the real one.”

Yusuke nodded. “...I'm thankful for it.” He smiled softly before it fell. “However, it’s impossible for this painting to be acknowledged by society anymore…”

Akira leaned against the railing, sipping at his green tea. “That’s a shame. Was Sayuri your mom’s name..?”

The artist shook his head. “No. I doubt it’s the name of any woman in particular. I bet it was to make it more mysterious, just a part of Madarame’s foolish staging.”

Mona slumped against the bag, leaning his chin on the edge. “Well, it would’ve been obvious that he plagiarized it if he had used the real name.”

Yusuke exhaled and held out the canvas in front of him. “So this is my mother...There’s no way that I would remember her face clearly…” He smiled fondly. “But I was right about the rush of emotion I felt when I saw this painting.”

Airi tilted her head. “What is her real name then? Maybe I can find her…” She offered quietly. She wasn't great with technology but a quick search could find something.

He hesitated. “...Kitagawa Keiko, if I remember correctly.” He answered after a moment. “I...would like to visit her, if you can.”

She smiled softly. “Of course. Oh!” She took out her phone. “I found out where Ayasakawa-san is, too. His remains are at Aoyama Cemetery.” She showed him the photo of the man. “I was thinking of calling Nakanohara-san to arrange a visit, if-if you want to join…”

“Let’s all go.” Akira piped up, finishing his drink. “It’s the least we could do.”

Ryuji grinned. “Yeah! We gotta let him know we got revenge for him!” He got up and crushed his can, walking away to throw it in the trash. He came back with a soda this time, downing most of it before burping loudly in Ann’s face.

“Stop that!” She snapped, fanning the air in front of her as she wrinkled her nose. Why did he always do this to her?!

Mona sighed in disappointment. “You’re so vulgar, Ryuji.”

Ryuji placed his drink on the ground and rolled his shoulder. “So,” He began, facing Yusuke. “What’re you gonna do now? We’re gonna keep targetin’ big shots.”

Yusuke regarded him. “...Why do you do such things?” He asked after a moment.

“It’s to get back at scumbags and like...society in general?” Ryuji shrugged. “We also wanna give courage to the people that’re sufferin’ ‘cause of selfish adults.”

Yusuke tilted his head. “Courage, hm...What good do they do?” He furrowed his brow. “You mean the courage to stand up for themselves, correct? Will acquiring that make them happy?”

Akira shrugged. “Probably…”

Airi leaned against the railing. “We can give them a chance to, at the very least.”

Ann nodded in agreement. “Right. There’s no knowing that. We just have to give it a try.”
Yusuke looked down. “...In other words, it all depends on the person, hm?” He murmured before smiling. “Then the same can be said about myself right now. I also suffered because of an adult’s selfish act.” He perked up. “Moreover, if we investigate these Palaces, it may expand my artistic repertoire.”

Akira snorted, finishing his drink. “Wait til you see Mementos.”

Ryuji grinned. “You really only think about art, huh? You’re impressive.”

Yusuke brushed his hair with a hand. “Well I won’t take part in any inelegant plans, all right?”

Airi pouted as she took another sip of her tea. “But I’m always part of the team...”

Ann groaned at the pun. “No worries!” She winked. “I’ve got us covered!”

With the exception of Yusuke, they sweatdropped, remembering her terrible acting within the atelier.

“Plus,” She continued, not noticing their expressions. “We have a rule that says we always have to decide on a target unanimously.”

Mona hummed. “How about it, Joker? We can give our calling cards a lot more oomph if we have Yusuke on our team officially.”

A minute twitch in his cheek, Akira nodded. Again with being called Joker in the real world. “He would make a great member.”

Yusuke smiled and inclined his head at his leader. “I will try and live up to those expectations.”

“At any rate,” Morgana piped up. “I’m curious...Another intruder besides us, huh?”

Airi perked up. “Right. Do you think it’s another Persona user?”

Ann grasped her chin thoughtfully. “Our only clue’s a black mask, so that doesn’t necessarily mean it’s just one person, right?”

Ryuji slumped. “But there’s no way to check anymore. The Palace is gone.”

Yusuke shifted the painting under his arm. “I’ll try probing Madarame. I may be able to learn something from him.”

Ann looked at him in concern. “Are you sure? I mean-”

He smiled reassuringly. “I’ll contact you all if anything turns up. Airi-nee, let me know when you want to start the search.”

Airi nodded, smiling at the suffix. “Of course. Does Wednesday sound OK with you?”

He inclined his head. “Yes, that should be fine.” He smirked slightly. “An artist and a phantom thief...It seems I’ll be engaging in two trades from here on...Very well. You only live once, after all.” He frowned. “Still, the incident about this other intruder does concern me a little...”

Akira sighed, picking up his bag. “We can’t do anything about it at this point. We’ll keep it in mind for future jobs. For now, we should get home and rest.”

Airi glanced at the artist. “Will you be OK going home..? You seem like you came to the decision
to cut him out of your life…”

Yusuke shook his head. “I will be fine. He would not dare to do anything to me until after the exhibit even if his behavior does not change.” He cradled the painting close to his chest. “I will have to hide this in my room though…”

Akira sat down on his couch with a sigh once he made it back to the cafe, the sun long gone. It was early evening but he felt exhausted after today’s events. The fight with Madarame’s Shadow proved to him that these Palace rulers could take on shocking forms, and he knew he and his team would have to be prepared the next time they tackle a Palace.

Morgana jumped up next to him, tail swishing in glee. “Not only have we dealt with our second big target, we even have a new addition to the team!” He beamed. “Goodness, things are going so well!”

Akira smiled slightly. “It’s all thanks to you.” That was true. Morgana had been the one to teach and guide them through the Metaverse.

The feline purred in delight. “Ahhh! If only I could make a certain Ryuji learn from you…” He scratched his ear. “But I have to say, you sure are something special. This is our sixth Persona-user. It’ll help broaden our battle strategies as well.”

Akira nodded. “It’ll be good to have an ice user instead of just me.”

Morgana grinned. “True. You can only hold so many Personas, after all. Besides, having an eye for beauty is a must for phantom thieves. We’re lucky to have Yusuke.” He licked a paw. “An artist is a talent you rarely come across. I mean, he IS a bit strange, but still...I’m sure mom can help him out.”

Akira leaned back in his seat. “Oh yeah, she’s a cellist, right? Music and art are pretty closely related…”

Morgana nodded, looking down. “An artist and a cellist, huh…” He mused. “What kind of person do you think I was? There’s no way I’d turn out to be some bad guy in the end, right?” His ears drooped. “I get so engrossed with the embodiment of human desires...And that’s not all. When it comes to the Metaverse, I’m the only one who can transform into a car. I’m special...but it’s still odd.” He looked up at him gloomily. “Who could I actually be..?”

Exhaling, Akira gently placed a hand on top of the feline’s head, lightly rubbing his ears. “You’re you. I think I can speak for the team that we’re fine with that. You’re more human than Ryuji sometimes.” He smirked lightly. “Plus, you’re our totoro catbus, remember? We still have to do that movie night to introduce you to it…”

Blushing, Morgana shook the hand off. “W-Well, that’s not much to go on. Ryuji certainly lives up to the “yankee” moniker.” He snickered. “Well, there’s no way someone like me, who has honorable aspirations, can be evil.” He stood up, puffing his chest out valiantly. “A man who saves those in trouble in the west, while punishing evildoers who may lurk in the east! A man who chastises people that smoke inside in the south, while saving bullied cats in the north.”

He grinned. “A man who has a sturdy body and vows to always do one good deed a day, be it rain or shine. I’m that kind of ideal person…” He ducked his head. “Or so I hope.”
Akira watched in amusement. “Aren’t you already?” He teased.

Morgana nodded. “Mhm! So if I turn back to being human...surely she’ll take notice of me, won’t she?” He blushed shyly.

Akira raised a brow. “You like Ann, right?” It can't be Airi.

Morgana froze. “D-Don’t be ridiculous!” He stammered. "Why would it be her?! People chase after me when it comes to love!” He laid down on the couch, sighing dreamily. “Where should I go when I become human...? I wonder where’d she like to go…” He smiled to himself, eyes shining with opportunities. “An amusement park, a movie theater, a fancy cafe, shopping…” He turned to Akira. “What do you think?”

Akira rubbed the back of his neck. ‘I feel like my bond with Morgana is growing deeper…’ “Well, since we’re clearly talking about Ann...a dessert parlor.” He snorted. “The way she devoured those cakes at the buffet were amazing...If a little terrifying.”


A phone rang out and Akira took his out, sharing the screen with the feline.

Ai: Good job, guys!
R: Hell yeah! Kudos to us!
An: We all did our best.
Y: Allow me to express my thanks again.
Y: Because of you, I was able to retrieve the painting that had been filled with my mother’s love.
R: Hearing you say that makes the whole thing worth it, Yusuke!
Ai: Of course, Yusuke-kun. We’re glad to have been able to help you.
An: Seriously.
An: I wasn’t sure you’d really want to change Madarame’s heart.
Y: I’m sorry to have worried you. I have no regrets about it now.
Ai: How is he? He’s home now, right?
Y: He hasn’t said a word to me. He locked himself in his room.
An: Then the change of heart happened, right?
Ak: Sounds like it.
R: Yeah. We did it just like with Kamoshida.
An: By the way, I’m curious about what he said at the end.
R: You mean about the other intruder besides us?
R: It was something about a black mask, yeah?
Y: That may have been nothing more than a lie.
Y: Madarame was quite delusional at that point, after all.
Y: For now, we should wait for his change of heart in peace.
Ai: If you’re sure.
An: OK.

Putting his phone away, he sighed and changed for bed. He was too tired to eat dinner tonight…

Morgana hummed as he jumped onto the bed, dreaming about a certain girl on their team.
Turning off the light, Akira got into bed, pulling the comforter over him. He exhaled, feeling the dream world pull at him. Closing his eyes, he slept.

The sound of chains clinking woke him up and he snapped his eyes open. ‘Dammit…’ He was back in the Velvet Room.

Getting up from the wooden plank that was supposed to be the cot, he walked over to the bars, the cuffs cutting into his ankles.

Igor greeted him with his usual ever present grin, sat at his writing desk in the middle of the prison. “You have expelled one who was stained in vanity. You are now one step closer to your rehabilitation. It’s a delightful thing indeed.”

Justine glanced at the prisoner from her spot outside of his cell. “Our master is pleased. You should be honored, Inmate.”

Igor crossed his legs. “However, that man’s remarks are concerning. It seems another has made their way into the Metaverse.”

Akira narrowed his eyes. “Is that true..?” Who could it be?

Igor shook his head. “That is beyond my knowledge...But your rehabilitation is progressing smoothly...That is for certain.”

Akira exhaled. That was good...right? Limo?

“They are not enough. You have only begun your journey towards the Metaverse.” Igor aspirited. “You still have much to learn. I have high hopes for you.”

The shrill ring of the alarm encompassed the prison, and his vision darkened until he could see nothing, hear nothing, feel nothing...

Igor grinned wider once the prisoner left back to his unconscious state and the twins went to secure the Velvet Room doorways in the real world. "Another kin has awakened by his influence. The game grows ever larger." He murmured. "Yet she has not grown enough by his willpower. What will the outcome be?..."

Chapter End Notes

Morgana rank 4
Chapter 84

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for 15.2k hits and 500+ Kudos!! 500+ people read this, I'm so shocked!!! And thank you for 32 bookmarks! I hope you'll stick with me for the next couple hundreds of chapters (it's gonna take a while...)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

---5/23, MONDAY, EARLY MORNING, YONGENJAYA BACKSTREETS.

Akira gasped, snapping his eyes open. The sun shined through the window as he slowly sat up in his bed, the birds chirping from the rooftops.

‘If I have to hear the word “rehabilitation” one more time…’ He silently grumbled as he pulled the covers back and went downstairs to wash up. He had to go to the bathhouse for his showers, but least it was free in the mornings.

Putting on his school uniform, his phone rang, the caller ID saying “Kitagawa Yusuke.” He picked up. “Hello?”

“It’s Kitagawa.” Yusuke answered. “I’m calling about Madarame’s state. For the time being, he hasn’t suffered a mental shutdown. Other than that, his demeanor seems to have softened a bit.”

Akira hummed. “I see...he left his room?” He moved around, packing his bag for today.

“Yes, only for a moment. He said he wasn’t going to the exhibit today, even though he has gone every day since the opening. Is that...the change of heart?” Yusuke asked hesitantly.

“It could be.” Akira answered, shouldering his bag with Morgana in it. “If his behavior has changed, he most likely has as well.”

“I see...” Yusuke paused. “I was curious and looked into Kamoshida as well. It’s as if he was an entirely different person. Will the same be true for Sensei..?”

Akira stayed silent, not knowing what to say. Kamoshida’s change had no negative consequences for them, but Madarame was Yusuke’s father figure and guardian. It’ll impact him either way...

“I’m sorry to have taken your time. That’s all I wanted to tell you. Good- Oh.” He paused. “I’ll try asking him about the black-masked intruder from the Palace when the time is right. Goodbye then. This time for sure.”

“Bye.” Akira hung up and sighed. He should go work today and finally confront that politician. Plus...

He glanced at his wallet, noting how thin it was. They had a lot for the team budget, not so much for him.
“Madarame, the maestro of the art world…” Chouno-sensei began at the front of the classroom with the early sun shining through the windows. “Artists with that good of an eye are rare in Japan. I wonder if he has synesthesia.” She flipped her curly hair. “Yes, regarding synesthesia...One of many English terms that comes from Greek root words. Haven’t heard of it? It’s a condition where your senses can cross over each other, like seeing music as color.”

She surveyed the room, stopping on Akira. “Mr. Kurusu. You were staring off into space, weren’t you?”

Startled, he sat up in his seat.

“Well, your number’s up. The root words of synesthesia are “syn” and “aisthesis.” What do they mean?” She asked.

Akira blinked. She had just said the condition is when senses cross over each other, so…””Together” and “senses.”” He answered.

She clapped delightedly. “Good! You’ve been studying! Unfortunately, synesthesia’s something you have to be born with. You can’t learn it.” She wrote the word on the board, in English and Japanese. “Some of the geniuses over the course of history have had synesthesia. The composer Franz Liszt instructed his orchestra to play the color purple. The poet Arthur Rumbaud was also said to see colors in letters.”

“Wow, he was actually listening.”

“I’m kind of surprised. He seems like the kind to just be spacing out.”

Airi turned and gave him a thumbs up, beaming at how studious he’s been. He smiled back, rubbing the back of his neck bashfully.

The class continued.

Packing her bag as the last bell rang, Airi stood up from her desk, some of the class darting out of the room.

Akira blinked, putting his pencils away in his case. “Are you going to work?”

She nodded. “Yeah, I’ve missed too many shifts this week so I have to make up for it.”

Ann turned around in her seat and winced. “Sorry, Airi…” She apologized glumly. “You know, we could’ve taken care of this ourselves. You didn’t have to miss work…”

Airi shook her head. Ann had been extra careful lately about mentioning wealth, but she knew she was poor. There was no need to tip toe around it. “Don’t worry. I’m not blaming anyone, except maybe Madarame...Plus,” She smiled. "Being able to help out Yusuke-kun made it all worth it.”

The two other thieves stood up as well. “I’ll come with, if you don’t mind.” Akira stated, picking up his bag.

Ann nodded, shouldering her schoolbag. “I wanna do some training, so let’s all go together!”
The three walked out of the school together, chatting along on the way and ignoring how other students turned away from them.

"They're all hanging out now..."

"Why the hell is Kimisawa with them?"

"Just ignore them, she can stay with the delinquents."

Swiping their wallets at the turnstiles, the three thieves walked down to the platform to wait for the train. Ann turned to the other lady a moment later. “Hey, Airi. Do you wanna go visit Shiho tomorrow?”

Airi perked up. “Yeah, sure! I was planning that actually.” She took out her phone, inputting it into her schedule. “On Wednesday, I’ve arranged to meet up with Nakanohara-san and Yusuke-kun at Shibuya. We’ll be going to the cemetery once Madarame confesses…” She bit her lip as a thought hit her. “I should go visit my parents, too…”

Akira glanced at her. “You haven’t been this year?” He asked quietly.

She sighed. “More like ever.”

They stared at her in surprise. “You mean you’ve never gone to visit their graves?” Morgana asked disbelievingly, leaning out of the bag.

Airi pursed her lips and looked away. “I was there when they were buried...but I wasn’t allowed out of the institution without a chaperone, and there was no way any of those staff members would ever let me.” She stated bitterly. “I was too busy at the second one, and once I got my house, I was too busy handling all the paperwork and dealing with school…”

The train pulled up, and they got onto the crowded cart, squeezing into each other. “It’s not a good excuse…” Airi continued quietly. “But maybe...I was just too scared.”

Ann gazed at her morosely. “How so..?”

Biting her lip, Airi stared out the window into the darkness of the tunnel. She screamed in anger at their deaths, she screamed in anguish when the matron punished her in the worst way possible, she screamed in horror when the life left Rui’s eyes. She had gone through so much that it seemed like forever ago that she was really “Airi.” Would her mother still call her "Ai-chan"?

“I didn’t want to tell them in person that I...that their daughter’s a criminal who stole. Who steals. That I became someone who wasn’t their daughter...Would they even recognize me if they were alive right now..?” She chuckled bitterly. "I've changed so much since I was seven..."

With so little space available, Akira encircled an arm around her shoulders, pulling her into him. “No one can blame you for changing...Losing your parents must’ve been hard for you.” He murmured. "I think they would love you even if you did worse things. “

Ann nodded, noticing their closeness but decided not to say anything for once. “Yeah, he’s right. Plus, you only stole because the younger kids didn’t have enough food. I think it’s justified.”

Morgana purred. "That's right. As long as you know yourself, I'm sure you can't be that different from when you were a kid."

Exhaling, Airi rested her forehead against Akira's collarbone. “Thanks guys...I think I’ll go visit
them soon.” She smiled timidly. “I’m kind of scared of going alone, though… I’ve only ever talked to them through their portrait.”

“I’ll go with.” Akira offered. Guess Hua Po was right about him visiting the parents. He could feel her giggle inside his heart.

Airi smiled softly. He was so kind. Who would ever want to accompany someone to see their dead parents? Others would probably say it’s creepy or it’s too personal, but not him. “Thank you…”

“This is Shibuya. I repeat, this is Shibuya. The time is now 4:18PM, the next stop is…”

They got off the train, the crowd pulling them up the escalators. They walked with Airi to the underground mall, dropping her off in the entrance before heading off to Inokashira Park.

“Good afternoon, Hanasaki-san!” She greeted her boss, putting on her apron.

“Oh, hello Airi-chan! It’s been a while since you’ve come into work. Is everything OK?” Hanasaki inquired, bundling a rose bouquet.

Airi put her hair up in a bun as she got ready for her shift. “Yeah, a new friend had some trouble so I wanted to help him…”

“I hope everything’s OK now.” Her boss smiled. “We’ve got a lot of orders incoming since it’s almost summer!”

Airi nodded. “I’m ready!”

It was now evening, the clock showing it was around 8PM, and her boss ushered her out of the store once she took off her apron. “We’re closing anyway, so you should go enjoy some time for yourself!” Hanasaki chided, handing her her wages for today. “I’ve included some extra since there were so many customers.”

Airi bowed, accepting the payment. “Thank you so much!” She waved before leaving the Underground mall. Her boss was the best.

Her stomach growled, reminding her that she hasn’t eaten since lunch at school. ‘Did Akira say he was going to work today..?’ Taking her phone out, she sent him a text.

Ai: Are you working right now?
Ak: No, I just got back from Inokashira Park with Ann.
Ai: I’m kind of hungry. Do you want to grab a bite to eat?
Ak: Sure. BBB?
Ai: OK!

Putting her phone away, she exited the station right into Central Street right across from the aforementioned restaurant. The streets were as busy as ever, but she could see through the windows that the fast food chain wasn’t crowded at all.

Akira was already waiting for her in front of the doors, phone in hand as Morgana chatted to him quietly. He seemed tired. “Hey!” She walked up to him, reaching up to give the feline a few scritches.
“Hey.” Akira smiled, putting his phone away. “How was work?”

Airi smiled. “It was fine. There were a lot of orders, so I got some extra today. How about you?” She tilted her head. “What did you do at the park with Ann?”

They walked into the fast food joint and waited in line to place their orders. “She wanted to do some training with strengthening her heart.” He explained as they moved up to the register. “I don’t think we really accomplished much, though…” The person in front of them left and they walked up to the counter.

“How big could it be? Besides, I’m starving.” He took out a couple of bills from his wallet and placed it on the counter.

“A couple seconds later, the employee came up to their table. “Thank you for taking the Big Bang Challenge. This is your first time, yes? Your starting rank will be Third Mate. Thus, your aim will be...the Comet Burger!” She announced dramatically. Another employee came up behind her, struggling with the tray.

They placed it down in front of the bespectacled teen, and the entire restaurant quieted, all eyes on the burger. It was the size of a pizza pie and as thick as a mattress. It included multiple tomato slices, cheese, lettuce, and a giant beef patty, all slapped together in one behemoth of a burger.
“This is a lot bigger than I was expecting…” Morgana whispered, staring at the burger incredulously from his spot inside the bag.

Closing his gaping mouth, Akira tightened his lips. He already committed to it, and he didn’t want to lose face in front of Airi.

“This burger is as voluminous as a soaring comet burning in the sky. It will not be overcome easily.” The cashier warned. “But should you conquer this challenge, you will be rewarded with an extravagant prize.”

Airi gave him an encouraging smile. “Good luck, Akira!” She hugged the bags to herself, watching him avidly with Morgana. Another employee walked up with her order, her combo seeming minuscule in comparison.

Akira swallowed, feeling the pressure amount on his shoulders. Doubt began to pool in his stomach. Could he really do this..?

“Well then,” The employee announced dramatically. “It’s time to get the thirty-minute Big Bang Challenge started! Ready…” She took a timer out of her pocket and pushed the button. “Go!”

Immediately grabbing the humongous burger, Akira bit into it, taking chunks at a time even though his jaw couldn't fit everything inside. ‘It looks like there’s a whole head of lettuce in here...The burger’s already cold…” He chewed quickly, swallowing the cooled grub.

“I don’t think you have the luxury of enjoying the taste.” Morgana stated gravely. “Don’t chew, just swallow!”

Airi sweatdropped, slowly eating her meal as well. He was acting like this was a Palace heist. Chewing on her burger, she discreetly held out a fry for Morgana, feeding him with some of her food. She honestly did wonder what he did eat with Akira. Did he feed the feline well? She always tried to give him fresh fish from the supermarket, even if they were discounted.

They watched as Akira slowly but surely advanced through this difficult challenge.

Swallowing the last bite ten minutes later, Akira gasped for breath and slumped in his seat. Resting his elbows on the table, he rolled his neck, wincing at the tight muscles from his endeavor. ‘I somehow ate the whole thing..! I thought I was gonna die!’

Airi clapped ecstatically, her empty tray in front of her. “You did it!” She beamed. “I’m so happy for you..!”

He gave her a tired smile, holding a weak thumbs up. He did it. He was pretty sure he was gonna become intimate with Leblanc's toilet tomorrow but he did it.

“Whoa…” Morgana breathed in awe. “I can’t believe you finished that! I thought you were going to choke for a second there..!”

The people sitting next to them clapped in astonishment. “Holy shit! I can’t believe he did it!” A guy exclaimed.

“That looked so intense, he must’ve been glad his girlfriend was here to cheer him on.” The girl marveled.

The two teenagers blushed and looked away from each other, overhearing the comments.
The employee came over with a smile. “Congratulations on completing this challenge! Since you managed to extinguish the Comet Burger…” She took out a black box and held it out to Akira. "I present to you the 2nd Mate Badge! New challenges will await you now that you’ve become a Second Mate!” She beamed. “I look forward to your next attempt at our challenge!” She bowed before leaving back to the counter.

“I’m...amazed.” Airi laughed breathlessly, still in disbelief. “Where did you put it? You’re still so slim!”

Morgana squeezed his head out of the gap. “You were so admirable, taking on such a daunting task with that intense level of courage!”

Akira smirked triumphantly, running a hand through his hair. “Guess I’m just that good.”

The feline stared at him in awe. “Your pace, your strategy of using well-time drinks, and just the spectacular way you devoured it...Everything was perfect!” His face fell. “I’m full just from watching you…”

Exhaling, Akira slowly stood up, stretching his arms in the air. “Let’s go home…” He covered his mouth as he yawned.

Nodding, Airi got up and handed him his bag, being careful of Morgana. She poked him in his still flat abdomen. “Seriously. You should have a food belly or something…” She pouted, mentally marveling at the firm muscles that were always hid from view. A slight hue rose up in her cheeks and she blinked the thought away. Don't be a pervert.

Akira flinched, moving away. “Hey, stop! I just ate…” He protested weakly as they walked out of the restaurant.

They got back to Yongenjaya late at night, the only lights that illuminated the way were the street lamps and the warm lights from the restaurants. They passed by the rowdy bar, making sure to avoid any of the drunks this time.

“Hey.” Morgana leaned his paws on his shoulder. “Don’t forget to ask the airsoft guy about the paper bag…”

Airi looked at them curiously. “Airsoft guy? Paper bag?”

Akira idly tweaked a strand of hair. “Munehisa Iwai from the airsoft shop. He’s where I go to get our guns. The last time I went was for the Olympic Medal, and he gave me a paper bag before these two detectives came in.” His eyes darkened. “They tried to threaten me when they noticed it, but Munehisa-san talked them away and I left the store.”

She frowned. “Detectives? Maybe they think the guns he has in the shop are real...What was in the bag?”

He pursed his lips. “It was a model gun, but it’s leagues better than our own. I should ask him about it, maybe he’d give us the good stuff…”

Morgana shook his ears. “Perhaps he can even customize them to be as realistic as possible. That’ll give us a real edge over the Shadows.”

She smiled. “Good luck with that.”

They continued walking down the road, passing by the alley where Leblanc was at. “Are you
“walking me home again?” Airi asked. "You don’t have to…”

Akira rolled his eyes. “And like every time I said before, I want to.” He emphasized his words, giving her a smile. “Besides, it’s just a five minute detour. I’d rather be there to make sure you're safe than to just leave you to go home alone at night.” He jokingly bowed. "I am a gentleman."

Morgana snickered. “I’ll wait for you at the cafe then. I don’t need to intrude.” He jumped out of the bag and darted past the road, disappearing from their sights.

Airi blinked, looking back at where the feline went. “What did he mean by that?”

Akira coughed into his hand, a slight hue in his cheeks. “Nothing. He’s just being weird, I guess…” He rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly and avoided her gaze. Was Morgana trying to set them up?

They arrived at the front of her house minutes later and she got her keys out. “Did you do your homework already? I can get some tea ready for us…”

He rested his hands in his pockets. “Sure. I...haven’t actually done my homework these last couple of days.”

Opening the door, she turned to give him an unimpressed look. “How are you going to stay in the top grade percentage if you don’t do your homework?” She scolded as they took off their shoes in the foyer.

“By having you help me..?” He smiled sheepishly, walking to the tatami room.

She shook her head. “I’ll go get us some tea.”

Putting the kettle on the stove, a thought hit her then. It had been a couple weeks since she had played in front of him. She had been playing almost daily since then, her muscle memory assisting her fingers, even though it had been years of abstaining. She was good enough now to perform a piece, but was she good enough to perform outdoors in front of strangers?

She could feel her palms sweating at the thought of sitting in public, cello in hand. All those stares, silently judging her worth as a musician, as a person. A stranger coming nearer to her precious instrument. The thought sent a shiver down her spine and a spike of fear went through her, the sound of wood breaking in her ears...

A whistle broke her thoughts, and she hurriedly turned off the stove as the kettle screamed. Pouring the boiling water into two cups, she gingerly brought them to the tatami room where Akira was sat at, books out on the table.

The shrine had freshly lit incense in it, meaning he had just finished praying. That brought a smile to her face. How did she find such a good friend who was thoughtful enough to do that every time he was here? “All right, is there anything you need help with?”

Chapter End Notes

Ann rank 3
Getting off the train at Shibuya, Ann and Airi walked through the busy streets together, still dressed in their school uniforms. The sun was just starting to set, its orange lights bouncing off the glass buildings. Ann chatted about various things as they entered Central Street, about the sweets she has tried back in America and Finland, and how they compared to Japanese sweets. "America has a bunch of different desserts since it's such a mash of cultures, but most of the time they aren't as good as the real thing." She explained enthusiastically. "Finland's desserts use a lot of berries, but I really like Mämmi the best because it's so creamy!..."

Airi smiled indulgently at her dissertation and didn't interrupt her. Shiho was finally getting better. She was seeing a therapist, her injuries were healing...she seemed so much happier than when she had been at school. She could only hope it was all uphill from now on.

They stopped near the crepe shop and Ann pointed excitedly at the displays. "Look, they're having a double creme hour! Give me a minute, OK?!" And without waiting for an answer, rushed to get in line.

Airi sweatdropped but walked over to the nearby blue vending machines to wait for her. She could never resist, huh.

Her eyes slid to the walls behind her where an advertisement for Madarame’s exhibit was still up and grimaced. What could she do to return those artworks to their rightful artists? Where could they even be?

"Excuse me…"

Startled at the unexpected voice, she turned around. A scruffy looking man walked up to her, his olive green jacket and dark beanie he wore stained with dirt and age. “I hear Madarame-sensei’s gotten quite popular.” He scratched out. “Do you like his work?”

Airi blinked. “Madarame-sensei?" She peered closer at his face.

He sighed nostalgically. “I used to be an artist myself. Dreamt of having my own exhibition.” His eyes darkened. “I was the apprentice to someone well known within the art circles. But that was a long time ago…”

Though he had a gray beard now, the shape of his eyes were unmistakable. She had seen them a couple days ago on her laptop. “Are you...Matsuoka-san?” She asked hesitantly.

He flinched, taking a step back. “You know my name, huh...Who gave it to you?” He asked warily.

She shook her head. “I’m sorry, that was rude of me. My name is Kimisawa Airi. A week ago, a man by the name of Nakanoohara Natsuhiko told us that he used to be an apprentice of Madarame’s. He told us how the apprentices would be treated terribly and have their art credited under their mentor’s name…”

He stared at her with crusty eyes before chuckling quietly. “Little Natsu-chan had the guts to tell someone...? Well, what are you going to do with this information..?"
She bit her lip. “...I want to find as many of the apprentices as I can and get their testimonies. I know a reporter who is digging into Madarame’s scandals, but she can’t find anything...” She pleaded. “Please, if you’re willing, you can reclaim your artwork.”

Matsuoka looked down at the ground. “...I can do that? I can have them back..?” He whispered, a shred of hope clinging to his voice. “But everyone believes them to be Madarame-sensei’s...”

She reached out and gently grasped his hand, not caring that they haven't been clean in who knows how long. “Don’t call him “Sensei.”” She stated firmly. “He wasn’t a sensei to you if all he did was steal from you.”

He nodded hesitantly. “R-Right...You’re right. He treated me like trash if I didn’t paint...and he kicked me out when I didn’t have any more ideas to give him...” He clenched his jaw, tears streaming down his tanned cheeks. “He wasn’t my Sensei! He stole everything from me!” He sobbed, clinging to her hand. “My dreams! My passion!...My art...”

Airi glanced around, noticing that people were beginning to watch them from his outburst. She rubbed his back in circles. “Shh...it’ll be OK soon. You’ll see.” She soothed. “He’ll get what’s coming to him for doing this to you. You and so many others...”

He sniffed and nodded. Straightening up, he wiped his face with his sleeve. “Sorry...must be embarrassin’ to see an old man clingin’ to ya like a babe...” He chuckled weakly. He wrinkled his nose at the snot on his jacket. “Err...Sorry. I haven’t had the money to shower lately...”

She pursed her lips. “You’re homeless, then..? That asshole...” She reclaimed her hand and reached into her bag, pulling out her wallet. “Here.” She handed him ¥3000. “It’s not much, but this should get you some food for a couple of days, especially if you go to Big Bang Burger.”

Fingers twitching, he slowly reached out. “...Are you sure? No one’s ever given charity to me like this before...”

She nodded, gesturing with the bills in her hand. She’d make it up within a day.

With a bitter smile, he took them, pocketing it in his jacket. “Thank you so much, Kimisawa-chan...I’ll be around here, so...” He took a deep breath. “If you wanna send that reporter over, I’ll gladly tell her my story. Maybe it’ll help me earn them royalties...”

Airi brightened. “Thank you, Matsuoka-san!” She bowed. “I promise she’ll do her best to get your story out to the public. Everyone will know that Madarame’s a fake.”

He nodded, hope in his eyes, and left into the alley.

“You’re so nice, Airi...” Ann murmured, coming up to her with a half eaten crepe in her hand. “Want some?” She held out the melting vanilla with waffle chunks drenched in caramel and apple sauce.

Airi sweatdropped. “No thanks...I’m only doing this because they deserved better. It’s not a matter of kindness, it’s a matter of doing what’s right.” She placed her wallet back into her bag. “C’mon, we should go see Shiho before visiting hours are over.”

Ann nodded, and they walked over to the hospital. It was quieter around this part of the neighborhood, a contrast to the loud and busy streets of Central. Entering through the sliding doors, the cool antiseptic air greeted them, along with the same blank faced receptionist. Hamasaki Chiyo.
Airi stopped and Ann looking back at her questioningly, throwing the remains of her crepe into the trash receptacle. Airi bit her lip. Should she ask her now?

Steeling herself, she walked up to the front desk. “Yes? How may I help you?” Chiyo asked quietly, not looking up from her monitor.

“You’re...Hamasaki Chiyo, right?” Airi asked hesitantly.

She nodded. “Indeed. It’s on my nametag.”

Airi blinked, her eyes darting to said item pinned to her lab coat. “O-Oh, right…” She bit her lip. “By any chance, were you ever in art..?”

A muscle twitched minutely in her cheek, and Chiyo looked up at her, a glimpse of darkness showing through in her irises. “...Please do not ask staff about their personal lives unless it pertains to the hospital and its patients.” She droned.

Airi furrowed her brow. “Please...you were one of Madarame’s apprentices, right? I saw your artwork at his exhibit, even if it is under his name…”

“And?” She asked uncaringly.

“Huh..?” Airi bit her lip. ”Don’t you want to reclaim them under your name?” This wasn’t going how she wanted it to. She might have to bring Yusuke with to convince her. “I know a reporter who’s digging into Madarame’s scandals. If you give your testimony, she can help bring him down and you can paint again.”

Chiyo stared at her blankly. “...That doesn’t matter to me anymore.” She stated calmly. “Whatever I was before, it doesn’t change that I am now a nurse at this hospital. Art has no place in my life.”

Airi clenched her hands around the strap of her bag. “...Are you sure? Didn’t those paintings mean anything to you?” She argued quietly.

Ann walked up from behind her, overhearing the conversation. “Yeah. I saw them during opening day, you know. They were amazing, and I could feel the tenderness through the brush strokes.” She added, crossing her arms. “You can help all your brothers and sisters, too.”

Chiyo flipped a page in the logbook, ignoring them. “As I said, art has no place in my life anymore. Madarame-sensei can have them. Please stop any further questioning or else I will call security.” She stated coolly.

Ann scrunched up her face. “But..!”

Airi placed a hand on her shoulder, stopping her. “No…” She shook her head morosely. “We can try again with Yusuke-kun tomorrow...”

Ann exhaled sharply. “OK...he’d be able to convince her, hopefully.” They walked to the elevators, not noticing blank eyes following them.

Once they reached the second floor, they walked over to room 203 and Ann threw the door open without knocking. ”Shihoo~!” She sang.

“Ann! She could be sleeping..!” Airi scolded, following her into the room.

“Oh!” Shiho blinked from her seat in the hospital bed, hugging the duck plush that Ryuji had gifted
her. “Ann. Senpai.” She gave them a small smile, the action a little forced. “Come in.”

Ann skipped to her side, taking a seat on the stool. “Sorry for the intrusion.” Airi apologized as she closed the door behind her and walked to the bathroom sink to wash her hands.

Shiho shook her head. “No, don’t worry. I’m always happy to see you guys.” She smiled slightly, idly playing with the plush in her hands. “I actually have something to tell you.”

Airi sat down on her other side, taking an apple from the fruit bowl and a spare knife. “What is it, Shiho-chan? Are you feeling OK? Does anything hurt?” She fretted, peeling the fruit.

Shiho shook her head. “No, nothing like that.” She hugged the plush. “I talked with my doctors and I convinced them to move my physical therapy up. I’ll be starting on Friday.”

“Ehh?!” Ann gaped and sat up straight. “Are you sure?!” She looked down at the cast around her friend's leg with worry. “I don’t know...are your injuries healed enough..?”

Shiho frowned. “Are you saying I can’t do it..?”

Ann shook her head. “No! I’m just worried, you know...You could make your leg worse.” She slumped. "I don't want you to hurt yourself." Again.

Cutting the peeled apple, Airi held up a slice to the patient’s lips. “You’re really sure, Shiho-chan? You can wait a little longer…” She frowned softly.

Biting the fruit, Shiho nodded. “Yeah. I’m sure.” She looked down at her white sheets. “Ann visited me a while ago, telling me how she’s going to become stronger. After what happened with…” Her breath hitched, eyes darting around nervously. “K-Kamo...shida...I want to become stronger, too.” She gripped the sheets. “So it doesn’t happen to me again…”

“Shiho…” Ann breathed, eyes filled with awe at her perseverance. Lips set in a firm frown, she brought her best friend into a close embrace, cheek against ebony hair. “OK...We’ll support you every step of the way.”

Bringing her bandaged arms up, the ex-volleyball player hugged her back. “Thank you, Ann…” She sniffled tearfully. “I’m so glad you're OK with this.”

Airi smiled fondly at the two. “If you’re sure about this, then we’ll be there for you.”

Shiho nodded. “Thank you...Can you guys come with me to my first session? I’m a little nervous…” She fiddled with her fingers. “The therapist said I should bring someone with me, but my mom’s busy with work…”

Ann pumped her fist. “Of course! You can count on us!”

Holding out another apple slice, Airi smiled teasingly. “You’re going to need all the vitamins and nutrients you can get if you’re going through with this. Eat up.”

Shiho pouted but opened her mouth. “Yes, mom.”

Bursting out into laughter, Ann hugged her stomach. “You too?!?” She grinned. “She’s such a mom, right?!” The two best friends howled with laughter, Shiho laughing much quieter and more controlled with a hand on her wrapped torso.

Airi sighed. “Children.”
They laughed some more and talked to each other about how school has been, what has been going on, so on and so forth.

A thought hit her, and Airi took out her phone, searching up Ichiko Ohya in her contacts.

Ai: Hi. My name is Kimisawa. You handed my friend your business card in front of Madarame’s house.
Oh: Hello! I remember. Did you find out anything?
Ai: Yes.
Oh: Great! What can you tell me?
Ai: There’s a man on Central Street that was one of his former apprentices.
Ai: He hangs around the bookstore next to the crepe shop.
Ai: I talked with him earlier and he said he’d give his testimony.
Ai: Would you be interested in covering his story?
Oh: Yes! Thanks for getting in contact with me.
Oh: I haven’t found anything on my end, so even if this is fake, at least it’s something.
Oh: I’ll go over there now.
Oh: Would you be willing to inform me when you find anyone else?
Ai: Of course. I’ll be sending them your way as long as they agree.
Ai: Please help them take their art back.
Oh: This is gonna be such a juicy article!

Exhaling, Airi put her phone away and glanced at the clock on the wall. “I should get going to work.” She said reluctantly, getting up from her seat.

Shiho blinked. “Oh, OK. Work hard!” She waved.

“I’ll stay for a while longer.” Ann crossed her legs and turned toward her best friend. “I have so much to tell you, like this new artist guy…”

Letting the two friends bond, Airi left the room. It was nice that Shiho wanted them with her at her physical therapy sessions. She’ll have to note it down in her schedule.

Walking out of the hospital, she traveled back to Central Street. Heading to the underground entrance, she saw out of the corner of her eye that Ohya was talking with Matsuoka, writing things down on her notepad.

She smiled, walking down the stairs. Things were finally looking up. “Good afternoon, Hanasaki-san!”

Waving bye to Ryuji, Akira set off to Shibuya. They had done another running session since the ladies were out visiting Shiho. The ex-runner had yet to discover where that gym teacher’s drinking spot was, so until then, it was just running around the school for them even if that meant occasionally bumping into the old track team.

It was evening now, meaning the streets were packed with adults trying to get home or going to parties. He squeezed through the crowds, trying to make it to Ore no Beko.

“Hey!”
He turned around and saw Mishima running up to him with a smile. “Kurusu!” He greeted.

“Hey.” Akira nodded in greeting.

They walked over to the side near the VHS store to talk. “Do you remember that group a while back who were claiming to hack websites in the name of justice?” Mishima asked.

Akira blinked. “Uh, Medjed, right? The news said they stole thousands of people’s information...”

The Phanboy nodded. “Yeah. I had high hopes for them, but they turned out to be posers…” He frowned. “They went from helping people to stealing people’s information unfairly. The Phantom Thieves are true heroes though!” He perked up. “I wanna help out however I can!”

Akira smiled slightly.

“Hey,” Mishima continued. “Do you remember that horrible person I texted you about? And how he had a change of heart?”

He nodded. “Yeah. He told the thieves that someone else was bullying him...”

Mishia blinked. “Really? I hadn’t expected that…” He grasped his chin thoughtfully. “Well, I’m sure the Phantom Thieves can take him down too!” He grinned. “I’ll support them as much as I can!”

Akira smiled. “I’ll let them know.” He waved as he left to the beef bowl shop. Mishima was a cool guy, if a little too enthusiastic about helping them. As long as he kept his eyes to himself, he’d have no problem with him.

Walking into the crowded restaurant, he hurried to the back to change into his blue and orange uniform, putting Morgana behind a cover so no one would see him.

He began his shift in a rush, still unused to the strenuous work all by himself. How was it this restaurant could be this popular but management couldn't hire more than one person per shift? Wasn't it also a violation of labor rights or something?

Hearing the doors open, he turned around and bowed. “Welcome to Ore no Beko!” A herd of people walked in, taking a seat around the counters.

His eyes widened. “Yikes…” Morgana whispered, peeking out from the corner. “A lot of customers just came in. You’re going to be bombarded with orders at this rate. Make sure you memorize them all!”

He gulped and crossed his hands in front of him.

“One medium curry bowl.”

“One medium hui guo rou bowl!”

“One large natto bowl, please.”

“Hey. Medium beef bowl, please.”

He bowed and rushed to the back, overwhelmed at all the meals that were requested.

“A-All right. Stay calm and remember the orders!” Morgana advised incredulously.
Packing the rice into four bowls, he grilled the beef and pork, scooping up some curry and natto from the pots. The grill sizzled, and he took off the meat and placed them in their respective bowls before rushing back out to place them in front of the customers.

“Please enjoy your meal!” He bowed quickly, running back to the kitchen to fix the other customer’s orders.

He sighed as he washed the dishes. The dinner hour just passed and the restaurant emptied enough that he didn’t have to run around anymore. ‘This is more stressful than the Palaces…’ Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the politician staring at him. He lifted his head and bowed his head. “Yes, sir?”

The man lifted his brows. “...You appeared to have a difficult time there.”

Akira blinked, turning off the faucet.

“Can’t you ask your manager to hire more people? You were extremely busy…” He frowned. “I think I remember you during your last shift, too. Your friend said you were working right before midterms.”

Akira shook his head. “The manager said there’s been budget cuts and can’t afford to hire anyone else per shift…”

The politician hummed in displeasure. “Employees being overworked is becoming a real problem in the workplace. That’s concerning…I should remember this.” He took his wallet out, leaving a couple of bills on the table. “I’ll leave my payment here. Thank you for the food.” He smiled kindly, before getting up and exiting the premises.

‘Yes!’ Akira shouted in his mind. If he remembered him, then he can go and ask him about his speeches. Then they could get more money in the Metaverse.

“That was the politician, right?” Morgana whispered. “He was worried about employees in the workplace, huh? Well, I think he knows who you are now. We should go to the station square again sometime soon.”

He nodded in agreement, before going back to his work. His shift wouldn't be over for another hour.
While waiting for the train to pull up to the station, they noticed another Shujin student make her way to their spot on the platform. “We meet again.” Makoto smiled coolly, walking up to the two Yongenjaya residents.

“Good morning, Niijima-senpai.” Airi bowed slightly, Akira nodding behind her.

Makoto tilted her head, watching them curiously. “It appears you’re lying low lately. What’s with the change?”

Akira raised a brow. “I’m acting the same as usual…”

Airi nodded in agreement. “He’s been studying hard like a good student.”

Makoto brushed some hair off her shoulder. “Really...Is it just my imagination then?” She murmured. “Anyhow...I wish the culprit would come forward soon…” She smiled bitterly. “It’s absurd to pretend I can do the police’s job...I wish he considered my feelings before asking me this.”

Airi furrowed her brow. “”He”?” She asked quietly. Was she talking about..?

Makoto waved her away as she observed the transfer student. “Never you mind. I’ll see you at school.” Her eyes slid to the cellist. “Kimisawa-kouhai, there’s a meeting this Saturday after school at the student council room.” She inclined her head and walked away.

Airi bit her lip as she watched her upperclassman leave. “Is she talking about the principal..?”

Akira glanced down at her. “He was asking you too, right? Do you think he’s pressuring her..?”

Airi crossed her arms. “Honestly, I wouldn’t be surprised. I talked with Kawakami-sensei and she agreed that Kobayakawa doesn’t have the student body as his first priority. He practically brushed Shiho-chan’s incident off when I mentioned it…” She tightened her grip around the straps of her bag. “Asshole…”

He snorted. “You’ve been swearing a lot lately. Has Ryuji rubbed off on you?”

The train pulled into the station, and they walked into the cart, hugging their bags to themselves. “Eh, I try not to…” She shrugged. “But it’s so…” She pursed her lips sheepishly. “It’s so much easier to say you’re frustrated when you’re swearing.”

Akira snickered as the train began running. “That’s not very “elegant,” you know…”

She gave him an unimpressed look and he burst out laughing.
Putting a ¥100 coin into the vending machine, Akira pressed the button. A can of carbonated water dispensed in the bottom and he picked it up, snapping the top off. It was nice to be outside in the courtyard after being cooped up inside the classroom for so long. He should go back to the class to eat lunch with Airi and Ann before time ran out.

“Hey, there you are!”

Taking a sip, he turned around to see Ryuji walk up to him with a shit eating grin, a piece of paper in his hand. “I need your help with something…” He looked around the courtyard. Seeing the coast was clear, he lifted the paper for him to see. “I found this flyer stuffed in my mailbox.”

It was an obscenely pink flyer, lace and heart patterns decorating the paper. A girl in a maid costume and cat ears posed cutely in the corner, the text bubble saying “Welcome home, Master!” It listed the various services the company could do, along with the number on the bottom.

“Housekeeping service!” Ryuji grinned, waving the paper back and forth. “It says that a cute maid will do anything for you!”

Akira stared with wide eyes. What? Were they going to request this?...Was this even legal? “Uhhh…” He uttered slowly.


Holding a hand out, Akira pushed him away. “Dude, calm down.” He coughed awkwardly and looked away. “What are you saying?”

Ryuji grinned pervertedly. “...You’re a guy, right? You know what I mean! Let’s give it a try. Yeah?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “Yeah!”

Akira sweatdropped. Were they really going to do this? He knew what Ryuji was saying, but...

Not noticing his dilemma, Ryuji continued. “Luckily, some guy on my floor just moved out so there’s a vacant apartment in my complex. The key is behind the mailbox, so we can get in anytime. The landlord seriously doesn’t care.” He crumpled the flyer into his pocket. “The place is all set, so…”

“Hey, I heard that!”

They stiffened and turned around to see who called out to them. “...What the hell?!” Ryuji yelped, taking a step back.

Mishima walked up to them with a smile. “Um, can I, uh…” He stammered nervously. “Get in on this?”

Mishima took a step back. “I-I’m not into it! It’s just for research!” He argued, furrowing his brow. “What does it mean that they’ll do “anything”? And do the maids look exactly as they’re advertised? We need to determine whether or not this company just pretends to offer housekeeping
services!”

Akira sweatdropped, finishing his drink. “Just tell the truth.” He sighed. “You want to know whether they offer sexual servi—”

“There you are!”

All three of them froze. That voice...

They slowly turned their heads to see a certain lady walk up to them with a blithe smile in the empty courtyard. “...Am I interrupting something?” Airi asked naively, holding two bentos in her hands.

“N-No…” Akira coughed awkwardly and slightly turned away from her. There was no way they could let her know they were doing something as weird as a maid service.

“S-Senpai..!” Mishima squeaked, face turning red at seeing his pretty class representative.

Airi blinked. “Yes? Didn’t I say you could just call me Airi?”

His eyes darted over to Ryuji, silently screaming for help. “Uhh…” Ryuji uttered slowly, eyes wide with trepidation. “You were lookin’ for us?”

She held up the two bentos. “You guys left before I could give you your lunches. The free period’s almost over.”

Blinking, Akira accepted his and placed the boxes on the table. “Right. Thank you.” He smiled, heart pounding at the thought of being caught with a maid service poster. That would be the end of the world.

“Yeah, thanks Airi!” Ryuji grinned, taking his hand out of his pocket to grab his box. A crumpled piece of paper fell out and rolled to stop at her feet.

Looking down at it, she began to crouch down to pick it up.

“!!!!” Their eyes widened with panic, and Mishima dove for it like a soccer goalie, snatching it up before she could.

“...Uh?” She looked at him with wide eyes, hand still outstretched. “Is everything OK, Yuuki-kun..?”

An idea came to mind and Akira lifted her from the ground, gently placing his hands on her shoulders. “Airi.” He began, her looking up at him curiously. “...We’re helping Mishima with his confession letter.” He heard him yelp “What?!” from the floor. “He doesn’t feel comfortable writing it with a girl around, so…”

Airi blinked. “Um...OK. It sounded like you guys were doing something else-” He sweated. “-But I’m glad you guys are supporting him!” She beamed. She looked down at the ex-volleyball member who was still on the floor, cradling the paper in his hands. “Who’s the lucky girl, Yuuki-kun?”

Mishima looked up with wide eyes, a blush overtaking his cheeks. “Uh...You-” Glasses flashed in the harsh sunlight even though they were in a shaded area, and Akira stared down at him. He paled, feeling the killing intent from his classmate. “Y...Yumi-san!”
Airi brightened, not noticing the death threat. “Really?! I didn’t know you liked her like that. She’s not even in our class.” She clapped her hands together. “I wish you the best of luck then! I’m going to head back.” She turned to leave back toward the main school building.

The guys sighed in relief at dodging the bullet.

“By the way…” She began, keeping her back to them. “…Don’t get into trouble, OK?” She walked away back inside the building, disappearing behind the glass doors.

Ryuji slumped to the ground once she was gone. “Phew...she almost caught us…”

Akira sweatdropped, sitting down on the bench. “I’m pretty sure she knew we were doing something we’re not supposed to…”

Mishima cried comically, getting up from the ground. “I’m sorry, Senpai…I feel so bad for lying to her.”

“Pfft.” Ryuji waved him away. “What she don’t know won’t hurt her...Now,” He grinned, standing up and taking back the crumpled flyer. “We gonna do it?”

Rolling his eyes, Akira opened his lunch and began eating, savoring the combination of vegetables and meat. Her lunches were always nutritious and appetizing, even though he's grown to really like curry.

Mishima nodded and stood up. “We should do a thorough investigation.”

Ryuji nodded with a grin. “Yeah, we gotta see it with our own eyes.” He snickered pervertedly. “Every little detail…” He turned back to Akira who was halfway through his meal. “We’ll hafta do this at night, so let us know when you’re ready.”

Sighing, Akira nodded resignedly. If they were going to do this, at least Airi wouldn’t know…

Mishima crossed his arms thoughtfully. “So what’s the code name for this operation..?” He hummed before perking up. “Since we’ll be watching them, it should be something like…”Operation Maidwatch”!”

Ryuji brightened. “Nice! I like that!” He sat down next to his best friend on the bench and opened his bento to start eating, stuffing his mouth with a tako sausage.

Akira sweatdropped, eating the last bite of his meal. They were pretty enthusiastic about this. Was it that great to hire a maid? It's not like they couldn't see things like that at maid cafes...

“By the way…” Mishima began hesitantly, eyes honed on their lunches. “...Does Airi-senpai make you lunch..? Every day?”

Ryuji nodded while chewing. “Yep. She makes these super good bentos for us ‘cause she’s worried we don’t eat enough veggies…”

The Phanboy slumped. “Lucky...I wish she’d make one for me, too…”

Narrowing his eyes, Akira closed the box with a snap. “Why don’t you ask her, then?” He suggested, steel in his voice.

Mishima froze like a deer in headlights. Ryuji glanced between them, watching avidly while eating his meal as if this was a soap opera happening before him.
“...N-No, I shouldn’t.” Mishima stammered. "I get lunch in the cafeteria anyway…”

Gray eyes flashed menacingly. “...So you’re saying the cafeteria makes better food than her?” Akira asked coldly.

“!!!” Mishima froze up even more, shoulders up to his ears. Slowly taking a step back, he pivoted and ran through the courtyard, gaining as much distance as possible away from them.

“Pfft!” Ryuji snorted, choking on his food at the dust trail that was left over. He laughed, coughing rice up his throat. “...Dude!”

Akira adjusted his glasses, the glare hiding the vindictive pleasure in his eyes. Even though he knew their Phanboy clearly liked the class president, there was no way he’d ever have the courage to confess if he ran away just from his stare. He wasn’t real competition.

Clearing his throat, Ryuji finished the rest of his lunch, burping at the end. “Anyway,” He began quietly, looking around for any eavesdroppers. “I’ve been lookin’ into Yamauchi, and apparently he’s been hangin’ at a monjayaki shop a lot.” He closed the box. “He gets super drunk and brags to his coworkers. Ain’t this a good chance for us?” He leaned back on the bench. “If we can get close, we can get some intel outta him.”

Akira raised a brow. “Wouldn’t he notice you?”

Ryuji grinned. “Exactly! That’s where you come in. He knows me, so I ain’t gonna be able to get anywhere near him...But that ain’t the case for you! I bet you could even sit next to his booth if you wanted!” He paused. “Prolly.” He looked up at him hopefully. “Soooo…”

Akira exhaled. “Sure.” He replied. “Just let me know when.”

Ryuji perked up. “Hell yeah!” He grinned. “I’ll let you know once I figure out when he goes drinking. Til then, we’re gonna put a hold on our training. I’ll be counting on you!” He smacked his hand against his back.

Akira coughed at the impact, covering his mouth.

“C’mon, let’s go before the bell rings!” Ryuji ran ahead, Akira following at a sedate pace.

-AFTER SCHOOL-

His phone buzzed as the class emptied out. Taking it out, he noticed out of the corner of his eye that Airi was staring at him. Pursing his lips nervously, he tilted the screen so she wouldn’t be able to see anything from her vantage point.

M: Hey, about that flyer. We’re doing it at night, right?
M: I’m usually in Shibuya at those hours.
M: Let me know when you’re going to it.
M: You better not leave me behind, OK?
M: I’ll never forgive you if you do.
Ak: Might as well do it tonight then.
M: OK. I’ll contact you again later tonight.

Sighing, he put his phone back in his pocket. He couldn’t believe they were actually going to do this.
“What was that all about?” Airi asked, shouldering her bag.

“Uh...Mishima was asking me for advice…” Akira answered awkwardly.

She hummed, narrowing her eyes at him. “...I know that Yuuki-kun doesn’t like Yumi-san. He’s never even talked to her before. What are you guys up to?”

He sweated slightly. “Just...guy things. Don’t worry about it, OK? It’s embarrassing…”

Airi gave him an odd look. Guy things? Did he mean they were going to do something together as guys...She lightly shook her head. Don't be a pervert. “OK...Well, I’m going to go meet up with Yusuke-kun and Nakanohara-san.” She got up from her desk, straightening out her skirt.

He blinked. “Right. That’s today. Do you want me to come with..?”

She shrugged. “If you’d like. We’re just going to try to find all the apprentices we can. I already found two yesterday…” Her face fell. “Though one of them didn’t want to even talk about it…”

Nodding, he picked up his bag, letting Morgana jump in. “It sounds like some of them are too scarred by their experiences.” The feline remarked quietly as they walked out of the school.

“Yeah…” Airi answered glumly. “She had said she didn’t want anything to do with art anymore…”

They took the train to Shibuya, swiping their wallets at the turnstiles. Yusuke was already there waiting for them in front of the Ginza line entrance, still in his white and black school uniform. “Hello.” He inclined his head. “I didn’t realize Akira was coming along.”

Akira rubbed the back of his neck. “Sorry. Is that gonna be a problem..?”

Yusuke shook his head. “No. You...have a certain charisma to your character. It could help us.”

Morgana snickered, leaning on Akira’s shoulders. “Isn’t that the truth.”

“Hello…”

They turned around. A salaryman in a dark suit walked up to them, briefcase in hand. His bowl cut was styled neatly above the rim of his glasses, showing dark eyes complimented with a hesitant smile. “It’s been a while, Yusuke.” Nakanohara greeted quietly.

The artist stared at his old Senpai with wide eyes. “Natsu-nii…” He breathed. He hesitantly reached out with a hand, unsure if his surrogate older brother was really here. It had been years since he had seen him. He lost hope that he would ever come back for him, and thought that he was to live forgotten inside the atelier. Forever under Madarame’s control with no one else.

His decision was made for him when the older man enveloped him in a hug. “I’m so sorry for leaving you alone…”

Yusuke stared ahead blankly, moisture gathering in his eyes. Hands twitching, he slowly reciprocated, his slim fingers digging into the suit jacket. “No…” He whispered. “I do not blame you…” He rested his face in the salaryman’s shoulder, the fabric absorbing a stray tear. “I had thought you had forgotten about me…”

Nakanohara huffed in amusement. “Always with the formal speech.” He smiled fondly, extracting the young man from his embrace and held his slim shoulders. “Look at you, you’re practically an adult now,”
Yusuke smiled timidly. “I wasn’t aware you were coming today…”

Nakanohara looked over to the Shujin students and cat. “Well, Kimisawa-chan here had asked me if I had some free time.” He replied earnestly, letting his arms fall. “I want to help out, too.” He clenched his hands, gripping the handle of his briefcase. “I’ve been too much of a coward, leaving you all to suffer…”

Airi smiled proudly at the older man. “That’s going to change today. You’re both very brave for doing this.”

Akira nodded in agreement. “It takes guts to find them. Do we know where any of them are..?”

Nakanohara nodded. “I found one that’s the same age as me. He usually sits right outside in the station square…” He frowned, adjusting his glasses. “I assume he’s homeless given his shabby clothing.”

Airi took out her phone, browsing the list. “Who was it? I found Matsuoka Toushiro yesterday, as well as Hamasaki Chiyo.”

His eyebrows raised. “You work fast, Kimisawa-chan. He was Hattori Daichi. How did you find those two?”

She smiled slightly. “Matsuoka-san was the one to approach me, asking if I liked Madarame-sensei’s art. The “sensei” part tipped me off.” Her face fell. “And...Hamasaki-san works at Ito Hospital as the receptionist. She...wasn’t very cooperative.”

Yusuke’s eyes widened. “Daichi-nii..?” He breathed in surprise. “He has been right outside this station this entire time?” He frowned slightly. “Unfortunately, I don’t remember the other two as well. There had been so many apprentices…”

Nakanohara shook his head. “Those two had left before you even turned six. It’s no surprise you don’t remember them clearly. Did you guys..?” He hesitated, glancing around. He moved closer, covering his mouth. “Did you guys change Madarame’s heart?”

Akira gave him a look. “You could say that.” He hinted. Morgana purred in response, knowing that the salaryman wouldn’t understand him.

Airi smiled. “I’m sure you’ll see it soon. The Phantom Thieves sure are amazing.” She winked. They couldn’t outright tell him since they didn’t want to drag him into this, but at the very least they could put his worries to rest.

Yusuke smiled serenely. “Yes. Their actions were heroic, indeed.”

Nakanohara’s eyes widened. “You too, Yusuke..?” He breathed in surprise, before shaking his head. “Right. I shouldn’t be asking this out in the open. We should start off with Daichi.”

Chapter End Notes

-tako sausage is when you cut the end of a sausage into four pieces then fry it, making it look like an octopus, “tako”.
They nodded and exited the station, looking around for the twenty-something year old. The station square was filled with people, walking to and from their destinations. The sun shone brightly in the afternoon, the temperatures slowly rising into the summer heat. None of them paid attention to the stragglers that lurked around the area.

“There.” Nakanohara pointed at a scruffy young man sitting next to the lottery office in front of the station, his back to the wall, staring down at the ground with a defeated expression on his face.

Morgana winced. “Wow...He looks miserable.”

They approached him, stopping at his feet. “Go away.” He muttered, not looking up at them. “This is a public space. I have rights to sit where I want.”

“Daichi-nii...?” Yusuke spoke hesitantly, gazing at his former older brother in horror. As the salaryman had described earlier, the former artist was indeed covered in shabby clothing, his jacket falling apart by the seams. Stains and dirt discolored his gray jeans, which were probably blue at some point.

Scrunching up his face, Hattori Daichi looked up at them. “How do you know my name? Who the fuck do you think you are, calling me big brother?!” He shouted venomously, glaring at them through squinted eyes as the sun shined brightly.

Yusuke flinched, taking a step back.


“What...?” Daichi narrowed his eyes at them, finally recognizing their faces when his vision adjusted to the harsh sunlight. “...Oh. You two.” He muttered, deflating from his outburst. “...What do you want?”

They looked over at Airi. Biting her lip nervously, she stepped forward. “Hattori-san, my name is Kimisawa. We’re trying to find all of Madarame’s former apprentices to gather up evidence against him.” She explained quietly, conscious of the bustling crowds around them in the station. “I know a reporter who’s already talked to Matsuoka-san. Matsuoka Toushiro that is, if you remember him. If she can get enough testimonies, she can publish an article that would ruin Madarame’s reputation and restore your artworks back to you.”

Daichi scoffed. “And what good would that do?” He asked bitterly, scratching his greasy hair, unwashed for a long time. “He’s already rich and famous. Who would believe one article?”

She pursed her lips, looking over at the two artists with her. What could she say to convince him?
Slumping his shoulders, Yusuke looked at him wistfully. “It would bring out the truth.” He murmured. “That he had used us, then discarded us when he deemed us as useless…”

Darkened eyes slid to him. “And who are you to say anything about this?! If I remember correctly, you were the one dogging that old man’s steps.” Daichi remarked scathingly. “You had it the best out of all of us.”

Flinching at the obvious insult, Yusuke clenched a hand near his chest. “I know...I had convinced myself that what Madarame was doing was fine, because to otherwise acknowledge the truth that he hadn’t cared for any of us...it hurt.” He took a deep breath. “I had recently learned that he had let my mother die in order to steal her work. The “Sayuri.””

Nakanohara turned to him in shock. “What..? I hadn’t heard of this...I thought that was the one he honestly painted.”

Daichi snorted. “As if that old man had ever painted anything good in his life. I’m not surprised that the “Sayuri” wasn’t his either...Sorry about your mom, though.” He added reluctantly, a glimpse of pity in his eyes.

Yusuke inclined his head. “Thank you. But the fact of the matter is, all of us who painted those artworks are left to suffer while he basks in our achievements. We need to take back what’s rightfully ours.” He explained resolutely. “And to do that, we must gather our brothers and sisters to testify. Even this one article can damage his reputation.”

Airi nodded in agreement. “Please, Hattori-san. If not for yourself, then for those who had suffered alongside you. You can reclaim your artworks and get royalties. That can help you get off the streets.”

Akira stepped forward. “I may not know much about art, but...I know what has been done to you and the others is inexcusable. You’re angry about it, right?” He crouched down to the same eye level as the homeless artist. “Then fight. Fight for what’s yours. You don’t have to keep taking this.” He hardened his eyes. “You deserved better.”

Daichi stared at him for a long moment. “...You really think so?” He asked quietly.

Airi nodded. “All we’re asking is for you to tell the reporter what you went through. Nothing else.”

Sighing heavily, he nodded. “...Fine. Send the reporter over. I’ll tell her my sob story.” He gritted out.

Nakanohara raised both brows. “Really? You’re agreeing, just like that?”

Daichi snorted. “The kid’s got a good argument. I shouldn’t be taking this...I could’ve made it years ago if that old coot hadn’t spread those rumors about me.” He scowled. “He ruined everything...I’d take any chance to bring him down a peg or two.”

The salaryman nodded. “Fair enough. Here,” He took out a couple thousand yen from his pocket and held it out. “This will help tide you over until we get your name under your portraits.”

Grumbling, Daichi accepted it, shoving the bills into his pockets. “Don’t want your pity money…”

Nakanohara stared at him in amusement. “Yeah, yeah. Just like when you didn’t want those lollipops I bought, but you took one anyway.”
The homeless artist blushed in embarrassment. “Sh-Shut up! That was back when we were teenagers…”

Smiling timidly, Yusuke bowed to his former senpai. “Daichi-nii-, no. Hattori-san. Thank you for accepting our request.” He was no longer someone he could call older brother. The time between his leaving the atelier and now, the older man had changed in ways that made him unrecognizable.

Daichi stared at the teenager. “...Yeah, yeah.” He waved him away. “I’m doing this so I can get my artwork back.” He looked away uncomfortably, as if he wanted to believe it himself. “…Now scram. I’ll talk to the damn reporter when they get here.”

Airi bowed, and the group left him where he was, regrouping near the Hachiko statue. That was the second apprentice on their side. Hopefully they’d keep succeeding on their quest.

Taking her phone out, she sent a message to Ohya about another apprentice. “OK, that’s the second one we’ve got on our side. The third one is…” She pursed her lips. "Pretty close."

Akira glanced at her, shouldering his bag with Morgana in it. “Who is it?”

“Do you remember the waitress at the Diner?” She asked, putting her phone away. “Her name is Kamiya Yukimi.”

Yusuke quickly turned toward her with his eyes wide open. “That really was her, then? I wasn’t imagining it?”

She turned to him in surprise. “You knew?”

He nodded hesitantly. “She had seemed so familiar, but...there was also something about her that was fundamentally different. I thought she was someone else.”

Airi gazed at him sympathetically. “There was life in her school photo. That waitress didn’t…” She took a deep breath. “She has that look of someone who doesn’t care if she dies…”

Yusuke looked at her in horror. “Then we shall do something about it. It’s not too late…” He clenched his hands. “She only left a few years ago.”

Checking his watch, Nakanohara pursed his lips. “It should be time for a shift change. Hopefully we can catch her…”

Morgana sighed, leaning against Akira’s shoulder. “Just getting one guy was hard enough…” He flicked his tail lacklusterly. “They must’ve had it really bad…”

They walked over to Central Street, avoiding the masses of people and going up the stairs to the Diner. “Welcome!” The host welcomed them with a bright smile at the entrance, the quiet murmurs in the diner a contrast to the noisy outdoors. “Will you be eating here or getting take out?”

The adult of the group shook his head. “Sorry, we’re looking for Kamiya Yukimi. Is she working today?”

They blinked in surprise. “Yukimi-chan..? Sure, she’s in the employee room right now. Her shift just ended. Are you her friends?”

Yusuke looked down. “You could say that…”
They smiled hopefully. “That’s so good to hear! Yukimi-chan’s been working here for a little over a year now, and always asks for extra shifts, but…” They paused, a wistful expression on their face. “We’ve been really worried about her. We’ve never seen her talk to anyone unless the job demanded her to…” They pursed their lips. "Are you really her friends, though? She's very uncomfortable with men. I can believe the young lady could be a friend, but..."

A hinge creaked as a door opened behind the host, and they turned their heads to the employees only door. “Oh, there she is now!” The host gestured.

Blank eyes looked up at them as she closed the door behind her. “Yes?” Yukimi asked quietly. Now out of her diner uniform, she wore a simple long sleeved shirt and jeans, both fraying from age and wear. Her short black hair was taken out of her usual bun, falling to her shoulders with choppy ends.

Pasting a friendly smile on her face, Airi walked up to her. “Hello Kamiya-san. My name is Kimisawa Airi. I don’t know if you remember, but the two men behind me remember you.”

She glanced at both Yusuke and Natsuhiko, her eyes staying blank. “...I know.” She replied monotonously.

Airi blinked. “O-Oh, well...If you don’t mind, could we speak with you for a couple of minutes? We won’t waste too much of your time…”

Yukimi shrugged. “Do whatever you’d like.” Walking past them, she waved to the host before descending the stairs at a calm pace, her actions more akin to a robot than a human’s.

The group looked at each other awkwardly and slowly followed her, watching as she dodged into the 777 convenience store that Akira had worked at. They observed through the window as she grabbed the cheapest items off the rack, a couple cups of ramen and onigiri, and walked up to the cash register.

Yusuke furrowed his brow worriedly. “Is that what she eats every day..?”


Airi deadpanned. “And it’s not healthy for you, or for her.”

Morgana snickered. “ Seriously, if only we could use the cafe's stock, then I wouldn’t be stuck eating canned cat foo-” Stiffening, Akira covered the feline’s mouth.

Airi looked at him in disbelief. “Canned cat food?...Really? I thought you said you were feeding him.” She accused disapprovingly.

Akira smiled sheepishly. “I can’t really afford much…It’s not like I’m eating much better.”

Yusuke raised a brow. “I assume your meals are not up to your standards, Morgana?”

Shaking off the hand from his mouth, the feline groomed his whiskers. “It’s little better than trash, I assure you.” He grimaced. “I assume since my current form is that of a cat, that it doesn’t taste as bad as it would if I were in my proper human form.”

The artist nodded in understanding. “I see…”

Nakanohara watched them with an odd look. “Are you guys...talking to the cat?”
The teenagers looked at each other awkwardly, remembering that no one else could understand. “Uhh…”

The doors of the convenience store slid open and Yukimi walked out with her purchases. They followed her to a nearby park, not a single soul in sight other than them. Choosing a far away bench, she sat down. Unwrapping an onigiri, she bit into it, chewing mechanically as she stared ahead with a dead expression in her eyes.

They looked at each other. “Um, Kamiya-san…” Airi called out, raising one eyebrow. “Can we talk with you now?”

The waitress stiffened, as if she had forgotten they were there. “...Oh, right.” She took another bite. “What do you want?”

Yusuke looked at her sadly, barely concealed disgust in his eyes as she talked with her mouth full, grains of rice spewing out. “Yukimi-nee, it’s me. Yusuke.”

She stilled, the rice ball still in her mouth. “…Who?” She replied, trying to sound nonchalant but the shake in her voice confirmed that she knew.

Nakanohara rolled his eyes. “Yukimi, we know who you are, you know who we are. You confirmed it earlier at the Diner.” He stated firmly. “Stop pretending and listen to us.”

Airi gave him a warning look before taking a seat next to their target. “Kamiya-san, we know the truth about Madarame. That’s why we have Yusuke-kun and Nakanohara-san with us.” She explained softly. She didn’t want to set her off. It had been a couple of years since Yusuke lost contact with her. Who knew what she went through to get here today… “How have you been since you left?”

Yukimi squashed the snack in her hand, rice spilling between her fingers. “…How have I been?” She whispered, ducking her head so her dark fringe covered her eyes. “How have I been? How have I been?!” Her voice grew louder.

The guys took a step back, watching for the inevitable shouting. Ears pressed against his scalp, Morgana hid back inside the bag. Airi sat there calmly, observing the other girl with the patience of a psychiatrist. Do it. Blow up. Let it all out.

“Oh, I’ve been great!” Yukimi replied sarcastically. “I just love having to work my ass off just so I could afford rent in the dingiest part of Ueno! I love going home to my barely affordable three tatami mat apartment! I love not being able to afford to eat! And I just loooove having to smile and look like I have a good time at work!” She growled. “What do you think!? I was homeless! Sensei threw me out once I fucked up!” She screeched in fury, throwing the remains of the onigiri onto the ground.

“I begged and begged and no one ever helped me! I had to live on the streets..!” She panted, launching herself off the bench to pace back and forth. “That old shack wasn’t the best of places to live, sure, but it had a roof! It had a bathroom! It had a working shower!” She scrunched up her face in disgust. “I had to drop out of school because I couldn’t afford the tuition. I couldn’t afford to paint. I couldn’t afford anything! The only places that hired me were seedy bars that only wanted girls!- ” She stopped, chest heaving up and down.

Not a single sound could be heard except for her loud breathing as they watched her with grim expressions.
“...No one cared. They told me not to care.” Her arms slowly reached up to hug herself, her nails digging into her shirt.

Nakanohara flinched. “What do you…”

Airi held her arm out, stopping him. Holding up a finger before her lips, she let the Teller know to stay quiet. She had to say this. Any sort of interruption could make her regress in her rant, and she’d shy away again.

Not hearing her former senpai, Yukimi continued quietly. “...They told me not to flinch when the customers would touch me…” She stared ahead blankly, lost in dark memories. “They told me I could make more money if I talked to him. All you have to do is talk to him, Yukimi. Just talk…” She bit her lip, the pressure hard enough to break through skin.

Small drops of blood began to bloom, slowly dripping down her chin. Collapsing into a fetal position, she gripped her head, pulling at her short hair. “...I’m so unclean. “Happy Snow”...I don’t deserve this name.” Yukimi stated shakily, tears clouding her brown eyes. “Why did I let him do that to me..? They told me it was my fault. Did I really want it..?”

Standing up from the bench, Airi took two long strides before kneeling in front of the broken artist. “No.” She wrapped her arms around her. “It wasn’t your choice. It was never your fault.”

Stiffening from the contact, Yukimi began to struggle. “No..! No, don’t touch me!” She wailed, her fingers detaching from her arms and striking up to scratch at her living cage.

“Airi..!” Akira furrowed his brow in alarm and he took a step forward, about to tear the other girl off. It didn’t matter what she had went through, no one was going to hurt Airi when he could stop it..!

Ruby eyes darted to him, and Airi shook her head as she fought to keep the waitress under control. He stopped, frowning deeply at her decision. Why didn’t she ever let him help...

Airi flinched as the other girl clawed at her face, taking a couple of strands of hair with her nails. “That’s right, Yukimi. Fight.” She commanded quietly, letting the waitress beat on her. These bruises meant nothing compared to her pain. “It wasn’t right. He took something precious from you without your consent. It didn’t matter if he overpowered you, it didn’t mean he could do that!”

Balling her hands, Yukimi beat her fists against the arms holding her back, her knuckles meeting the soft flesh. “I didn’t want it! I didn’t want it! I didn’t want it I didn’t want it I didn’t want it…!” She cried, her arms losing strength. She sobbed loudly as her resolve broke, her wails echoing through the empty playground. “Why?! She screamed. “Why did it have to happen to me?! It hurt so much...He wouldn’t stop!”

Biting her lip, Airi drew the other girl closer, letting the victim cry into her shoulder. She rocked back and forth as she felt the warm tears seep into the fabric of her blazer. “Shh…” She soothed, rubbing a hand on her back, feeling every ridge of her spine through the thin shirt. She frowned grimly. She wasn’t going to let her become the next Shiho.

Airi tightened her grip, holding the other girl closer. Never again.

Yusuke looked on in horror, the loud crying piercing his eardrums and into his brain. He doubted he could ever forget the sound in his lifetime. Though his mind was always filled with the thoughts of painting and the wide range of subjects, he couldn’t even imagine what his pseudo-sister went through. The way she talked implied she was...
He flinched, clenching his eyes. Their father figure really had ruined so many.

After many minutes, the loud sobbing died down into soft hiccups, the tears never stopping. The sun had begun to set on the horizon and the sky slowly darkened, casting shadows over them all.

Closing her eyes, Airi continued to rock the girl back and forth, humming a song that was almost inaudible to all except the child in her arms. Because that was what she was. Sure, Yukimi was twenty years old, but right now she was as vulnerable as a baby, bearing her damaged soul to the world. She wouldn’t betray that trust.

Yukimi sniffed, the sound wet from all the snot. “...Sorry.” She squeaked, her voice cracking from her breakdown. “You don’t even know me…”

Airi smiled slightly. “No, but I’m also a girl.” She rested her chin on top of the waitress’ head. “My friend, Shiho-chan, went through what you had experienced. She tried to kill herself because she couldn’t take it…”

Hiccuping, Yukimi looked up at her with red rimmed eyes, the occasional tear slipping from the corner. “...Is she OK?”

Airi nodded. “She’s alive, and much better now. It took going into a coma for her to realize it wasn’t her fault. It was all his. Disgusting men like that would look at us and think only about how our bodies would please them…” She sneered, remembering how Kamoshida had started treating her as well. Especially how he thought of her in the Palace.

“But you have to realize, there are men out there who would never, ever think of harming you.” She smiled softly, looking to the side where her companions stood. “Especially the men right here.”

Yukimi stilled, forgetting that there were others who watched her cry like a baby. Quickly moving back from the cellist, she wiped her eyes frantically, sitting on her legs. “Um…” She sniffed. “...Right.” Biting her lip, she looked up at her fellow apprentices apologetically as she let her walls fall. “Sorry...I was a bitch.”

Snapping out of his dark thoughts, Yusuke quickly shook his head. “No! Please do not apologize to us, Yukimi-nee.” He hesitantly walked over and knelt next to her, taking out a handkerchief from his back pocket. “You have every right…” He looked down, self loathing welling up inside him. “If only I had rebelled sooner, maybe you would not have to go through that…”

Yukimi slowly reached out, taking the piece of cloth. Wiping her face of fluids, unknowingly smearing the blood, she quickly drew the younger man into a hug. “I missed you so much…” She cried, a few more tears escaping her blood shot eyes. “I’m sorry, Yusuke…”

His eyes softened and reciprocated, wincing when he felt all her ribs. She was too skinny. “I missed you as well, nee-chan...Please listen to what we have to say.”

She nodded before noticing she was staining his white uniform shirt with the blood from her lips. “Oh!...” She tried to wipe it with her thumb, but only succeeded in smearing the blood further into the fabric. “Ah, fuck…”

Yusuke chuckled, before breaking out into laughter. “Don't worry about it. I can bleach it later…”

Letting them talk it out, Akira walked over to Airi, kneeling next to her as he observed the scratches with worry. None of them were bleeding, the cuts being too shallow. “Are you OK..?” He whispered.
Airi smiled, sitting down on the ground from her kneel. Her thighs were burning from exertion. “Don’t worry. We’ll just have to go to Dr. Takemi later.” She winced at the rips on her shirt and the small pool of blood drying near her collar. “I’ll have to sew this up…”

Now that there wasn’t any yelling, Morgana sneakied his head through the opening in the bag. “You sure, mom?” He asked concernedly. “I’m pretty sure there’s a Recov-R gel in here somewhere…” He dove back into the crevices of the bag, digging through the books and pencils.

“Hey…” Akira pursed his lips as he watched his bag become a jumbled mess. “Don’t mess it up too badly…” He was ignored as an eraser flew out and hit him right in the center of his cheek, falling to the gravel with a plop.

Airi covered her mouth as she laughed quietly, wincing when she pulled an open cut.

Deadpanning, the bespectacled teenager reached into his bag, bypassing the feline with a yowl, and grabbed the tube. “Hey!” Morgana complained, turning back around. “I had it!”

Akira rolled his eyes and squeezed out the medicinal gel. With the gentleness of a feather, he applied it to the wounds on her face, furrowing his brow in concentration.

“Um…” Airi blushed, feeling the tips of his fingers dancing on her skin. Didn’t it seem like they were always touching one another like this? “I-I can do that…”

His hands stilled, index finger still on the evaporating cut on her cheek. Sighing, he lightly enveloped the side of her face, his hand dwarfing her cheek. “I want to, OK…?” He answered quietly, gazing at her with soft eyes. “Let me help you with this, at least…”

Her face was almost feverish compared to his cool palm. “OK…”

He continued his ministrations, not a single perverted thought entering his head. Now wasn’t the time for that. He could only worry for her and her brash need to accept injuries. “Why is it always you getting injured…”

Airi huffed in amusement. “It’s worth it if I can help someone.” She glanced away morosely, making sure her voice was at a whisper so the waitress wouldn’t hear. “Bruises and cuts fade, but a person’s soul will never heal completely without pain. You have to clear the wound before it can heal, or else it’ll get infected again…”

Yusuke sat down in seiza position, ignoring the gravel digging into his knees through his thin pants. “Yukimi-nee, we’re trying to gather as many of our brothers and sisters to share our story.” His face hardened. “We have a reporter who has agreed to publish an article of our testimonies against Madarame. We can take our art back.”

Yukimi squinted at him as she wiped her face. “What..? How is that even going to work? No one would ever believe it, even if we gathered all of us.” She looked down bleakly. “A lot of them aren’t even around anymore…”

Nakanohara flinched. “Wait, what? What do you mean by that?”

She sighed, hugging her knees. “What did you think I did after I got kicked out? I tried to find the others…” She mumbled. “…Most of them are gone. Dead, I mean. From what I heard, they tried to blab about Sensei and too many people listened. I couldn’t find any markers or graves for them but they’re listed as deceased in the city registry.” She tilted her head up at the sky. “The rest left the city, trying to get away. I… I thought about doing that, too.”
Yusuke furrowed his brow in disbelief. “What..? You think Madarame had murdered them?” He sputtered. “But he wouldn- No…” He looked down. “He would…”

Yukimi gave him an odd look, wiping away the last remnants of her breakdown. “Do you know something?”

He sighed heavily. “The “Sayuri” painting that he is so famous for was actually my mother’s. He…” He clenched his hands. “He let her die so he could take it for himself.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “...Damn. I...I’m so sorry, Yusuke.” She frowned. “I always wondered why you were there when you were a kid…”

Yusuke nodded despondently before shaking his head. “That is...not the point. The point is, we know this will work. We only need more proof.”

Yukimi looked at him skeptically. “I...guess I could. You’re sure..?”

He nodded firmly. “Yes.” There was that small voice of doubt niggling in the back of his head, but he brushed it off. He was the newest member after all, and his more experienced teammates had assured him it was a success. All they needed was the confession itself.

Yukimi heaved a sigh, feeling the fight leave her. “All right, all right. I’ll do it for you.”

Nakanohara gave her an unimpressed look. “And not me?”

She stuck her tongue out. “You were mean to me, so no, you stick-in-the-mud.”

Perking up from her spot just a few feet away, Airi got up from the ground, Akira following along sedately like a moody puppy. “Thank you so much, Kamiya-chan!” She smiled softly. “You’re so brave.”

The waitress studied her for a moment before blushing, remembering that this was the person who comforted her just a few minutes ago. A total stranger who didn't know her, but wanted to help. That soft smile was so warm. “...T-Thanks, um. Airi, right?” She glanced away, rubbing the back of her head. “You’re really c-cute...Wanna go on a date sometime?”

Flabbergasted, the group gaped at her. “Huh?!” Airi blinked rapidly, feeling her cheeks heat up. She had never been asked out before, let alone by another girl. This was all new grounds for her. “Um...” Her eyes darted to her left where Akira was standing as stiff as a board.

Akira was frozen to the spot. Did he hear that right...? She asked Airi out? There was never a thought in his mind that a girl would try to steal her affections, especially when they barely knew each other. This opened up a whole new can of worms in his head. Was she into girls? Not that he had a problem with that, except now he was doubting whether she even liked him…

Rolling his eyes, Morgana jumped up onto the catatonic teenager’s shoulder and swatted the back of his head with a paw. “Wake up.”

Wincing at the hit, Akira rotated his head to glare at the feline. He was having an internal crisis here!

Pursing her lips, Airi gave them a hesitant smile before turning back to the other girl. She was flattered but... “Sorry, Kamiya-chan, I’m not interested.” She grinned sheepishly, fiddling with her braid. “But I’ll be happy to be friends?”
Pouting, Yukimi reluctantly nodded. “Yeah, I had a feeling that guy behind you was your boyfriend anyway, but I had to try, right?” She narrowed her eyes at the sputtering transfer student. “I don’t really like you ‘cause you’re a guy and you look flaky as hell, but girls like that,” She jerked a thumb at the class president. “Are one of a kind, so don’t fuck up.”

Gaping, Akira closed his mouth with a click. “Of course.” He replied in a clipped tone.

Airi blushed, noticing he hadn’t refuted it. “We-We’re not...together like that.” She glanced away awkwardly. “Um...Anyway, moving on.” She cleared her throat. “I’ll let the reporter know where to contact you. Is the Diner OK?”

Yukimi nodded. “Yeah, it’s fine. The staff loves me there.” She squinted her eyes. “...You promise this will help? I can...” Her eyes darted down to the ground before bouncing back up with a hopeful glimmer. “I can paint again?”

Yusuke nodded. “Of course, Nee-chan. Why don’t I lend you some supplies in the meantime?” Reaching into his back pocket, he brought out a few brushes and tubes of acrylic paint. “Here.”

Airi gave him an odd look. “Uh, Yusuke-kun...When did you have those?” Call her a pervert, whatever, but she knew that his back pockets couldn’t have had so many objects.

Yusuke gave her a naive smile, unable to hear her thoughts. “I always carry some supplies with me, as well as this.” Reaching behind him, he took out a sketchbook the size of a monitor.

Airi stared. Where...Where did that come from? There was no way he could’ve hid such a giant notebook in his pants. Was it secured on his back underneath his uniform? But the shirt was tight enough that they would’ve seen something while walking behind him...

Glancing at his watch, Nakanohara cleared his throat. “It’s getting late and I still have work tomorrow. Why don’t we end this for the day and try again another time?” He quirked his lips. “We got two on our side today, five in total. That’s still a success, right?”

Akira nodded. “Right. We also know the next one’s working at the hospital and we can resume from there.”

The salaryman sighed. “I’m going to...need to do some of my own research, too. I honestly had no idea that a bunch of us were gone.” He held his head down in shame. "I was too engrossed in my own suffering..."

Yusuke looked down forlornly. “Yes...We were too late to help them, but...” His eyes hardened. “We can still save the ones who are alive. I swear this.”

Chapter End Notes

Japanese schools require a tuition fee for every level, ranging from first grade to high school. There are scholarships available, but public school tuition costs around ¥112,000 a year (About $1120) and private schools such as Shujin would cost around ¥785,000 (About $7850). However, high school education isn't mandatory by law, so a lot of people may only have a middle school education working in minimum wage jobs.
“W-Wait, Akira..!” Airi complained while her classmate and leader encircled an arm around her shoulders, guiding her to a certain doctor’s clinic in their neighborhood. “I’m fine!” She showed him a ripped sleeve, the skin unmarred underneath. "See?"

They were back in Yongenjaya after parting with Yusuke and Natsuhiko at the station. Yusuke had mentioned he was going to take that time to reconnect with his pseudo brother and sister. Letting the artist make up for lost time, Akira immediately dragged Airi onto the train back to their neighborhood.

“We should get Dr. Takemi to make sure.” Akira answered shortly as they walked up to the elevator that would bring them up to the clinic, and pressed the button. “I’m not a doctor, and gel can’t solve everything.”

Morgana made sure to hide inside the bag, nose wriggling from the strong scent of antiseptics. “Yeah, mom. As a phantom thief, you should always be in top shape.”

With a ding, the elevator doors slid open and they walked in, heading to the third floor. “I guess…” Airi reluctantly acquiesced.

Akira raised a brow. “Why are you so against going? You worked here before, right?”

The elevator dinged, opening its doors for them and they walked out, opening the door to the clinic. “Once, yeah. I just…” She hunched her shoulders. “I’m used to patching myself up. It’s expensive to visit a doctor, even though she charges me less...Besides, they’re just scratches.” She didn't want to waste the little precious amount of savings she had on something that will heal just fine, given time. She was used to small injuries like this, and she didn't need a doctor to tell her so. Even though she admitted it'd be wiser.

Stopping in front of the check-in window, Akira gave her an exasperated look. “And it could get infected. Dr. Takemi,” He turned toward the reception desk where the punk styled woman gave them a raised brow, looking up from a folder. “Airi got hurt earlier. We just want to make sure everything’s OK.”

Airi looked away guiltily. “No, it’s fine.” She noticed the doctor’s skeptical look at the rips and tears in her uniform. “Really!”

Rolling her eyes, the doctor stood up from her chair and gestured them to an examination room. Not listening to the cellist's protests, Akira dragged her in and sat her down on a chair with his hands on her shoulders. She pouted, wincing a bit when her skin pulled around the edges of a still open wound. He was treating her like a petulant child.
Taking a seat in the doctor's chair, Takemi swerved her seat to face them. “All right, shirt off.” She commanded quietly, snapping on a pair of gloves. “Guinea Pig, you can stay or get out.”

With a blush, Akira glanced at Airi and finally noticed for the first time since receiving them that a lot of the scratches were centered around her arms and waist. “I...I’ll wait outside.” He rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly and quickly left the room, closing the door behind him.

Once the door was closed and the only one who would see her was another woman, Airi pouted and unbuttoned her shirt, leaving her in just a bra. “You don’t have to, Doctor…”

Takemi watched her impassively. “It’s my job.” Holding a pen flashlight in one hand, she examined the shallow cuts on her patient, experimentally pulling at the edges with a gloved finger.

Airi held still, minute eye twitching the only indication that she felt pain.

With a sigh, the doctor turned off the flashlight and placed it down, replacing it with tweezers and a cotton ball. “Well, one good thing is that it’s not serious, though you knew that. I’ll just disinfect and wrap them.” Dipping the cotton ball into alcohol, she slowly and precisely dabbed the surface of the injuries. “They’re healing slower than normal. Have you been using too much Recov-R?”

Airi laughed sheepishly. “Um, yeah...There had been some situations.” Like Shiho scratching her wrists, Kamoshida's castle, Mementos wounds, and last but not least Madarame's museum. Granted, they all had suffered various injuries, ranging from tiny cuts to large gashes, but they have yet to receive anything bigger. She dreaded the day anyone on her team would get seriously injured.

The doctor quirked her lips in displeasure. “You know the medicine gets less effective the more it’s introduced to the system. The only way to maximize the healing effect is to space out the usage.”

The tweezers clattered onto the metal tray as she picked up a roll of gauze, wrapping it around the teenager’s torso and arms. “There.” She patted it down, making sure it was secure. “Not too tight?”

Airi shook her head. “Feels fine. Thank you.” She buttoned her shirt again and frowned down at the rips. It was almost irreparable, but hopefully she could restore it. Uniforms were expensive and she couldn’t afford to buy one on top of the scholarship fees.

A knocking on the door broke her thoughts. “Um, are you guys done?” Akira asked through the door.

“Yeah, you can come in.” Airi assured, rolling down her sleeves.

The door opened and he walked back in to take a seat on the bed. “So? Everything good?”

“Yes.” Takemi replied distractedly, writing something on her clipboard. “Since you’re here, though...Want to do a trial? I’ve been meaning to test this new mixture.”

Akira blanched, slowly putting his bag down next to the bed. Takemi eyed him for a moment. “Are you backing out...? Don’t you need this for “college exams”?”

Blinking, Airi looked at the two in confusion. What did they agree on exactly?

Akira swallowed. To be completely honest, he was scared to try another of her concoctions. Who knew what it would do to him this time. But...
His eyes slid to Airi. She was here with him. It should be fine, right?...Right? “...Uh, all right.”

A sly smile slowly grew on her face, and Takemi moved to the medical fridge next to the window. Opening the door, she grabbed a glass bottle, the cold crispy fog enveloping her arm. Slamming it closed with a bang, she poured the mysterious purple liquid into a disposable cup and handed it to the victi- volunteer. “I made various adjustments to the previous drug, based on your trial results.” Her cool eyes slid to her other patient. “I can assume you’ll keep this quiet, Kimisawa-chan?”

“Um…” Airi glanced over at Akira who nodded jerkily. “Yes, I will. I just...Is this really safe?” She bit her lip worriedly. “It’s not that I don’t trust you. I’m just worried, you know…”

The doctor gave her an amused smirk. “I promise I won’t kill your friend here. He’s too important to this project to kill.” She turned back to her volunteer. “All right, drink it down in one gulp.”

Paling at her casual mention of offing him, Akira looked down at the “medicine” bleakly. Taking a deep breath, he knocked his head back and drained the cup. ‘It’s sour and bitter...The smell is terrible.’ He cringed, feeling the thick liquid travel down his esophagus like sludge. The experience left him reeling, his chest tightening from the sensation.

Trying to take a deep breath, he found that he couldn’t. ‘I’m having a hard time breathing…’ A weak curse left his lips and he collapsed in a heap on the bed, black swimming in from the corners of his vision.

Eyes widening in horror, Airi shot up from her seat and quickly went to his side. “Akira!” She furrowed her brow, hands hovering above his unmoving form. “Dr. Takemi, is he OK..?”

The doctor only chuckled as she wrote down her observations on her clipboard, watching the now twitching patient with a keen eye. “Ah, his reaction to it is absolutely perfect.”

Airi gave her an incredulous look. This was something she expected?!

With a violent twitch, Akira coughed, eyes snapping open. “Wha-...” He coughed violently, covering his mouth with a hand as he tried to sit up. His body wasn’t responding like usual, though, and he could only lean on his elbow for a few seconds before collapsing back onto the thin mattress.

“You feel a bit dazed, hm?” Takemi hummed, her pen scratching against paper as she wrote down his symptoms. “Yes, I mixed in some special...components.”

Airi frowned, reaching out to help Akira sit up before stopping just before she touched him. First lesson from the doctor had been that she shouldn’t be touching a patient with bare hands.

Quickly grabbing a pair of disposable plastic gloves from a box, she snapped them on and gently lifted him up into a sitting position, supporting him by his shoulders. It was exactly what he would do for her, had done for her, and she would do her best to be there for him as well.

“OK, let’s take your temperature and blood pressure.” Takemi stated, taking out a prepared thermometer and rolling the sphygmomanometer from the corner, sticking the former instrument under his armpit and wrapping the latter around his arm, squeezing the pump. “I’m also going to draw some blood. I want to perform a few motor skill tests...” She lifted her eyes to observe the almost catatonic teenager, his head lolling around like a bobble head toy, taking the thermometer back once it beeped. “But those might be too much for you right now.”

Akira couldn’t even protest, the muscles in his face refusing to respond to his command. If it wasn’t for Airi, he’d still be sideways on the bed and not in a hunched over sitting position.
He couldn’t help but be a little impressed, though. He wasn’t exactly a heavy guy, but he weighed enough that he could feel through her shaking hands that she was having a hard time keeping him upright, yet she still did it anyway. He was thankful that she was here, otherwise he’d be scared with only Morgana for company. The feline wouldn’t be able to save him from the doctor.

“Anyway, since we’re in the final stages, I should first stabilize the fundamental formula…” Takemi murmured to herself, tearing the sphygmomanometer off, writing down the numbers.

“Oh, so you ARE here.”

The two fully conscious occupants snapped their heads up, the younger girl paling at the sight of a stern police officer walking into the examination room.

The doctor narrowed her eyes at the unwanted intruder. “…I’m in the middle of an examination.” She sighed sharply as Akira weakly looked up, gaining movement in his limbs again. “I’ve told you before, Officer. If you want to investigate me, you need to show me a warrant.”

Airi watched the cop warily, gripping her gloved fingers around firm shoulders. She didn’t know how this was going to turn out, but if the officer found out what was actually happening, they’d be in big trouble. He was here for the doctor, but what if Madarame had contacted his private investigators to come after them?

The cop hmphed. “I’m here because we received a report.” He sneered down at the doctor. “I’ll need to see a detailed statement of medical expenses and full medical records.” He eyed the scattering of paper on her desk and smirked. “I bet you didn’t have enough time to hide any incriminating documents, huh?”

Takemi listened with a cold glare, glancing down at her phone. “…Must be under the orders of the Medical Chief of Staff.” She gestured to the files in front of her. “Here you go.”

The officer was taken aback. “Huh..?”

She jerked her chin at the two teenagers still in the room. “These two are my only patients today.” She watched him coolly before looking down at her clipboard, continuing her notes. “If you’re asking for their medical expenses, I’m guessing I’m under suspicion of improper billing? But without a receipt, I’d say you’ve been sent on a wild goose chase.”

The officer furrowed his brow in confusion. “Wh-What’s going on here..?” He asked hesitantly, his bravado from seconds ago disappearing under her unexpected compliance.

“You’re being manipulated.” Takemi stated bluntly. “That “report” is fictitious. It’s nothing but an attempt to harass me.”

He scrunched up his face. “What?!” His eyes darting around, landing on the two teens. “…Hey, you two! What’re you doing here?!” He narrowed his eyes. “You don’t seem sick...Are you up to something illegal?!”

Flinching at the accusations, Airi opened her mouth to reply when a hand was held in front of her, cutting her off. “I have a bad heart.” Akira replied quietly, letting his arm fall onto his lap. “She’s here to support me.”

The officer sputtered. “A-A bad heart..?”

Takemi nodded. “He’s stressed about taking his entrance exams. I have some drugs that help with relaxation.”
He opened his mouth, closed it, then opened it again. “Well, I…” He glanced around, trying to find something else to use as evidence. His eyes landed on the cuts in the class president’s shirt. “…H- Hey, where’d you get those cuts then?!” He pointed at her torso. “Did this woman give them to you?!”

Airi blinked rapidly, trying to think up an excuse. She couldn’t say someone attacked her, or else he might ask for a description. “Uh...I,” The bag next to them rustled, unnoticed by the adults and an idea came to her. “…Had to trim my cat’s claws. He gets really unruly about it and got me good this time, so I had Dr. Takemi disinfect and wrap them.” She smiled innocently. It was a good thing her cuts hadn’t bled. “She always does such a good job, too.”

Giving her former volunteer an amused smile, Takemi turned back to the officer. “So, is there anything else? As you can see, I’m pretty busy here.” She flipped a page, rereading a chart. “You’re obstructing their health.”

He sputtered, before closing his mouth with a click. “…Fine. You’re infuriating, you know that?” He crossed his arms. “But I’d expect nothing less from the “Plague.”” With a turn of his heel, he walked out of the examination room.

Hearing the reception door slam from down the hall, the doctor sighed and rolled her eyes. “I’m so over this…”

Now with all his strength back, Akira looked at her questioningly. “Harassment?”

Takemi let out a groan. “You couldn’t infer the meaning from the conversation? I get so irritated whenever it comes up.” She rubbed her neck. “It’s nothing to worry about. I’m sure it was my former superior who made that false report. You eavesdropped on our conversation the other day, remember?”

Airi watched her with concern as she sat down in a chair, not really knowing what had just happened. “If he’s bothering you, maybe you should file a harassment suit?”

Takemi shook her head. “He’s just trying to put pressure on me…by having the police investigate me and my practice.” She grimaced. “There’s no point in taking this to court.”

Getting up from her chair, she opened a cabinet and took out a sterile syringe and tourniquet. “Anyway, I need to draw some blood. There’ll be some mild anemia, but only temporary. You’ll be fine.” Placing the equipment next to the patient, she also acquired an alcohol wipe and a collection tube from the drawer. “…It’s part of our “deal,” remember?”

Sweatdropping, Akira pursed his lips. ‘I guess I have no choice…’ He exhaled and he unbuttoned off his blazer, rolling up his sleeve to show a bare arm.

Takemi smiled slyly at his compliance. “I like kids who listen to their superiors.” She chuckled, covering her mouth with her clipboard. “I’m going to draw more blood than usual since you’re healthy and all…”

He sweated, ducking his head.

“...Only kidding.” She quirked her lips. “OK, please lie down. You can go home once I’m done. You should have Kimisawa-chan escort you just in case.”

He nodded, trying to calm his racing heart. Lying back down on the bed, the wax paper crinkling under his body, he stared up at the ceiling, dread filling his body. He hated needles. His muscles jumped when he heard the doctor tear off the sterile packaging off the needle next to him, and he
clenched his hands.

Slim plastic covered fingers enveloped one of them, and he tilted his head up to see Airi smiling gently at him, her hand reaching out to his. “I’m here with you, right? Everything will be OK.”

Taking a deep breath, he gave her a shaky smile before letting his head fall against the mattress. That didn’t calm his heartbeat, but having her with him helped somehow. She was a calming and helpful presence as always.

He flinched when the doctor tied the tourniquet on his arm, three inches above his inner elbow.

“Calm down and make a fist.” She advised, rubbing the alcohol pad on his skin. He nodded, lacing his fingers with the class president, gripping tightly. The thin needle glinted in the harsh lighting, sending a bolt of fear through him.

His breathing became labored as she pressed the needle against his skin, piercing through before he could even react. She put the collection tube in the other end of the pipe, and he watched blankly as scarlet liquid filled the transparent plastic, quickly filling the cylinder. Once it was close to full, the doctor replaced it with an empty one, repeating the process twice more before pressing a square of gauze on the collection point, pulling the needle out from underneath in one smooth motion.

“Hold it down.” She ordered as she placed the tubes into a rack for testing. Ripping a band-aid out of the wrapping, she quickly applied it on top of the gauze, sealing the wound. “You can go now. I’ll let you know when to come back.”

Akira sat up on the bed, rolling down his sleeve to cover the healing wound. “Got it...Thanks again, Doctor.”

Takemi gave him a small smile. “Get home safe, both of you. Don’t worry about the bill, Kimisawa-chan. I’ll put it under his agreement.”

Airi nodded with a thankful smile, grateful that the doctor remembered she didn't have much money, and shouldered both their bags with a wince. Morgana was heavy. “Right, I’ll make sure he gets back in one piece.”

His head spun as soon as he slid off the bed, and almost stumbled if Airi hadn’t caught him. Gripping his waist and tugging his arm over her shoulders, she slowly guided him out of the clinic and to the elevator. “Take it slow.” She murmured reassuringly. “Let me know if I’m going too fast.”

Akira nodded weakly, reluctantly leaning against her. How the tables have turned. He was the one helping her earlier and now she’s the one dragging him home.

Exiting the building, they turned right toward the supermarket before turning left on the street. “Huh..?” He furrowed his brow in confusion. This wasn’t the way to Leblanc, it was…

"We’re going to my house.” She answered, guiding him down the road. “I’m not going to let you just sleep off the anemia. It’s dangerous with your usual meals.”

He huffed. Just because he ate only ramen and curry. “Thanks…”

She smiled apologetically. “Just rest at my place until you feel better, OK? I don’t think Sojiro-san would nurse you back to health.”

Arriving at her front door a few minutes later, she carefully unwrapped his arm from her shoulder
and opened the door. Taking off their shoes, she guided him to the living room, letting him collapse on a chaise. “Rest for a while, OK?”

She placed their bags down next to him, unzipping his for Morgana to get out. “Clipping my nails, mom?” Morgana teased, stretching out his body on the floor.

She laughed quietly, mindful of the ill-feeling teenager on her couch. “Sorry about that, it was the only thing that popped into my head that would seem believable.” She glanced to her left when Akira laid down and closed his eyes. “Let’s leave him alone for a bit, OK?” She whispered. “He’s a bit dizzy from earlier.”

Morgana nodded, and they tip-toed to the dining room, crossing over to the kitchen. “What are you doing?” He asked curiously, jumping onto the counter.

She smiled, taking out a packet of beef from the fridge. “Dr. Takemi drew a lot of blood, so he must be low on iron right now. I’m going to make him a meat heavy dinner.” She placed it on the counter next to the feline and took out a knife and a cutting board from the drawer underneath. “The only thing you guys have at the cafe is curry, and that won’t help his health right now.” She washed her hands in the sink, rubbing her skin with soap under the heavy currents. “Want to help?”

Morgana perked up at the offer before slumping. “How can I? I only have paws right now…”

Smiling sympathetically, she gave him a quick kiss on his forehead. His fur was so soft and luxurious. “By keeping me company, how about that?”

Blushing from the affectionate act, he nodded, watching avidly as she prepared dinner.

With a sigh, she killed the heat, transferring the meat on top of the bowl of rice. She made sure to slice the beef thinly so Akira wouldn’t have to put too much effort into chewing. He was probably too exhausted anyway. The cookbook she had propped up to the side said to braise the meat in a skillet to boost the iron levels, so hopefully she did this correctly.

She was lucky that she could get her utensils and cooking equipment from the supermarket at low prices. Buying everything discounted always felt nice, and she didn’t need to spend more than necessary to get the same results. She honestly was proud of how far she had come, from being an invisible child scrounging for food to cooking meals for her friends.

Accompanying the meat were red mustard greens and broccoli to help him absorb the nutrients better via vitamin C. There was more meat and vegetables than rice, making sure his meal was jam packed with nutrients.

Padding over to the bowl on the counter, Morgana gave it a few tentative sniffs. “Smells amazing, mom!” He turned to give her large kitty eyes. “I have a share too, right?”

Airi gave him an amused smile, walking over to the fridge to pull out a small pack of salmon. “Is this all right? I haven’t had much time to go shopping lately, so this is all the fish I have left…”

Morgana nodded eagerly, eyes honed in on the sushi box. “Y-Yeah…” He drooled.

Filling a large cup with water, she balanced it with the large bowl of food in her hands and quickly
walked over to the living room. Setting them down on the coffee table, she leaned down to observe her guest.

Akira was sleeping quietly on her couch with one hand laying above his head, small snores escaping his slightly open mouth. His blazer was wrinkled from sleeping in it, and his hair was even messier than usual from all the laying down he did today. Completely relaxed, he seemed almost angelic by comparison to his usual self.

His glasses had fallen off when he turned on his side, and she grabbed it to make sure he wouldn’t crush them. Curiosity overtaking her, she slid them on her face and blinked.

There was no difference in her vision. These were non prescription glasses. She thought he needed them for his eyesight, but then again, he didn’t need them as Joker. He wore non prescription glasses every day?

Taking them off, she peered at the brand on the temple.

Gucci.

She covered her mouth as she placed them onto the coffee table, muffling her laughter. He wore glasses because they were designer? What a nerd.

Swallowing her giggles, she lightly placed a hand on his shoulder and gently shook him. “Akira.” She called out. No response.

She shook a little harder. “Akira.” She called out louder, getting a minute twitch of his eyes in response. She pouted before an idea hit her. It was kind of intimate, but Morgana was still in the kitchen so no one would know…

Leaning down, she hesitantly stuck out a finger, the tip making contact with his smooth neck. Lightly scratching the skin with her nail, she tickled him.

Akira shuddered, subconsciously trying to make her stop.

Airi grinned, raising her other hand. Now with twice the power, she tickled his neck on both sides, trying to get him to wake up. “AKIRAaaa…”

His face scrunching up at the ghostly sensations, he let out a groan. “Stop…” He muttered, shifting away from her.

She snickered, her hands following him. “Nope, wake up.”

He let out a sigh, still mostly asleep. “No...Airī…”

She blushed at the breathy way he said her name. It was almost like a moan…

Shaking her head, she gave up on the tickling and outright shook him. Even though it was fun, she shouldn't take advantage of his unconscious state to mess with him. “Wake up, your food is getting cold!”

Cracking one eye open, Akira turned and glared at her tiredly. “What..?”

She deadpanned. “I didn’t cook for an hour so that your food would get cold. C’mon, up you go.”

She helped him sit up on the couch and he yawned, covering his mouth. “How long have I been asleep..?” He asked drowsily, one hand going up to comb his hair with no success.
She smiled at his kitten-like behavior. “Only a little over an hour, don’t worry. I guess today’s been too much and you passed out.” Leaving the living room, she went back to the kitchen to grab herself a bowl of the same food, though much smaller in portion, and picked up Morgana’s salmon. He jumped down from the counter and followed her back, darting onto the coffee table.

Sitting down on the other chaise, she held out a pair of chopsticks to her sleepy guest. “You should eat so you can recover.”

Akira stopped rubbing an eyelid and finally looked down at the bowl in front of him. It was a huge bowl of meat, vegetables, and rice. His stomach rumbled once the delicious scents reached his nostrils, reminding him that he hadn’t eaten anything since lunch at school. “You didn’t have to…”

Airi grinned, opening the pack of salmon for Morgana. “I want to.” She repeated his words.

He chuckled, picking up his bowl and chopsticks. “Thank you, Airi...I really appreciate it. Itadakimasu.” He took his first bite of his meal, chewing the thin beef slices. “This is really good. The meat almost melts in my mouth.”

She blushed at the compliment, holding her bowl as well. “Thank you. It was my first time braising meat, so I’m glad it turned out OK…”

A phone rang out, the noise echoing through the quiet house. Furrowing his brow, Akira dug into his pocket to grasp his phone and put his bowl on the table.

**M:** Hey, you didn’t forget, did you?! **M:** You know, about that flyer! **M:** We need to look into the truth behind that housekeeping service. **M:** You said we would do it tonight! **M:** I’m over at Central Street right now.

He sweatdropped. He *did* forget.

Airi watched him curiously as his face changed from curious to almost exasperated. “Who is it?” She asked, taking another bite of her food.

Akira coughed awkwardly. Shit. She was onto him earlier. “Err...Mishima’s asking me to hang out.”

She stopped chewing, giving him a *look.*

He glanced away uncomfortably, feeling the embarrassment creep up on his shoulders. Did she actually hear them earlier..? Did she know they were going to call over a maid?

Avoiding her gaze, he turned back to his phone.

**Ak:** Can we try tomorrow instead? **M:** What? Why not today? **M:** You promised!

An idea came to him just then and he smirked. He typed another reply, seeing his classmate was typing too.

**M:** -typing-
Ak: Airi’s making me stay for dinner.
M: ...
M: ...You bastard.
M: You’re doing this on purpose!

Akira burst out laughing. Seemed like the jig was up.

“Uhh…” Airi raised her brows, watching him as he smacked his thigh repeatedly from the texts. Rolling her eyes, she turned on the TV and ignored him. The news talked about a rise in scams in Tokyo, most of the victims being younger than twenty.

She made a mental note to address this at the student council meeting on Saturday. The school should issue a warning to the students about this.

Morgana watched avidly. “It sounds like more people have been getting scammed. I feel bad for people who fall for those.”

Winding down to quiet chuckles, Akira glanced back down to his phone that vibrated with new messages.

M: Fine, tomorrow then!
M: You promise, right?!
Ak: Tomorrow night for sure.
M: OK!
M: BTW, I’m not giving up!

Smile falling, he glared at the screen and shove it back into his pocket, picking up his bowl again.

“Done?” Morgana asked, finishing the last of his salmon.

Akira grunted, crunching on the broccoli. Mishima wouldn’t give up, huh. Well, he wasn’t backing down either. They’ll do this, man to man.

“So, if you’re done with your little thing with Yuuki-kun…” Airi gave him an amused glance as he grimaced. “I’d like to ask if you’d be free maybe…tomorrow? Or Saturday.”

Akira blinked, pausing his meal. “I promised Mishima tomorrow night, so…I can do tomorrow afternoon.”

She perked up. “OK! Then…” She slowly put down her empty bowl on the coffee table and fiddled with her braid. “Would it be OK if I call in that favor?”

Licking his lips, Morgana jumped onto the couch next to her. “You mean playing your cello in public, right?”

Airi nodded shyly. “Yeah…I want to give it a try. I’ve been practicing a lot since you came over that time, so…” She took a deep breath. “Please be with me when I do this.”

Akira blinked before smiling softly. “Of course. Tomorrow then.” Standing up from the couch, he collected their empty dishes and walked to the kitchen to place them in the sink.

Airi followed after him, leaning against the counter. “Oh, you don’t have to…” She argued weakly, already knowing what he was going to say.
“I want to.” He quipped, turning on the faucet and squeezing the sponge.

They grinned together. It was like they had their own catchphrase, just for the two of them.

Stoppering the flow, he dried the bowls before placing them within the cabinet. “So...homework?”

Groaning, she flopped onto her bed. Exhaling a long breath, she smiled at her ceiling. Today had been a massive success. Not only did they find two of the former apprentices, but they got them on board with telling their stories to Ohya! They didn’t have enough time today to drop by the hospital to confront Hamasaki-san, but they were making progress.

She felt...proud of herself. As a phantom thief, their successes seemed far off, the victims never knowing it was a ragtag group of teenagers who saved them. They would never be thanked in person by their targets, but helping those apprentices and hearing their appreciation and hopes was like a balm to the soul.

She never knew how much she craved that sense of gratification, of feeling needed again. It wasn’t a plea for help with studying, or something trivial. These were people’s lives that they were affecting. And they were helping them, albeit unorthodoxically. Did this make them heroes?

Grinning, she snuggled into her blankets, cuddling the Mona plush that Ryuji gifted her on her birthday. She watched the moon through the window, its celestial light shining faintly through the glass. Tomorrow, she’d be playing her cello in public for the first time in ten years.

She gripped the plush tighter. She hoped that nothing would go wrong, even when in the forefront of her mind was her impending failure. She could already see it now. Her sitting in the wide open park, every pair of eyes on her as she messed up and someone would...would...

Closing her eyes, she tried to get some sleep. Please...don’t break down.

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With one last drag of her bow, she let the note end, breathing out. The crowd burst into applause, most of them grudgingly clapping since she wasn’t their child. The loudest cheerers from the crowd were her parents, sitting right up in center in front of her. "Hime-sama!!" Her dad yelled out exuberantly.

With a big grin, she held up her brand new child-sized cello and stood up from the chair, bowing to the audience.

“A great performance by Kimisawa Airi, children’s division!” The announcer of the local talent show cheered, and she bowed again before walking off the stage and into the back. Her heart was pounding in her chest as she diligently wiped down her instrument just like her mommy told her. She did her absolute best out there, and if she didn’t win...

Well, her mommy would tell her she still won her heart, so it was OK. Even when she would probably cry and throw a tantrum.
“Now announcing the winner of the children’s division…” The announcer began as the group of ten walked out onto the stage, standing nervously in their small tuxes and dresses.

Airi fidget with the hem of her dress, twisting the lace with her fingers, just the barest of callouses forming. Kaa-chan would scold her for ruining it, but right now she couldn’t care.

She stood between another girl and a boy, both of them older than her. She had tried to speak to them earlier, but they immediately brushed her off, saying they couldn’t stand to be with a baby.

She pouted. She wasn’t a baby, she was seven!

A flash distracted her, and she looked down from the stage at her Tou-chan’s wide grin, a digital camera in his hands. She didn’t believe him when he said he took time off from work since he was so busy with his research or whatever he did, but she was so happy he was there to watch her! He told her before that Kaa-chans playing was what made him fall in love, and knowing his daughter was going to be a cellist too made him the happiest man or something. She just made fun of him for being so cheesy.

“-imisawa Airi-chan! Congratulations!“

She blinked. Huh? The audience began clapping, the adults standing up in ovation. “Come on up, Kimisawa-chan!” The announcer gestured with their hand, telling her to come to the front of the stage.

She won? Her eyes were wide open as she slowly took a step forward, almost stumbling from her neighbor trying to trip her. Pouting in indignation, she stuck her tongue out at him before skipping up to the MC, a big grin taking over her round face. She won!!

She scowled as she dragged her bow against the un-tuned strings, the wretched sound reverberating through the hall. Her face held a rebellious fire in them, her red eyes burning from being forced to do this. It was a complete contrast to only five months ago when her parents still lived and watched her performance, when she was innocent to death.

She hated this. The matrons had wanted her to play a Holy song for their "guests," but the only one she really knew was Canon in D. Whatever she liked about this piece was now burned to the ground as she played it incorrectly, placing her fingers on the wrong boards. Her hands ached from the bruises on her palms, yet another punishment for being a "heathen," and her rear was sore from humiliating spankings. Dark circles marred the area below her eyes from being in this hellish nightmare.

She hated this place, she hated these people who hurt her in every way they could, she hated everything in this world for taking her life apart, for taking her parents.

Letting the last string screech, she finished with a flourish, bowing mockingly. Can they go away now? She just wanted to hide in her dorm. These people didn’t deserve to hear the music that came from her precious cello her Kaa-chan gave her.

The adults stared at her incredulously, slowly lifting their hands from their ears. “This…” A woman began, gripping the cross necklace on her chain. “This child is horrible!” She complained to the matron who was sweating nervously and glaring daggers at the orphan. “How could you even call this talent?! That was the worst thing I’ve ever heard in my entire life!”

Her husband nodded, the stone cold sneer never leaving his face. “Absolutely worthless. There’s
“no way we’d adopt a thing like that.”

“Is she…” Another woman began hesitantly, gesturing to her temple. “Y’know...special or something? Because that was...yeah.”

“Is she retarded?” A businesswoman asked curtly, constantly checking her watch. “I’m not interested in adopting this brat. Tell your sponsor that I’m quitting the deal.” Getting up from her chair, she promptly left the premises, her heels clacking on the hard wooden floors.

Airi gaped before glaring at them, feeling their words cut her insides. A thing? Worthless? Retarded? Even if she played it like that on purpose, they didn’t have to say that. They didn’t have to refer to her as less than human. Just because she was a child didn’t mean she wasn’t a person!

Not that she wanted any of them to be her parents. No one was going to replace her Kaa-chan and Tou-chan. No one.

Face resembling a volcano about to erupt, a matron forced a smile on her face before ushering them out of the room. “This one said it had a special talent, but I suppose that was another lie coming from Its heathen mouth. Come! We have lots more children to see. There’s one named Goro who’s has shown some promise…” The potential parents left the room, following her down the halls.

The matron that stayed turned to Airi, her cold fury replacing the polite smile from earlier. “As for you…” Reaching up onto the mantle, she retrieved a piece of rope.

Wood creaked in her ears. It hurt.

With a gasp, she woke up, the early sun’s rays muffled by her curtains shining dully into the darkened room. Sitting up in the bed, she gripped the Mona plush to her, the only noise she could hear were the birds chirping and her own thundering heartbeat.

She furrowed her brow as she grimaced, wiping the sweat that stuck her hair to her forehead. Her mind really couldn’t stop playing tricks on her. She didn’t want to remember that latter part of her dream-turned-nightmare. Any sort of confidence she held in herself last night was gone now, wiped away by her memories.

She gritted her teeth when the remnants kept replaying in front of her eyes, even as she flipped the covers off her. The sound of wood splintering replaced the serene chirping, echoing in her ears as she got ready for school.

Today...was not going to be a good day.

Chapter End Notes

Takemi Rank 2
Kawakami eyed her homeroom, furrowing her brow when she noticed her class representative keep her head down. She pursed her lips but decided against saying anything and began her lecture.

“Sometimes I see people writing exactly the same things on their essays.” She griped. “Don’t think you can get away with copying stuff from some website.” She narrowed her eyes at the class. “I’ll know. Got it? Stealing someone’s ideas is plagiarism. It’s as much of a crime as stealing anything else.”

She rolled her eyes. “It’s so annoying dealing with copyright crap these days...Oh yeah, did you know this? So, you know how Sir Arthur Conan Doyle has the famous character Sherlock Holmes?” She raised a brow. “One time, another author used Holmes in his own story without permission, and Doyle protested. Now then...Kurusu-kun.”

Akira blinked, straightening up in his seat. He felt like he should know the answer to this one, even though he had never read a Doyle book. It was like his soul understood.

“What was the name of the other famous novel that Sherlock Holmes appeared in?”

His mouth opened before he could even think. “Arsene Lupin, Gentleman Burglar.” He furrowed his brow. What? An answering pulse thrummed in his chest and he exhaled. So it was true then. Their Personas all existed before, now in their hearts.

Kawakami clapped her hands, impressed. “Oh, do you like mystery novels? You’re right. It’s the ultimate showdown between the gentleman thief and the famous detective.” She turned back to the class. “But afterward, Maurice Leblanc- the author of the Lupin series- changed Sherlock’s name in his books. He changed it to “Herlock Sholmes.” He just moved the S to the start of his last name.”

“Hey, did you know that? I had no idea!”

“Kurusu-kun is so smart!”

Rubbing the back of his neck bashfully at the much nicer whispers from the rest of the class, Akira glanced to his right, expecting the usual praise from Airi. Her eyes stayed unfocused at her paper though, seemingly not hearing a thing.

He frowned faintly. What was with her today? Even earlier on the way to school, she had been unusually quiet. Her pretty smiles were subdued and almost forced, and when he asked, she only reassured him that she was fine. Was it because she was playing her cello today?

“Both Lupin and Holmes would go on to appear in a number of other works…” Kawakami
continued. “But those were homages, not plagiarism. Now, Arsene Lupin is synonymous with the idea of a “phantom thief.” He’s recognized all over the world.”

He raised a brow. Seemed like his Persona was the origin of the phantom thief phenomenon. Was this why he was chosen by Igor?

“Wow, it looks like some phantom thieves never go out of style!” Morgana purred quietly as the class continued the lesson.

Lead scratched against the thin paper, its path undetermined as it swerved from left to right to left to down.

Airi couldn’t pay attention today at all. Every lecture had passed over her head, her teachers’ voices overlapped by the creaking wood and metal in her ears. She knew it was her brain playing tricks on her, but she couldn’t get it to stop.

She even got a question wrong earlier when Ushimaru-sensei had called on her, and the class looked at her in shock. She had never gotten a question wrong so far this semester, and it was so out of character for her, but she couldn’t bring herself to care. Let them see that she’s human too. That she’s just as broken as everyone else.

Who cares about some stupid trivia answers when she couldn't stop thinking back to that time-

Airi exhaled, her mechanical pencil stilling in her hand. Get it together. 'You’re the class representative. You’re supposed to be the role model for the class, always open to help others. You have to perform later today.' It’s just one piece, she only had to play one piece of music. No one was going to come up and-

“Airi?...”

Blinking out of her trance, she looked up to see both Ann and Akira gazing down at her with worried frowns. Behind them, she could see Morgana sticking his head out of the desk just far enough to give her sad blue eyes. “Are you OK..?” The model asked hesitantly. “You’re really out of it today…”

Airi plastered on a smile, inwardly cursing herself. She hadn’t meant to worry them, it was the last thing she had wanted to do. “I’m fine!” She quickly reassured them. “Just some things, you know…”

Ann furrowed her brow, clearly not believing her. “Right...Well, if you need to talk, I’m here.” Giving her one more worried look, she walked out of the classroom to the cafeteria for lunch.

Airi sighed, slumping in her seat. What was wrong with her today. Was she really so scared to perform later because she feared that something will happen just like nine years ago? Was she going to let that incident continue to stop her from doing what she loved?

“Airi.” Akira softly whispered once he took his seat, making sure to be quiet since there were still some students in the room.

Airi blinked and turned her head to him. She had forgotten he was still here. “Y-Yeah?”

Pursing his lips, he pulled his chair up to her desk and sat backwards in the seat. “What’s wrong?”
Biting her lip, she looked away. “Nothing. I’m fine…” She mumbled, but she barely believed her own words.

Akira slowly exhaled at her answer. He placed a hand on top of her own, dwarfing her hand with his. “Don’t lie to me.” He pleaded. “Just tell me the truth?”

She stared at their hands, her fingers entwining with his on their own. “I’m just...nervous about later.” She partly lied. She was nervous, but she was also afraid. So irrationally afraid that she hated it. She hated worrying her friends because she couldn't get over her admittedly very real fear. She hated that she was worrying him. The last thing she wanted to do was to burden him with her problems.

Akira gave her a small smile, his thumb caressing the top of her hand in a soothing manner. “I’ll be with you, so you don’t have to worry. You’ll do great.”

She wanted to believe those words, she really did. “Thank you…” She smiled back, not as fake as before. She appreciated his kindness and patience.

The last bell rang, signalling the end of classes. Her heart thundering in her chest, Airi stood up from her desk and with Akira, walked out of the school building and to the train station. Ann had reminded her that Shiho’s first physical therapy session was tomorrow in the afternoon, so she’d have to work afterward.

They quickly took the train back to Yongenjaya and walked to her house, taking a detour to Leblanc so Akira could change into more casual clothes.

Opening the door at her house, she told Akira to wait in the foyer since she'd only be going up to change clothes and grab her cello. He nodded, taking out his phone to browse while she took off her shoes and ran up the steps in just her socks. Changing into a dark purple blouse and a black skirt with black leggings underneath, she reached out to stroke her beloved cello. She was going to do this.

Biting her lip, she lifted the large instrument and carefully strapped it into its case before lugging it over her shoulder. It was heavy, but she’d have to get used to it again. Carefully going down the stairs, she smiled nervously, tapping her feet into her heels. “Let’s go?”

Looking up from his phone, Akira nodded and straightened up from leaning against the shelf.

Airi locked the door behind her and they began walking down the street back to the station. “We have to go back to Shibuya and transfer onto the Keio-Inokashira Line.” She bit her lip as they swiped their wallets at the turnstiles, walking down underground to the train again. “It’s out of range for our student metros so it’ll charge...I can pay for you.”

Akira deadpanned. “I’m sure I can afford ¥190, thanks.”

She scrunched up her face, trying not to laugh. “Sorry, I’m used to offering help.”

With a rumble, the train pulled up into the station, slowly stopping at the designated markers. The doors slid open and they stepped inside. She bit her lip as her eyes darted to every person nearby, tightening her grip on her case. Every time someone shifted in her direction, she would shift away, maintaining a certain distance.
Akira watched her curiously and stayed silent. He knew she didn’t have a problem with crowds, so why so antsy now?

They walked into the park, finding a free spot near the lake. Inokashira Park was one of the most beautiful recreational parks in Tokyo, the trees and fresh air akin to out in the countryside. It was a popular tourist and relaxation spot with many overworked adults coming here to de-stress from their days at the office.

Airi sat down on the wooden railing that guarded the lake behind her. They chose a spot that was near a walking path, but far enough from the entrance that not a lot of people would be traveling this way.

Setting the case down, she unlocked it and flipped open the lid. Carefully taking her cello out from the cushion indent, she pulled out the endpin and let it balance against the ground.

Akira watched attentively from a few steps away as she got ready, but was worried about the blank expression on her face. Was she ready for this? She looked almost...ill. Why was she so afraid to play in public?

Airi cursed herself, feeling her hands trembling while she tuned the large instrument. She could do this. She was ready. She could play. No one was out to insult her or to harm her.

It wasn't going to happen again.

Making sure her bow was nice and taut, she placed it in front of the strings and took a deep breath. What to play? Hisaishi again?

Only one song came to mind and she nodded to herself, taking another deep breath to try to calm her thundering heart. It felt like she was going to throw up from the nerves. She’d take getting sick in Mementos over this any day.

“1...2...3...4...” She counted down, immediately dragging the bow against the steel cords in quick and light moves, playing the beginning notes of Bach’s cello suite no.1 prelude in G major.

It was the first piece she had ever played when she began learning cello seriously, her mother drilling the song into her brain from hours and hours of practice. Bach, Vivaldi, Kreuzter, Paganini. All the greatest composers her mother had introduced her to, teaching her the very basics of their most famous pieces.

The music flowed continuously, vibrating through the air and weaving around the trees and branches in the park. Her bow never leaving the surface of the strings, she continued the piece, feeling herself begin to relax. There were only a few stragglers around, stopping to watch from a distance away.

This was fine. She could do this. Maybe she could even perform the whole nineteen minutes...

Smiling a little at her accomplishment, her fingers danced across the neck as quickly as the note changes, playing low to high to low again. The piece was fast but paced well, with every note only taking half to a full second. It was an arpeggiated piece which was her forte, and she didn't have to spend the effort on vibrato.
“Wow, she’s good…”

“Oh, this is Bach, isn’t it?”

“What a great way to spend a day in the park. The sun is shining, the breeze is nice, there’s beautiful music being played by that girl…”

"Should we tip her?"

Akira smiled slightly from his spot near the trees at all the comments the passersby made. Everyone could see his friend at her best, playing the instrument that she loved. She really looked like she was starting to have fun, and even someone as ignorant as himself was about music, he could hear the effort and admiration she put into the melody.

A bell rang and he looked to the right, seeing a cyclist recklessly biking down the road. They rang their bell again, trying to signal to people to get out of the way, but had to swerve to not hit a person. The path they swerved to was directly in front of Airi and they swerved again, just barely missing her as they continued cycling down the path.

The beautiful music screeched and she flinched, hugging her cello close to her. Furrowing his brow in worry, he jogged up to her to see if she was OK.

In the middle of one of the climaxes of the song, Airi heard a tiny ringing sound from her left and she glanced up only to freeze. Her bow screeched against the strings as she flinched away from the cyclist who almost ran her over, just an inch away from crashing into her cello. They continued biking away as if they didn't just almost run over several people and disappeared beyond the path.

Her heart stopped as she hugged her instrument close to her, letting out a shaky breath. No. Not again. Too close! Too close! Too close, too close.

“Airi?”

Hearing her name, Airi snapped out of her fear induced panic and looked up at Akira. “Are you OK?” He asked concernedly, looking her over for any injuries. “That cyclist was really irresponsible…”

Her eyes darting around for any more threats, she jerkily nodded. “Y-Yeah...That was...That was really close.” She swallowed nervously, feeling the high from earlier disappear as she began to hyperventilate. Her hands were beginning to shake. “I don’t...I don’t think I can do this.” She couldn't risk it. That was too close.

Akira gave her a look of confusion and took a step closer, reaching out with one hand. “Why not? Nothing happened…”

She flinched and hugged her cello closer. Too close! “Please don’t!”

He froze, hand still outstretched in her direction. They stared at each other, neither saying a word. Seeing the fear in her eyes stung like salt on a wound. She was scared. She was scared because of him- She was scared of him. The one person who he silently promised to never hurt and it- Jaw tightening, he let his arm fall to his side. Tearing his eyes from hers, he clenched his fists, a bitter frown persisting on his lips. He promised nothing would hurt her, and if he was the reason
for her hurt, then...

“I…” Airi began but faltered, hanging her head. “I’m sorry…”

Akira acknowledged her words but didn’t say anything, still feeling the sharp sting of rejection in his chest. He must have done something to scare her, he refused to believe it was because of just him. There was no way she of all people would be afraid of him...right?

“Please don’t leave me...I didn’t mean it…” Feeling her eyes beginning to water, Airi brought up a hand to cover them, not wanting him to see her cry again. Why did this always happen. She just had to mess it up.

He let out a heavy sigh and warily turned back to face her. “I would never leave you if you don’t want me to. Just…” He struggled to find the words. “...Was it...me? I’m sorry that I...That I scared you.”

She shook her head, hiding her face in her arms. “No, it’s not you. I don’t...I don’t like it when people get too close to my cello. That’s why I didn’t want to do this…” She gritted her teeth, feeling that familiar self hate at her own weakness. “It wasn’t that I couldn’t play in front of people. I...I can’t stand letting someone get close to it. Never again.”

Akira blinked at her word of choice. “‘Never again’? Did something happen..?” He had noticed that she had never shown this instrument to Ryuji or Ann, and he himself had never even come close to it. Morgana had walked the closest to it that day almost a month ago but even with the feline, Airi had angled it away.

Airi huffed bitterly. “You could say that…” Since she had no motivation to continue playing, not with what had almost happened, she tucked her bow into the side of the case and grabbed a cleaning cloth.

Wiping down the instrument, she began her story. “This isn’t originally my cello...It’s my mothers. I got it back along with most of the furniture when I signed for the property. She used to perform in orchestras all over Japan, and that’s how she met my dad. He fell in love with her because of her music and they married, moving to Yongenjaya to be close to his work…” She stared blankly ahead, her hand wiping mechanically.

Akira slowly took a seat on the railing, close enough to listen but not close enough to touch. He didn’t want to be rejected again.

“I pestered her all the time to learn because I ’wanted to be beautiful just like Kaa-chan, and she was most beautiful when she played.”’ She smiled nostalgically, her mother’s kind face looming over her child sized self. “...After they were...killed, I was immediately placed in the institution straight from the funeral. All I had with me was my child sized cello that my parents had gifted me. I wouldn’t give it up to the matrons who wanted to take it.”

Her eyes darkened, the sound of rulers smacking flesh echoing in her ears. “They physically punished me, saying I had to listen, but I refused. They tried to bring in potential parent candidates after, to see if anyone would take me.” She sighed heavily. “They tried to make me play for them. I guess they thought a girl who knew how to play an instrument would be easier to get rid of. I didn’t really play, though...I botched my performance on purpose. I thought if they saw me with no talent, they’d leave me alone.”

She flinched when she remembered the insults hurled at her. As if she was something unworthy of them. Something that wasn’t human. “...Some of the couples kept remarking how I must be dumb,
or that I have no talent, something was wrong with me, I’m a waste of space…” She scoffed weakly. “Maybe they were right about some things, I don’t know.” She didn't really know herself to say anything for sure.

She eyed some of the people nearby who glanced at her instrument and felt another shiver of fear, hugging it protectively. “It’s just...hard to play in front of people now...Other than you, of course. I know you would never try to hurt me, it just...became something instinctual.”

Akira frowned softly at the story. “You know they’re wrong. You play wonderfully and you’re the smartest person in class...You didn’t deserve that.”

Airi smiled slightly. “I guess, but that’s because I’m comfortable with you. I didn’t know them at all, but they judged me so quickly…” She tightened her jaw. “I was really punished that night. I embarrassed the institute and consequently the church, so...they smashed my cello.”

His breath hitched. What?

Noticing his shocked face, she smiled bitterly. “…They tied me to a chair, recited all the sections about sins from the bible to me, and then took my cello and smashed it with a hammer right in front of me.”

She shakily exhaled, placing her current instrument into its case, securing its safety from the world. “I don’t...I don’t want to lose this one, too. It’s all I have left…” Her breath hitched as she tried to withhold the tears, but she couldn’t dam the flow. She bit her lip as it quivered from the memory, the wood creaking in her ears. “It’s all I have left of her, of them…I can’t let anyone else touch it. I don't want anyone taking my music from me again.”

Her music represented everything to her. Her parents' love, her love for Rui, for everyone she promised to play for. This cello, her mother's cello, was her way of redemption, an instrument that could soothe and help people like she wanted, a symbol for her soul and kindness. Without it...Who was Airi.

Akira softened at her explanation. So that was why. It wasn’t him, it was the thought of someone touching the instrument. He could understand that.

He carefully scooted closer, making sure to not get too close to the case. He didn’t want to set her off again, even if the cello itself was sealed away. Lifting his arms, he slowly brought her into his embrace, resting his cheek against the top of her head. “I understand...Take your time.” He murmured. She trusted him enough to reveal this, the least he could do was to continue to protect her.

Hearing those words opened the floodgates and Airi began to cry in earnest, her tears soaking his shirt. She brought her arms up to hold him too, her fingers gripping the back of his blazer with a desperation that she never verbally admitted. He understood. He wouldn’t leave her too.

Feeling her shoulders tremble and a warm wetness in his front, he held her for as long as she wanted, idly stroking the back of her hair. ‘I want her to trust me completely…’
“Well…” Airi sighed tiredly. “That was an epic failure…”

They were back in Yongenjaya, walking through the backstreets to her house. The sun was just starting to set, casting its orange rays against the old and worn buildings. They had left the park shortly after she had let out all her tears, her not wanting to stay in the public eye with a stuffy face.

“No, you tried.” Akira corrected as they turned at the corner. “I think that’s progress, right?”

Her lips quirked. “Right...Yeah, you’re right.” She took a deep breath, looking up at the cloudless sky. “…I need to get over this fear. It’s not like someone’s going to come up to me in public with a hammer to smash my cello, right? It’s irrational…” She just didn’t want to lose it again.

He shook his head. “You have your reasons, and they’re understandable. I’ll…” He looked away for a moment, hesitating on saying it, but he wanted her to understand. “I’ll be there with you every step of the way, as long as you want me.” So long as she wanted him around, he’d be there.

Airi stilled, standing frozen on the street as her heart quickened from his statement. He wasn’t going to leave her. He wanted to support her for as long as she wanted him. “Then…” She licked her dry lips. “Then please, stay by my side as I try to overcome this.” She bowed at her waist, holding tightly onto the strap so her cello wouldn’t fall over.

Akira blinked. “Uh, no need to be so formal…” He rubbed the back of his neck bashfully. “Why are you bowing?”

Straightening her back, she smiled softly. “You’re making a very serious promise there, so I wanted to show you how much it means to me. I know you’re meeting with Yuuki-kun in a bit, so I won’t make you walk me the rest of the way.”

She took a couple of steps and walked by him before stopping, her back still turned to him. “You told me before that you believe that I’m genuinely kind, even after hearing about Rui...But to be honest, you’re the one who has been the kindest of all. I’ll do my best to not fail you.” She turned around, beaming at him. “You can count on me too.”

Akira nodded, smiling back. He already knew that. “Yeah.” With a wave, he turned to leave for the station.

Airi exhaled, watching him as he walked farther and farther away until he turned at the corner, disappearing from her sight. Turning around, she walked the rest of the way home, entering the dark and empty house. It was true that she didn’t have anyone here with her, but she knew after today, that she couldn’t fail again like that, no matter what.

She couldn’t disappoint anymore.

“‘Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.’” The matron recited in front of her as she struggled against the rope tying her to the chair.

The room was empty now except for a large painting of the lord, hanging over the mantle. Her audience was quickly ushered out by another staff member so they wouldn’t witness her punishment.

“‘The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he
has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

“I’m not listening!” Airi yelled, swinging her legs back and forth, trying to get out of her prison. “He can judge me all he wants, I don’t care! He doesn’t exist!”

Her face hardened as she slammed the ruler against already mottled knuckles, ignoring Airi’s cry of pain. “You stupid child…Very well. If you will not listen to me or the Lord, then perhaps this will convince you.” She left the room, slamming the door behind her, leaving the girl all alone in the empty room.

Airi sighed, glad to be away from the stifling presence of that woman. The lord this, The lord that. Who cared when he couldn’t even bring back her parents? Or Go-kun’s, or anyone else’s? They didn’t deserve to die. They left her alone to suffer like this. Why was this supposed to be fair?

The door creaked open and she looked up reluctantly. The matron was back and in her hands was—Her eyes widened. A hammer. “Wh-What are you doing with that…?”

She was ignored as the faithful woman walked up to the mantle and picked up her cello. The cello that her parents gifted her. The only thing she had left of them. “This was left over from the construction,” The matron explained coldly. "And it shall serve a purpose here as well. The lord and our sponsor has told it to me."

Ruby eyes latched onto the sight of the tool, quickly connecting the dots. “No…No, please don’t! Please don’t, Matron!”

She shook her head sadly. “You will not listen, child. Not unless you know the weight of your sins. This is your punishment and so you shall repent…” She raised the hammer into the air. “Forever.” She swung down, the sound of wood creaking echoing in her ears.

“No!” Airi cried out, struggling even harder against the bonds, not caring that the rope began to cut into her skin. “No no no no nonononono!” She watched in horror as the matron continued her destruction of her beloved instrument, the wood breaking under the repeated beating.

Just like how she had physically beat the child in front of her, she now beat her soul, each swing of the hammer shattering it into unsalvageable pieces.

The wood creaked in her ears, the slivers splintering like her heart. Kaa-chan…Tou-chan…

With a sneer, the matron threw the snapped neck into the pile of wreckage. “Children should always listen to adults. It’s your own fault.”

Airi sighed and closed her eyes, knowing it was going to be another tough night. Rui had registered in the institution after that incident, and couldn’t comprehend how much it had hurt her. But…

She smiled softly. She had someone who really understood, who didn’t judge her stupid fear. Just by taking that first step into bringing her beloved cello into public, she was making progress. As long as he was with her, she felt that she really could do this.

She could make music her passion once more and hopefully help others with it like it had helped her.

Within her heart, she could feel it. A new power blooming at her resolve. Closing her eyes, she concentrated on her soul. Her Persona. Kouga.
Chapter End Notes

Airi: rank 5
Swiping his wallet at the turnstile, Akira walked under Yongenjaya station for the third time today, feeling drained. He didn’t really want to hang out with Mishima, especially after what happened earlier, but he had already reneged on his promise once and didn’t want to be thought of as flaky.

Taking a seat on the train, he looked down at his shirt underneath his black jacket and frowned when he realize it was still slightly damp from Airi’s tears. He could still hear the sounds of her sobbing into his chest, her hands gripping the back of his jacket like a lifeline. She was usually so calm and dependable like an adult, but in those few minutes, she was little more than a young girl who had stayed strong for too long.

If only he could do more for her...

Feeling his bag shift, he looked down at it. With all that had happened, he forgot that Morgana was still with him. He unzipped his bag to let the feline wiggle his head through the gap and raised a brow. “And where were you that you didn’t speak up at all today?”

Morgana avoided his gaze. “I didn’t want to interrupt. I knew it was only right to respect your privacy.” His ears drooped at the memory. “...Is being a human so hard? She said a matron, an adult that takes care of children, physically punished her and broke the only remaining memory of her parents. Why do people do this?...Why is it that the youth have to suffer?”

Akira exhaled a long breath. Could he even answer this? “...Sometimes, people are cruel. They don’t have to be distorted like Kamoshida or Madarame to hit a child because to them, it might be morally correct to do it.”

He stared ahead blankly. His own parents had never hit him, but that was because they refused to touch him. “It doesn’t take a distorted heart to be a bad person...” Some people were just evil in nature.

Morgana stayed quiet, contemplating his answer. “I see...Well then, we’ll just have to change that, right?” He purred hopefully. “As The Phantom Thieves. We’ll show the world that being evil is wrong, no matter the reasoning behind it.”

Akira smiled. “Yeah.” And maybe one day, he could find those people who had hurt her, and that man who had hurt him.

“This is Shibuya. I repeat, this is Shibuya. The time is now 7:48PM, the next stop is...”
Getting up from his seat and leaving the train, Akira walked out of the station and up into the square. Knowing Mishima usually hung around the rental shop, he headed toward Central Street, weaving through the crowds. Spotting the mess of blue hair through the throngs of people, he made his way over, waving his hand to catch his attention.

“Oh hey!” Mishima waved, still in his school uniform. “I heard the pollen is really bad this year...Are you OK, Kurusu? You’d seriously look like a criminal if you had one of those allergy masks to go along with your cool glasses!”

Akira deadpanned. “Thanks.” He could feel Morgana laughing to himself inside his bag.

Glancing around, his classmate took a step closer. “So, we’re executing Operation Maidwatch tonight for sure, right?” He whispered. “You bailed on me yesterday, saying Airi-senpai had you over for dinner...” He narrowed his eyes, trying to intimidate the transfer student. “Were you lying?”

Akira huffed in amusement. “Why would I lie? You could text her to confirm it.” A smirk grew on his lips. He wasn’t going to pull any punches. “It was even more delicious than her lunches.”

Mishima flinched, staring at him with wide eyes. “No way...” He whispered, shoulders slumping at how far behind he was. “W-Well...” He perked up. “You weren’t here last year when Airi-senpai and I had shared a class too! She was amazing during the cultural festival!”

Akira pursed his lips. That was pretty good. “...Well, I’m definitely looking forward to this year’s then.”

Mishima's face fell. “All right, all right. Let’s just...” He groaned at another loss against him. “Are we doing this or not?”

Akira rolled his eyes. “Hell yeah we are. I’ll call Ryuji now.”

Mishima brightened. “Sweet, I’ve been waiting for this!” He blinked and looked down at the phantom thief’s clothes, noticing the casual look. “Wait, you already changed out of your uniform?!” He crossed his arms thoughtfully. “I guess that’s a pretty good idea...We’re meeting over at Sakamoto’s place, right? Let’s stop by mine beforehand so I can change too.”

Akira nodded, dialing Ryuji’s number. “Yo! Are we doin’ this?!” He heard the punk answer.

“Yeah, we’re coming over now. Send me the address.”

“Gotcha! Hehe, I can’t wait...!”

Rolling his eyes, he hung up while following Mishima to his house a couple blocks away. He wasn’t surprised to see his classmate lived in a high class neighborhood so close to Central Street.

His phone pinged, a text message listing the address of Ryuji’s building. “I’ll just...” Morgana began slowly, receding deep into his bag. “Let you handle this...”

Akira sighed deeply. The feline wouldn’t be able to help anyway. Putting that into his GPS, he showed it to Mishima who reappeared in his green and white baseball shirt, slamming his door closed. “Oh wow, that’s far...” He remarked. “But we’re going to do this!”

Exhaling, he followed his classmate to the station, swiping his wallet at the turnstile for the Meguro Line heading to Senzoku station. What the hell was his life...
“S-So we’re really gonna do this, huh…?” Mishima fidgeted with his sleeves, pulling at a loose thread. “You think it’ll be OK?”

They were in the empty apartment in Ryuji’s building, furniture already cleared out from the tiny flat. Everything had already been pre-cleaned, leaving no dust or stains on the walls or green mats. Behind them was the sliding glass doors leading out into the balcony where the AC generator was, so there were no exits other than the front door. Akira had left his bag near the entrance since Morgana wanted no part in this and stood across from his friends with a sweatdrop.

Ryuji grinned, dressed in his casual 777 jacket and black jeans, and took out the same obnoxiously pink flyer from last time. “Operation Maidwatch, bro!”

Nodding jerkily, Mishima pumped his fist. “Y-Yeah! Operation Maidwatch!”

The ex-runner adjusted his hoodie. “If it turns out to be sketchy, we can just bail. The apartment’s vacant, so it’s not like we’ll be messing with anyone’s home.”

Akira grimaced. “I’m still worried...Should we really be doing this? I mean, you’re a genius for using this place for it and not your own apartment, but...”

Ryuji grinned mischievously. “You already promised, dude, and yeah, I know I’m smart.” He preened, messing up his hair. "Plus, my apartment's on a whole other floor, so it won't get back to me."

Mishima stared in awe. “To think...Sakamoto has a brain. But if that’s the case, then…” His eyes slid to Akira.

Grinning, Ryuji also looked at him knowingly. “Then…”

Mishima nodded in agreement. “Yep!”

Akira’s eyes darted back and forth at his two year mates. What the hell were they talking about?

“OK!” Ryuji held out the flyer to him. “Give ‘em a call!”

Akira stared at them incredulously and pointed at himself. “Me?”

He nodded eagerly. “Of course it’s gotta be you, leader!”

Mishima blinked. “‘Leader’?”

Akira sweatdropped, taking out his phone. “Leave it to me…” Inputting the number listed on the flyer into the dial pad, he held it up to his ear. After a couple of rings, it went through. “Thank you for calling! This is Victoria’s Housekeeping!” A man answered chipperly.

Mishima gasped and leaned in closer. “They answered!” He whispered.

“Shh!” Ryuji shushed him but watched his leader with eager wide eyes as well, excitement shining through in the large grin on his face.
“I take it you’re interested in our services, then?” The employee asked.

Mishima squeaked. “S-Services..!”

“Is there anyone in particular you’d like to request?”

Ryuji’s eyes widened. “A-Anyone we want to request?! What should we do, Akira?!”

“Uh, no…” Akira answered uncomfortably, holding a hand to his forehead. This was awkward on whole new levels. “No preference.”

“Very well!” The employee replied, the sound of computer keys clicking in the background. “Let’s see here...We have a maid available in...20 minutes. May I ask for your address?”

Sweatdropping as both Ryuji and Mishima started jumping in glee, he listed off the address that Ryuji had given him earlier. “Thank you very much for requesting Victoria’s Housekeeping! Your maid will be there soon to fulfill your needs!”

Akira hung up and placed his phone back in his pocket. He did it. He called and requested a maid to a fake address on a whim.

He felt no sense of accomplishment from this.

“Shit…” Ryuji breathed. “This is really happening…”

Mishima nodded distractedly. “A maid’s “services”…” He scratched his head. “Hey...What should we have her do? I was thinking we can start with some cooking. Of course, I wouldn’t mind some of the other services either…”

Akira gave him a flat look. “And which ones are those?”

Mishima winced. “…Should we hold a strategy meeting to discuss?”

Ryuji gnawed on his bottom lip, placing his hands in his pockets. “They said twenty minutes, right?…” His eyes darted away. “I gotta use the bathroom…” Leg bouncing nervously, he made his way to the small toilet and closed the door behind him.

Akira stared at the door. He felt like he knew what the blond was going to do, but at the same time, didn’t want to think about that. They were good friends, but there were some lines he didn't want to cross.

Him and Mishima waited in awkward silence as the minutes ticked by, each second closer to the time assigned for when the maid would show up. He glanced at his phone, dreading once it would reach twenty minutes. Pursing his lips, he began a text conversation. He had to confess his sins somehow.

Ak: I’m sorry.

A few seconds later, he received a reply.

Ai: ? What for?
Ak: I just felt like I need to say this to you.
Ai: Uh, OK…
Ai: Does this have something to do with Yuuki-kun?
Ai: And Ryuji’s there too, right?
Ak: Bingo.
Ai: Well...I hope you remember to wash your hands when you’re done.
Ai: Oh, and wear a condom.
Ak: ?!
Ai: If you’re going to have a threesome, make sure to have consent.

Akira stared wide eyed at the screen, feeling his cheeks heat up in embarrassment. Was he having a nightmare...? Airi thought he was having a threesome with both Mishima and Ryuji? Her of all people?

Feeling faint, he typed in a reply.

Ak: That’s not what’s happening.
Ai: It’s not? Oh.
Ak: Why do I get the impression that you’re disappointed.
Ai: I’m not.
Ai: I thought since you guys were so secretive yesterday at lunch...
Ai: And you said you were doing guy things...
Ai: You were doing something perverted together.
Ai: I wouldn’t judge, you know.
Ai: Oh, I’m probably making you uncomfortable. Sorry.
Ak: ...You’re a fujoshi, huh.
Ai: What? No!
Ak: Just to clarify, I like girls.
Ai: Well, good to know.
Ai: You’re still doing something perverted, right?
Ak: ...Sort of.
Ai: Well...make sure to wear a condom.
Ak: I don’t need to be hearing this from you.
Ai: Then why did you apologize to me? Are you feeling guilty?
Ak: Because I lied to you.
Ai: Aww. Well, it’s OK. I trust you.
Ai: Just remember to be careful with whatever you’re doing.
Ai: The yakuza control the red light districts.
Ak: ...Just stop.

Putting his phone back in his pocket, he facepalmed. Why did he had to have that sort of conversation with her? Was she actually that dirty minded? Or was she just using dirty humor to distract herself from earlier? Either way, he was embarrassed that she of all people would think of him like that.

“What’s wrong..?” Mishima asked nervously, watching him oddly.

“N-Nothing…” He blurted out, grimacing at the thought of having a threesome with him. **Never.**

Hearing the toilet flush, they look up to see the bathroom door open, Ryuji absentmindedly wiping his hands on his jeans as he walked out. Akira narrowed his eyes, feeling even more uncomfortable. Did he actually..?

“I-It’s almost time…” Mishima stated nervously, checking the time on his phone before looking at the ex-runner. “You were in there for a while...Are you OK? Hey, did you wash your hands?”

Akira cringed and looked away. He did.

Mishima crossed his arms. “Y-You’re really nervous.” He laughed awkwardly, trailing off before his eyes widened with realization. “Are high school students even allowed to use this type of service?”

Ryuji furrowed his brow in confusion. “Huh?”

Mishima stared at him incredulously. “What do you mean, “Huh”? You should’ve researched it! What if they find out who we are?!”

Ryuji glared at him. “H-How should I know?! But why would how old you are matter when it comes to housekeeping?”

Akira facepalmed. Why was this happening now? Why didn’t they think of this earlier? Why was he stupid enough to go along with this in the first place…

Mishima turned to him. “We would’ve been screwed if your number had shown up on their caller ID…”

The doorbell rang, cutting them off from any further conversation, and they all quickly turned their heads to stare at the door with wide eyes. “Good evening…” A woman’s voice called out behind the door. “I’m from the housekeeping service.”

“What?!” Mishima squeaked in horror, taking a step back from the doorway. “Already?! She’s five minutes early!” He panicked, flapping his arms. “What do we do?! I’m not mentally prepared!”

The doorknob wiggled, turning with no resistance. “Oh, the door’s unlocked..? Um, may I come in..?”

They paled.

“I-I can’t do this..!” Ryuji whispered fervently, turning back to Akira with wide eyes. “My stomach’s actin’ up! And my hands are all sweaty!” He took a step closer, face to face with him. “OK, you handle the rest...And don’t let her find out you’re a high school student.” He grimaced, scrunching up his face. “I’ve got your back! Just...From way back! Like,” His eyes darted behind him and at the glass doors. “From the balcony!”

Mishima stared at the blond in shock. “Wh-What? I can’t do this either! Kurusu,” He turned to stare at the phantom thieves leader hopefully. “We’ll leave it to you!” Running to the glass doors, they slid it open, hiding behind the window blinds, and slammed it behind them, leaving Akira all alone in the room.

Akira stared blankly at the balcony doors where he was just abandoned by his friends, a small whimper leaving his lips when he heard footsteps from behind him. Why him…?

“Excuse me...Oh, there you are!”

He heard the footsteps coming closer, the feminine voice calling out to him. He didn’t dare to turn around, though the voice sounded familiar for some reason.

“Welcome home, Master~.” Fabric rustled, implying that she was curtseying in her maid uniform.
“I’m going to fill your tired heart full of lovely energy. Meow~!” She said cutsey-like, her charm sweetening her voice like honey. “I’m Becky, and I have the pleasure of serving you today~.”

He kept his head down, keeping his face away from her view. “H-Hello...Nice to mee-ow-t you.” He immediately cursed himself. Why did he say that. Now he was only encouraging this.

Becky giggled. “We’re going to get along so well! Meeooowww!~~” He heard her hair brushing back and forth as she looked around. “Oh my...how thoughtless of me! I should explain our services to you, Master! What would you like me to do today? The basics include cooking, cleaning, laundry...But there are other “services” we provide if you desire~.”

Akira sweated. He didn’t want any of those.

The footsteps came closer and he tensed, turning his head away. “Hmm? You look young, Master…” She leaned closer. “Are you...perhaps...in high school?”

He twitched, slightly leaning away. “I’m in college.” He lied.

She giggled. “Oh Master, your skin’s so healthy! You’re not lying, are you?...” He felt her eyes on him for a few moments, just observing him. “Hmmm, I’ll wait to provide those other “services” until you’ve matured a bit, Master~.” She gathered her skirt and curtseyed. “Sooo I’ll be going now.”

“Wh-What?! No!”

Their heads snapped to the balcony door from where the voice came from. Akira inwardly cursed. Ryuji, you idiot..!

“Quiet!” He heard Mishima whisper, a dull thumping sound implying that he elbowed him.

“I-Is someone there?!” Becky asked nervously, walking up to the sliding doors.

Now that she was in front of him, Akira quickly observed her, noting the stereotypical maid uniform with a large window of her cleavage, white stockings, and dark brown hair tied up in pigtails. She was shorter than him, coming up to his chin. She really did seem familiar for some reason…

“Oh no..!” Mishima breathed.

“Shit! Run, Mishima!” Ryuji yelled, loud noises coming from outside the balcony. They must’ve jumped to the neighboring one.

“Mishima? Sakamoto-kun?” Becky asked out loud.

Akira blinked. How did she know their names? Wait...That dark brown hair, that height, her voice if it was more bored sounding...Could it be?

She turned around, confirming his thoughts. “Did you request me specifically?” Kawakami asked in her normal voice, crossing her arms.

“N-No, Sensei…” He replied awkwardly, hiding his sweaty hands in his pockets. What the hell...

Kawakami feigned a smile, the dimple on her chin showing. “Oh, no, it’s all right. How would you know me?” She faked a laugh. “This is our first meeting. Yes, the first time ever, Master~.”

He stared at her uncomfortably and tried to lean away from her. Please stop…
Noticing that he didn’t believe her, she let her laugh fade, shaking her head in defeat. “Ugh, this is unbelievable…” She nodded her head reluctantly. “Yes, it’s me...your homeroom teacher…” She sighed. “I’m so done...I can’t believe I got caught by some of my own students…”

She groaned. “I should’ve taken a job outside of the city. But I needed it to be close to school so I could go there after I finished work…” She glared up at him. “Who did you hear about this from? Oh! It was Chouno-sensei, wasn’t it?! That harpy..!”

Akira gave her an odd look. What?

“Chouno-sensei, the English teacher…” Kawakami explained. “She’s been snooping on all the teachers ever since that incident with Kamoshida-sensei...Are you going to tell her about this?”

He shook his head. “She didn’t tell me, and I- we didn’t know…” He rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. Damn it, this was supposed to be some dumb dare. How did it turn out like this?

Kawakami gazed up at him speculatively, resting a hand on her hip. “Hey,” She spoke up defensively. "If you’re going to side with a teacher, side with me. I’m in charge of your class, after all. And if you promise not to tell Chouno-sensei about this, I’ll do anything for you!”

He scrunched up his face. “‘Anything’?” He didn't really want anything from her, especially her "services."

She gave him an unimpressed look at his inference. “Hey...It won’t be any better for you if people find out that you called a maid service. What would Airi say if she knew?”

He coughed and looked away, remembering the text conversation a couple minutes ago. “Sh-She thought something way dirtier…”

Kawakami lifted a brow. “Huh, wasn’t expecting that…” She looked around the empty apartment. “This isn’t even your home address to begin with, is it? I guess you at least thought that through. Well, I’ll promise to keep this a secret too...so why don’t we both forget this ever happened? I’ll treat this as if you had canceled, so you won’t have to pay anything, OK?” She glanced at him sharply. “On that note, I’ll be leaving! Don’t say anything about this at school, OK?! Just act as if nothing ever happened! Got it? OK, bye!”

She bypassed him, quickly walking to the entrance before stopping at the ledge, putting on her mary janes. “Oh and...don’t tell Airi about this. She doesn’t know.” And with that, she slammed the door closed, leaving him alone in the vacant apartment.

Akira closed his eyes tiredly. ‘I want to go home…’

He slowly walked over to the entranceway and slid his feet into his boots. Morgana popped out of the bag, staring incredulously at the door. “Was that your homeroom teacher?”

Akira only sighed in response before picking him up and consequently his bag, opened the door and closed it behind him. The hallways were empty, showing that none of the other building’s occupants had heard the commotion. Ryuji and Mishima had completely left him behind, so he’d just go back by himself.

The journey back home was silent with him still in a stupor trying to figure out how his life turned out like this where the prettiest girl in class trusted him enough to cry on him and his teacher was doubling as a maid in secret.

Getting back to the cafe where the lights were turned off, he unlocked the door and went up to his
room where he threw himself on his couch. He felt exhausted down to his bones. He couldn’t believe that had just happened.

Feeling his phone vibrate, he slowly took it out.

**Ai: So how was whatever you were doing?**

He groaned, throwing his phone away. He was not getting into a conversation about that again.

Chapter End Notes

Fujoshi - a girl who love yaoi pairings
Chapter 91

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

----5/27, FRIDAY, EARLY MORNING, SUBWAYS

When they met up in the early morning, Airi had given them a small but genuine smile and they exchanged their greetings. They didn't talk on the way to school, wanting to stay quiet on this typical yet peaceful morning. Once they got off at Shibuya, however..."You didn’t reply back to me last night.” Airi brought up innocently, though the amused smile on her face said otherwise.

Akira stopped in the middle of the platform and let out a long sigh. Why did she have to bring that up. “I don’t want to talk about it…” He muttered. He had almost pushed it out of his mind until she brought it all up again. Was last night real? Had he really caught his teacher as a maid? Had his friends really convinced him? Had Airi actually thought he was doing something as perverted as a threesome?

He was half convinced he had gone crazy last night, or someone slipped him some drugs.

Airi blinked at his glum face and slumped shoulders. “Was it really that bad?”

Akira slowly shook his head, placing a hand on her shoulder. "...Just...Just stop.” He pleaded weakly.

Leaning out of the bag just enough to speak clearly, Morgana snickered. "You won't believe what had happened!” He egged on. Airi leaned in closer with an eager and curious smile while Akira scowled.

“Good morning.”

They turned around and saw Yusuke walk up to them, pushing past a few other commuters. “Oh, good morning, Yusuke-kun.” Airi smiled in greeting.

Akira nodded to him as well. “Hey.”

Morgana raised a paw in greeting. "Good morning, Yusuke. How is Madarame?”

Yusuke idly swiped some hair out of his eyes. “Madarame’s still ill, but the exhibit is going strong.” He looked down wistfully. “I can’t respect him as my Sensei...but it’s sad to think I don’t have a mentor anymore.”

Akira pursed his lips sympathetically. “I’m all ears if you need it.” He offered. It was the least he could do since, well...they were the ones who ruined his family. Even if he was being used as an art slave.

Yusuke blinked in surprise. “Talk..? To you?” A small smile grew on his face. “...Now that I think about it, I don’t believe I’ve ever had someone I could simply talk to. Perhaps I may need a sounding board sometime. I hope you’ll humor me then.”

Airi smiled. “Well, we’re a team remember? You can always talk to us.”

He nodded shyly, touched at their kindness. “I suppose so…”
The train pulled up into the station, and they got onto the crowded cart. “Have you always taken this way to Kosei?” Airi asked, holding onto Akira as the train began its travel.

Yusuke nodded, leaning against the train doors as it was too crowded around the safety poles. “Often, yes. We most likely have encountered each other without realizing it.”

Airi hummed. It was strange to think that in such a large city like Tokyo, they had been so close to one another without knowing. Maybe she should be more aware of her surroundings. Who knows how many people like him were suffering and she didn't notice. “How are your grades?”

They continued to chat for a while on the train, asking each other what they liked and disliked. Akira, Airi, and Morgana learned that Yusuke was actually quite the skilled chef, but a lack of funds had limited the selection of dishes he could experiment and create. Airi offered up the use of her kitchen if he'd like, so long as he was mindful of how much he was using. Akira sweatdropped at how even though she was being kind, she was also being a cheapskate.

“This is Aoyama-Itchome. I repeat, this is Aoyama-Itchome. The time is now 7:15AM…”

“This is our stop.” Akira stated as the train slowed down into the station. “Let us know if anything comes up.”

Yusuke nodded and waved goodbye as they walked out of the cart and to school.

Once the last bell rang, Ann packed her books and got up from her seat. “Let’s go, Airi! We have to make it to the hospital!”

Airi nodded absentmindedly, writing the last notes down into her notebook. “Give me a few minutes. The session doesn’t start for another two hours…”

The model fidget with a ponytail. “Yeah, but...This is too important to be late for. We should get there early, you know?”

Akira looked up curiously while packing his bag, gesturing for Morgana to jump in. “What are you guys doing?”

Ann gave him a cheery grin. “Shiho’s first physiotherapy session is today! We promised to go with her.”

Morgana purred, sneaking his head out from under the desk. “That’s really kind of you, Lady Ann!”

The leader smiled slightly. “That’s great. I wish her the best of luck.”

He got a bright smile in response. “Me too!” Ann turned to glare at the occupied class president. “And Airi would be too if she would hurry up!”

“Don’t talk to your mother that way…” Airi replied distractedly, pulling out a new sheet of paper to finish making a cliff note version for Ryuji.

Sweatdropping, Akira got up from his seat. “I’m gonna head to the bathroom…” He was ignored as the model continued to pester the other female thief, and walked out of the class with Morgana in his bag, heading down the hallway. As always, other students gave him a wide berth, though he noticed that the ones from his class didn't really avoid him anymore. If anything, they gave him little nods when they saw him.
It was...nice, to be treated like a normal person. Even if it was because Airi had convinced them to give him a chance and not because he had been completely docile and peaceful to his fellow students.

“So what are you going to do about that Kawakami thing?” The feline whispered from his bag.

Akira shrugged. Honestly, he just wanted to forget the whole thing even happened, but it would be beneficial to get away with things in class.

“As I’ve been saying...”

Ears perking up at the familiar voice, he swerved his head to see Kawakami-sensei being cornered by Chouno-sensei next to the teacher’s offices. ‘I should probably intervene…’ He thought as he walked up behind the two.

Noticing her student, Kawakami turned to look at him. “Get home safely, Kurusu-kun.” She turned back to the overly dressed teacher. “Well then, I have another matter to attend to, so I have to excuse myself...” She trailed off, trying to take a step back.

Chouno-sensei wagged her finger at her. “No!” She refuted strongly, a scowl warping her bright red lipstick. “We’re not finished talking yet!”

His homeroom teacher grimaced, glancing at the clock. “But I...”

Chouno-sensei frowned, resting a hand on her hip. “There’s been a series of scandals on this campus. We’re all being called into question, and yet you leave work earlier than anyone else- and you barely make it to the faculty meetings!” She crossed her arms. “Explain yourself! Don’t tell me you’re running around at night!?”

“Kawakami’s being grilled by Chouno.” Morgana whispered on his shoulder. “She said she’d do anything if we helped her out, so let’s clear up Chouno’s suspicions.”

The perfumed teacher glanced at him. “The school’s closing soon, Mr. Kurusu. Head on home before it gets late. Or did you need something from Ms. Kawakami?”

Akira nodded, adjusting his glasses so that the light would reflect off of them. “I have a question for her.”

She stared at him “...What?”

Kawakami-sensei gazed up at him in surprise. ”Huh...? Oh!” The realization lit up in her eyes. “Y-You have another question?!”

Chouno-sensei furrowed her brow. “...Another question?”

The homeroom teacher of 2-D plastered a smile on her face. “Th-That’s right! Kurusu-kun’s questions are complicated, so I take time at night to help him...”

Chouno-sensei raised a brow. “So you’re giving individual lessons outside of school hours, hm?” She brightened. “What passion! You are the ideal teacher! A passionate teacher is exactly what we need at this school during this time. I’m sorry for suspecting you.” She clapped her hands. “Well then, keep up the hard work, you two.” She turned and slid the door open, disappearing into the teacher’s offices.

Kawakami sighed once she was gone. “She just kind of convinced herself...But that did clear up her
suspicion, so...thanks.” She rubbed the back of her head. “Could you come with me for a bit?”

Akira nodded, and followed her into a secluded corner near the entrance to the Practice building. It was late enough that any students staying after school were already in their club rooms.

She rubbed an arm. “I can’t talk about this at school…” She sighed and took out a distinctly pink business card. “This is the address and phone number of my night job.” Akira took it, scanning the card for the information. “Call at night and request me. Just be careful that it doesn’t show up in your call history though, OK?”

“Nice going, man.” Morgana cheered quietly, tail waving behind him. “No call history means a public telephone. Let’s call from Leblanc’s. We can call her over to your room the next time you’re free at night!”

Akira sweatdropped, pocketing the card. “Thank you, Sensei…”

Her eyes darted around, noticing a few other students walking their way. “OK, I have to go. Oh, and remember,” She gave him a stern glare. “Don’t tell Airi.”

He nodded, and she walked away, entering the teacher’s offices a few steps later. He exhaled, shoulders slumping as he walked to the bathroom to do his business. He couldn’t believe his own teacher was a night maid...

Once he was done, he walked back to the class but stopped once he heard footsteps behind him. As in, right behind him.

Narrowing his eyes, he turned around to see a magazine cover. He blinked and looked down at the person holding it, noticing the familiar vest that Niijima-senpai wore. She didn’t say anything, only swiveling around as if she was too engrossed in the book to notice him.

Giving her an odd look, he turned back and made his way to the class, bumping into Ann and Airi near the stairs as they were leaving. He blinked. “Oh, are you guys going now?”

Ann nodded. “Yeah, we want to get there early, right?” She linked her arms with the class president.

Airi sweatdropped at the death grip on her arm. “Yeah, might as well…”

Akira shouldered his bag. “I’ll go with you guys to Central.”

They walked out of the building and made their way to Shibuya, taking the train at the station on main street. Getting off the train once the system announced it was their stop, they walked above ground toward Central Street, moving past the crowds. It was a bright and sunny day, with the temperatures slowly rising from cool spring weather toward summer.

“Oh!” Ann stopped, staring at the crepe shop in awe as it advertised its weekly special. “The double cream is half off!”

The two Yongenjaya residents sweatdropped at their friend’s obsession with sweets. Morgana even popped his head up to give her an incredulous look. “Sweets, now?”

Her face fell. “Oh, but we probably can’t take a crepe into the hospital, huh…”

Airi nodded. “Plus, it wouldn’t be helping Shiho’s recovery. She needs real nutrients.”
Ann bit her lip, looking at the busy crepe storefront with longing. “I...really want one though...Do you think maybe Shiho would want one too? Maybe the sweetness would help her mood. She always got the one with caramel apple slices in it...!”

Akira shook his head. “Give it up, Ann...It’s not healthy.”

Her shoulder slumped in resignation. “Yeah...They probably wouldn’t even let her eat it.”

He furrowed his brow as a thought hit him. “Wait...but it’s only been a little over a month. Is she recovered enough to be doing physical therapy already?”

Ann huffed in amusement. “That’s what I said, but she pushed it up ahead of schedule.” A fond smile grew on her lips. “She told me it’s because I told her about how I want to get stronger. She said she was gonna start working hard, too...”

Airi smiled. “And one way for her to work hard is to not be eating sweets.” She reminded gently. "She should be eating nutritious meals that will help her recover.”

Ann laughed sheepishly, scratching the side of her face. A phone rang out in the middle of their conversation, and she took it out of her pocket. “Oh, hold on.” She swiped the screen, reading the message. “What?” Her eyes widened. “Now?! Uhhh, that’s not good!”

Akira looked at her quizzically. “What’s up?”

Ann winced. “That was from my agency. One of the models didn’t show for a magazine shoot they’re doing. They’re looking to wrap soon, so...” Her eyes darted away guiltily. “I’m gonna head over now to fill in.”

Airi blinked, checking the time. “I mean, we have a good hour and a half...”

The model perked up. “It’s pretty close. Wanna come with, Akira? Actually, let’s just go!” She grinned, taking Airi’s hand and dragging her further down the street. “We’ll race you there!”

Sputtering, he followed after them, hearing Airi protest at the abuse. They stopped a few minutes later next to the Don Quixote where two photographers as well as another model were.

Airi stumbled forward as Ann suddenly let go of her, stopping next to the store. “Ah!” She squeaked as she tripped, closing her eyes awaiting for her kiss with the ground.

Quickly reaching out with his phantom thief reflexes, Akira pulled her back into his chest and enveloped her in his arms. “You OK?” He asked quietly, holding her securely.

She nodded slowly, exhaling a long breath as her heart pounded in her rib cage. “Thanks...” She swerved her head to glare at Ann who was grinning slyly at them. Had she planned that?

“Ann-senpai!”

They turned to see the other model, a pretty brunette in a sleeveless turtleneck dress, walk up to the half foreigner. “I’m sooo pumped to get to work with you today!” She beamed. “After I saw you in last year’s show, I just...” She sniffed. “Oh, I think I’m gonna cry...”

Ann blinked in bewilderment, rubbing the back of her head. “U-Um, it really wasn’t a big deal...That fashion show was tiny...”

The other model smiled. “I’m Mika, and please, no honorifics.” Her smile fell into a more serious
expression. “I might be older, but you have loads more experience, Ann-senpai.”

Ann smiled nervously. “All right, M-Mika...Haha, it feels a little weird saying it like that. Oh and you don’t need to use “senpai” with me.”

Airi huffed quietly a few feet back, the two models not hearing her. “Feel my pain…” She muttered.

Akira snorted silently and snickered, untangling one arm from her waist to cover his mouth. He never did question why their class called her Senpai, and rolled with it himself since it seemed more respectful. Now though, it was more of an inside joke to poke fun of how caring she is.

Ann bit her lip awkwardly. “A-Anyway, uh...it’s nice to meet you?”

Mika giggled. “Likewise, Ann-chan. You're so nice.”

Ann smiled sheepishly and played with one of her ponytails. It was awkward to be complimented so freely by someone she had just met.

The brunette model perked up, clapping her hands together. “Hey, can you teach me how to be a better model? You know, your everyday routines, stretches…”

Ann looked at her quizzically. “Routines? You mean like...singing in the shower..?”

The other Persona users sweatdropped, watching from behind her.

Mika blinked, and blinked again. “O-Oh, is that all you do...? Then, what kinda stuff do you eat? I’ve been looking all over for a place to import some organic green almonds…” She smiled awkwardly. “Plus I’m getting suuuper tired of eating quinoa. Do I need to like, boil it in hard water or something?”

Ann tilted her head. “Um, almonds? I only ever eat those when they’re covered in chocolate…And hard water? Isn’t it kinda tough to boil ice..?”

Turning around to hide her face in Akira’s shirt, Airi laughed silently, her shoulders trembling from the force of trying to stay quiet.

Akira sweatdropped at their model friend’s obliviousness, patting Airi’s back half heartedly. He had never gotten into fashion but even he knew what the other woman was asking.

Mika stared at her for a moment. “…Do you weigh yourself?”

Ann perked up at finally being able to answer a question confidently and pumped her fist. “Oh, of course! Once a year for the health examinations at school.”

Airi only laughed harder, trying as hard as she could to keep quiet by muffling her face into Akira’s turtleneck. Morgana sweatdropped and hid back inside the bag from second hand embarrassment.

Mika could only stare at the other model with irritation and disappointment. “So...you’re gonna keep it all a secret from me, huh? I get it.” She looked down. “I guess it’s hard trusting someone you just met…”

Ann sputtered, waving her hands in objection. “Th-That’s not it! I just don’t really think about that stuff...! It has nothing to do with not trusting you. It’s more that modeling is like a hobby for me.”

Mika stilled at her admission and narrowed her eyes. “...What?”
Akira winced at her careless wording. He knew this was going to blow up somehow.

Ann stared at her quizzically, not realizing what she had just said.

Pouting, the other model held her closed hands in front of her chest. “Ann-senpai, that’s so horrible..!” She said loudly, gaining the attention of the photographer and his assistant. “What do you mean you don’t care about modeling for these guys?!?”

The photographer assistant looked at the half foreigner with surprise and disappointment. “...You said that, Ann-chan?”

Ann sputtered. “W-Wait, I…”

Mika shook her head. “I love this magazine! Everyone tries so hard to make sure their product is the best..!”

The photographer sighed. “Mika-chan, just calm down. Don’t worry, we all know that you’re giving it your all here.”

She turned to the crew, sniffing as tears moistened her eyes. “But...you guys work so much harder than me...and I’m still the one getting comforted…”

Ann gaped at her sudden change in attitude toward her. “H-Hold on…”

The assistant rubbed his head awkwardly. “Ann-chan, the truth is, we had both you and Mika-chan come down as substitute for our missing model. We wanted both of you on the cover, but if you’re not really interested…”

She frowned, slightly hurt by their confession. “H-Hey, I didn’t…”

Mika delicately rubbed her eye of a tear. “Don’t worry, I...I can do it alone! I read the concept docs on my way here...” She sniffed before turning to Ann, making sure her face was away from the crew. “...Heh.” She smirked, not a speckle of a tear anywhere on her face.

Ann gasped at her acting. “You faker..!”

Mika covered her mouth in fake horror. “Y-You’re so mean, Ann-chan..! Do you really hate me that much?!!”

The photographer huffed, unaware of what had really been going on. “Keep it civil, you two. Anyway, you good to go Mika-chan?” He turned to the other model. “Sorry about all this, Ann-chan. We won’t be needing you today.” Strapping his DSLR around his neck, he took out his wallet, giving her a couple of bills. “We’ll reimburse your transportation expenses though, and even throw in a little extra for your trouble.”

Unconsciously accepting the cash, Ann furrowed her brow. “But…”

His eyes slid to the other two Shujin students, focusing on Airi. “Unless your friend would like to participate in your place?” He gestured to her.

Ann scrunched up her face at the suggestion. “What..?!” She yelped incredulously.

He nodded, looking the class president over. “Yeah, she could be a model. Her coloring is perfect for the spread. Would you be interested?”

Feeling Akira’s hold on her tighten a bit at his offer, Airi held up her hands. “Um, sorry but I...”
She glanced at Ann’s upset face. “I’d rather not. Thank you, though.” She smiled politely.

He shrugged. “All right then. Let’s go, Mika-chan! Now I want you over there, leaning against the wall…” The crew and one model left, leaving the group of Shujin students behind next to the Don Quixote.

Ann furiously rubbed her hair. “I really screwed that up...Can’t believe they were gonna offer Airi the spot instead of me.” She muttered. "She's not even under contract..!"

Said cellist sweatdropped. “S-Sorry..? I didn’t want to take it since it was supposed to be yours. Plus, modeling isn't for me. You're the model here.”

Akira glanced down the street where the photoshoot was now taking place and shook his head. “That Mika is pretty amazing, huh…”

Ann sighed and crossed her arms. “Yeah...But maybe it’s because deep down, I’m not actually that invested in modeling. She sees straight through that.”

Airi winced. “I mean, it was kind of insulting for you to say it’s a hobby when this is her career…”

She rolled her eyes tiredly, flipping a ponytail. “Yeah...I totally ruined the shoot...But still,” She continued. “Wasn’t Mika’s fake crying pretty incredible?”

Akira nodded. “It had grace.” He admitted.

Morgana leaned out of the opening in the bag. "The way she was able to fool the photographer was brilliant.” He remarked with a wince. "She was pretty mean to you."

Ann gasped with realization, hitting her fist against her palm. “Oh, maybe that’s what I’m missing..!” She crossed her arms. “I-I dunno though, I think I’m pretty good at fake crying myself. I know the perfect technique.” She stared at them with a serious frown. “Listen carefully. The key is...you don’t actually cry!”

Akira rolled his eyes. “I figured that much.”

She immediately grinned at his fast response. “Either way, I think I’ll be able to use that ability to our advantage in the Metaverse! I’ll turn my failure today into positive energy going forward!”

He smiled and nodded. ‘I sense a heightened motivation from Ann…’

She grinned. “Speaking of the Metaverse...I’m gonna try super hard in my work with the Phantom Thieves, too!”

Airi smiled proudly. “That’s a good way to look at it, Ann! I’ll help out, too!” Her phone buzzed in her pocket. Taking it out, she gasped. “It’s almost time for Shiho’s physiotherapy session!”

Ann gaped, flailing her arms. “Oh no! We’re gonna be late..!” Running forward, she grabbed the cellist’s hand and started running down the other street toward the hospital. “See ya tomorrow, Akira!”

“Ohw, Ann, not so hard..!” Airi cried out, trying to keep up with the other girl as they ran down the streets.

Holding his hand up, Akira waved hesitantly at their quickly retreating backs. “See ya..?”
Don Quixote (Don Kee yo tay) is a popular store chain where you can buy a lot of different things.

Ann - rank 5
Chapter 92

Chapter Notes

WARNING: Hospitals, PTSD, Physical Therapy, sexual harassment

Bypassing the receptionist with a guilty conscience, knowing they couldn’t confront her again about art so soon, they impatiently waited for the elevators at the hospital. There weren’t as many patients waiting in the lobby today, but the ones that were present seemed to be suffering from the pollen outbreaks and the change in season.

‘We’ll have to switch to summer uniforms soon…’ Airi thought idly as they walked out of the elevator and to room 203.

“Shiho!” Ann cried out, slamming the door open. “Are we late..?!”

Said patient looked up from her book, giving them a nervous grimace. “Oh, hey guys.” Shiho greeted, placing the novel on the bed stand. “No, you’re not late. There’s still a couple minutes before the therapist arrives.”

Sighing in relief, the model plopped down on a chair, putting her bag down on the floor. “That’s good to hear. I thought we were gonna be late…”

Airi huffed, sitting on the opposite side. “At least we made it.” She crossed her legs. “So, what are you going to work on first?”

Shiho awkwardly hugged the duck plush. “I’m working with my arm first. The doctors said it has the best chance of recovering strength faster than my legs.” She bit her lip and looked down at her still bandaged body with trepidation. “Then I’ll start on walking again…”

Airi smiled gently. “One thing at a time, Shiho-chan. We’ll be here with you every step of the way if you want.”

A twitch of a smile appeared for a moment and Shiho nodded. “Yeah...Thank you. My legs are like sandbags right now, so it’s going to take a while…”

A knock interrupted them and they turned to see the door open, revealing a doctor. “Good afternoon, Suzui-chan!” She greeted with a bow. She was a portly middle aged woman with graying brown hair, large glasses sitting in front of her experienced eyes. “And I see you have some guests! Friends of yours?”

Shiho nodded. “Hi, Dr. Fudo. This is Ann, my best friend.” She gestured to the model. “And Kimisawa-senpai, Ann’s class president.” She gestured to the other thief.

The doctor smiled warmly and walked to her bedside, Ann and Airi getting up from their seats to put some distance between them and the bed. “Well, that’s great to hear. For your first session, this will be very painful, so it’s good you have some support with you.”

Biting her lip, Shiho swallowed nervously. “So, um...Can we start now?”
Dr. Fudo sighed. “That’s up to you, Suzui-chan. Since your arm is the closest to being 100%, I want you to try to clench your fist.”

Shiho looked down at her now bare arm and concentrated, her brow furrowing. Her thumb twitched, the other fingers following suit to shakily touch her palm.

“That’s good...” The doctor observed, writing it down in her clipboard. “Keep going for as long as you can.”

Gritting her teeth, the ex-volleyball player clenched her eyes as her hand shook. Sweat poured down her forehead as she slowly closed her hand before she gasped for breath and let her hand fall limp.

“Shiho...!” Ann frowned worriedly, trying to take a step forward but was stopped by a hand on her arm.

Airi shook her head, pulling her back. “Don’t. She needs to do this.”

They could only watch Shiho silently, clinging their hands together when she would cry out in pain, when tears were pooling in her eyes from the exhaustion. She had to do this herself, or else she would never believe in her own strength. They knew she was strong, she was strong for deciding to do this.

After fifteen minutes of the activity, Shiho was able to clench her fist, though there wasn’t a lot of strength in it. Panting, Shiho tried again and again until she couldn’t, collapsing against her propped up pillow. Her brow remained furrowed, the sweat on her forehead shining under the harsh lights.

“You’ve made very good progress, Suzui-chan.” Dr. Fudo congratulated, writing the results on the clipboard. Putting it down on a stand, she lightly grasped the tender arm and massaged it. “This will help your muscles gain strength again. Now, I want you to try to practice opening and closing your hand throughout the day, but not too much.” She paused in her ministrations as Shiho winced. “That’s why we’re doing this. It hurts right now because it’s not used to so much exercise anymore. You play volleyball, right?”

Shiho nodded demurely. “Y-Yeah, but I don’t think I can even spike a ball anymore...”

Ann shook her head, grasping her uninjured hand on the other side of the bed. “Don’t worry, Shiho. You’ll be able to again as long as you work hard. Right, doctor?”

Dr. Fudo nodded with a smile. “Yes. As long as you keep at it, you’ll get there again. There isn’t any permanent damage from your fall, so the rest is up to you.” Going into the small closet in the room, she pulled out a wheelchair, unfolding it. “Now, we’re going to go to the exercise room. I think you should try walking today, just a little.”

Nodding tiredly, Shiho tried to maneuver herself onto the portable chair, cursing when she almost tipped over the bed.

Ann and Airi went to her side and helped her into the wheelchair, holding her under her arms. Together, they wheeled her to the elevator where they headed to the exercise room, a large open room that had thick plush mats covering the ground.

Dr. Fudo moved over to the side, propping up two balance bars from the wall onto the floor, making sure the bars weren’t too high or too low. “I want you to try to put your weight on your legs. If it gets too much, grip the bars to relieve the pressure.” She gave the patient a kind smile.
“I’m not expecting miracles today and neither should you. I really shouldn’t be letting you do this since you’ve only just healed your leg, but…”

Biting her lip, Shiho nodded determinedly. “It’s my choice. I want to be stronger.”

Helping her get up to the bars, Ann and Airi took a step back, worried out of their minds.

Taking a deep breath to calm her racing heartbeat, Shiho tried to put her weight on her uninjured leg, wincing when it felt like needles piercing her skin. “Ngh..!” Slowly putting the rest of her mass on that one leg, it almost gave out on her and she gasped. Hands shooting out, she gripped the balance bar with her uninjured hand so she wouldn’t fall on her face.

“Shiho..!” Ann fretted, gnawing on her knuckle.

Airi watched on with trepidation, one hand gripping Ann’s blazer just in case she rushed over to help. Shiho had to do this herself. “You can do it, Shiho-chan!” She called out. “I believe in you!”

Nodding in agreement, Ann shouted too. “C’mon, Shiho! Move your ass!”

Chuckling weakly at their encouragements, the ex-volleyball player got up again, trying out her just healed leg. She screamed out in agony when the limb was engulfed in fire, the pain shooting up from the sole of her foot to her upper thigh like being struck by lightning. “Fuck..!” Tears streamed down her face, her cheeks red from exertion as she tried to take a step. “This is the fucking worst. I hate this..! I hate this I hate this…Why am I so weak..!”

A vein pulsed in her temple as she clenched her jaw, to the point where her teeth ground together in a screech. Taking another couple of steps, she collapsed onto the mats below her, her legs red from the now unfamiliar blood rush.

She was done for the day.

The two thieves rushed to her side in an instant, picking her up and placing her back into the wheelchair so that she could rest comfortably. There was a water cooler in the corner which Airi took advantage of, bringing two cups of cool water to the patient.

They wheeled her back to her room, helping her into the bed. After a short post-therapy examination, Dr. Fudo nodded and wrote down the results before she proceeded to massage Shiho’s limbs.

The patient cried out in pain, her bangs glued to her forehead from sweat. She collapsed against the mattress with relief when it was done.

Picking up her clipboard again, the doctor walked over to the door. “Your next session will be next week, same day same time. Rest up, OK? Have a good evening, girls.” She bowed before leaving the room, closing the door with a click.

Quickly pouring some water from the pitcher, Airi held it out for the exhausted patient, the rim next to her lips. “Here, Shiho-chan.”

Cracking her mouth open, Shiho gulped down the cool liquid, coughing a bit at the end.

“Shiho…” Ann furrowed her brow, taking a paper towel and gently wiping her mouth. She seemed a little shaken, her face pale from watching her friend go through such excruciating self torture.

Clearing her throat, Shiho gave them a tired yet still minuscule smile. “Thanks, guys…” She
sighed and relaxed against the pillow. “That was...a lot more painful than I thought it would be.”
Lifting her recently healed arm, she tried once more to clench her hand and just barely managed before letting the appendage flop against the mattress. “Ugh...this sucks balls.”

Choking, Airi laughed, covering her mouth so as to keep quiet in the hospital. It was good to see she could still find humor in the situation, even if it seemed bleak.

Ann rolled her eyes at her classmate, trying to hide how uneasy she was from the session. “Suck it up. Remember that sports injury you took in middle school that almost got you kicked off the team? Think of it like that.” She idly twirled a ponytail. “You’re so strong, Shiho...You were crying and snotting all over, but you kept trying…”

Shiho snorted. “Thanks, I know I was definitely gorgeous as sweat drenched my face.” A soft smile grew on her lips. “It’s because you guys are here that I was able to do this. Knowing that no matter what, you’ll have my back…” She ducked her head. “I kind of wanted to give up, but...I know you two won’t let me.”

Ann grinned, a blush heating her cheeks as the paleness subsided. “Hey, maybe next time I can sneak in a crepe for you??”

Airi rolled her eyes. “Don’t do that. You’d probably eat it before it even got to the hospital.”

The model turned to pout and Shiho coughed out a weak laugh, her face shining from all the sweat.

“Anyway, you won’t believe what happened earlier. This model, Mika…”

Getting back home just before 10PM, Airi let out a sigh as she collapsed on a chaise.

Today wasn’t so bad. She was happy to see Shiho beginning her journey to recovery, even though it was painful to watch. It was definitely more painful for her and this was only the start. Maybe they can ask Ryuji to come on by and give her some tips for her leg...

Sighing, she grabbed the remote and turned on the TV, the channel staying as the news.

“The ongoing Madarame exhibition continues to draw in a constant stream of visitors.” The Newscaster broadcasted. “Turnout is much greater than expected, and those involved are pleased by its popularity.”

She frowned. Everything about it was so fake. How did nobody catch on that these weren’t his paintings? Her phone buzzed in her pocket, and she took it out.

Oh: Hey there, Kimisawa-chan!
Oh: Just wanted to let you know I talked to all those people you recommended to me.
Oh: And they were great. The amount of details they gave me were amazing.
Ai: That’s good to hear.
Ai: Thank you for doing this again.
Oh: It was more for my job, hehehe
Oh: Helping you and the apprentices were the aftermafftthd

She stared at the garbled mess of a text.
Ai: ...Are you OK?
Oh: Oh yeah, I’m fine! I’m drinkg in Shinjuku right nw
Oh: Hey, wanna join m?
Ai: No, thank you. I don’t like alcohol and I’m not of age.
Oh: Hehe, you put yu dont like alchol first, mening you do drink.
Ai: I don’t.
Oh: Don’t worry, im not gonna presure yu.
Oh: If you’re free thugh, I want to go over some of the detailp with you.
Oh: The article is being publshd in 9 days on June 5
Oh: Since you’re basically cordinating evrythig, we should go over it.
Ai: ...All right. Send me the address of where you are, and I’ll be there soon.
Oh: Great! See ya in a few!

“Great…” She sighed, letting her arm fall. Guess she was heading out to a bar at the age of sixteen. It was for the apprentices, though, so she’d have to suck it up.

Her phone buzzed again and she squinted at it.

Ak: What do you know of Yamauchi?
Ai: From Shujin, right?
Ai: He was Kamoshida’s assistant in P.E
Ai: He was supposed to take over as gym teacher when Kamoshida went on his suspension.
Ai: But he said he was busy, so class presidents and representatives had to.
Ak: I’m with Ryuji right now at Tsukishima.
Ak: He said that Yamauchi was going to take over officially.
Ai: I hadn’t heard about this…
Ak: Ryuji here. It was a rumor with the sports guys, that’s why.
Ai: Oh. Well, why are you guys at Tsukishima?
Ak: Monjayaki and a little eavesdropping.
Ai: ...Well, don’t get caught.
Ak: Akira here. Who do you think we are?
Ai: Haha, that’s true! Good luck, you two.

Smiling, she put her phone away as she went to change. She shouldn’t be appearing in the red light district in her school uniform.

Wearing a dark purple blouse and black jeans, she put on a pair of sneakers and left the house, making sure to lock it behind her. The less skin showing, the better. She didn’t want to be targeted, especially at this time of night.

Swiping her wallet at the turnstile, she made her way to Shinjuku, passing by the crowds of drunken party goers. A lot of people in this district wore flashy suits and tiny cocktail dresses, hoping to entice customers into their host and hostess clubs.

“Hey there, cutie. You look like you could have a drink with me?” A host smirked in her direction, holding out a elegantly designed business card.

Briskly walking past him, she ignored his calls, along with every other advertiser’s. It wasn’t good to be mixed up with these types of people. This lifestyle would only suck a person in until they had nothing left, leaving them a soulless husk that depended on alcohol and sex to feel alive again.
She sighed, observing the people walking opposite of her. Did these people have Palaces? Did they only have those rooms in Mementos? It seemed almost mandatory for an adult to become distorted somehow...

Turning the corner, she spotted the bar Ohya had told her about, “Crossroads.” The street in front of it was fairly empty, meaning it wasn’t exactly a popular place. That was good. She didn’t want to see people having sex in the VIP lounges anyway.

Walking in, she took in the immense amount of pink mood lighting decorating the establishment. It was fairly small, with one long bar and a small sitting area to her left that was hidden with a bead curtain.

Ohya was sat at the counter, nursing a scotch on the rocks. She perked up when she saw the teenager in the doorway. “Heeeyyyyy, Kimisawa-chan!” She unsteadily waved at her, gesturing to the bar stool next to her.

Airi hesitantly took a seat, feeling uncomfortable in the new environment.

“Glad you made it!” Ohya giggled delightedly, her face flushed from alcohol. “Hey, Lala! Get my friend a nice drink here!”

The bartender walked up; a large woman with stubble on her chin, exaggerated makeup, and wearing a beautiful purple kimono. “I’m not giving alcohol to a minor.” She stated flatly, her voice deep but with a musical lilt.

Airi shook her head. She wouldn't have accepted anyway. “It’s fine. Do you have a soda?”

Nodding, Lala slid her a cold can from the fridge underneath the counter. “Glad you’re sensible about this.”

Airi smiled, popping it open. “Thank you, Lala-san.”

The bartender shook her head. “You're welcome. This here is a haven, a quiet spot.” She narrowed her eyes at the drunk woman. “Well...it would be if Ohya there didn’t come every night.”

Airi raised a brow at that. The reporter came in every night? How much did she drink? “So, Ohya-san...”

Ohya laughed. “Just call me Ohya! None of that -san shtick...”

Airi sweatdropped, distancing herself away from the alcoholic stench emanating from the reporter. “OK, Ohya...How is the article coming along?”

Ohya downed her drink in one go, the large ball of ice hitting her lips. “Lala-chan! One more!” Grumbling, the bartender did as she was told, refilling her scotch. “It’s goin’ fineee. In fact, I've been pullin' so many all-nighters that I needed to drink more than usual!” She burped. “Actual evidence, real stories, all the works! Hehehe...” She laid her head down on the counter, the cool lacquered wood cooling her cheeks. “It'll definitely be a blaze. It’s gonna be sold all over the country...”

Airi’s eyes widened and she coughed when her soda slid down the wrong pipe. “What? I thought it was just Tokyo...”

Ohya giggled, taking a sip of her drink. “We export to all over. Now everyone who reads ‘em will know Madarame’s a piece of shit...”
Mulling it over, Airi slowly smiled. “That’s good…That’s really good. Thank you, Ohya-san. I can
tell you weren’t really interested in writing about it. I hope…” She fiddled with her can as she
stared absentmindedly at the shelf of alcohol. “I hope it’ll help…”

Ohya quieted, gazing up at her with blurry eyes. “You’re so nice, Kimisawa-chan…I know you
don’t know those apprentices at all. Why are you doing this for strangers?”

Airi smiled slightly, if not in a professionally polite way. “It’s for my friend. He’s also a victim of
Madarame’s, and would’ve continued to be if we didn’t convince him…Plus,” Her eyes darkened.
“No one deserves to be used like that. The truth shouldn’t be shoved away. I’m sure I’m not the
first outsider to notice Madarame’s plagiarized work, but no one has come forth about it…At least,
succeeded in telling it.”

Ohya snorted, downing her drink. “Preach, girl!” She burped. “Lala-chaaaaannnn!!!”

The bartender gave her a flat look. “No. I’m cutting you off for the night, Ohya. You drank way
more than usual already.”

She pouted. “But don’t you want my moneeeeey?”

Lala rolled her eyes. “Your tab is almost as long as this counter. Just…” She sighed. “Get home
safe and sleep this off like usual, OK? And you,” Her eyes slid to the cellist. “You should get
home safe, too. A girl your age with your looks would be snatched up in seconds around here if
you aren’t too careful.”

Airi smiled gratefully and nodded. “Thank you, Lala-sa– Lala. I appreciate your concern.” Taking
out a few bills for the soda, she left it on the counter. “Good night, Ohya-san. Let me know if
anything else comes up. I…” She hesitated. “I might have one more testimony for you, if I can get
her to agree.” She furrowed her brow as a memory came to her. “Oh. I have a photo for you, too.”
Taking her phone out of her pocket, she sent it to the reporter’s number.

Ohya beamed at her and waved her phone in the air as it buzzed, signalling that she got it.
“Okaaaaaay! G’night, Kimi-chan!”

Sweatdropping at the name, Airi waved and left the bar, walking down the packed streets. It was
close to midnight and the parties were in full swing. Feeling even more uncomfortable, she quickly
made her way to the station, taking the populated routes. She didn’t want to be here any longer...

As she was about to turn the corner, a hand grabbed her wrist. “Hey there, cutie!” The same man
from earlier winked at her, trying to drag her into the host club he worked for. “Glad to see you
came back! How about a drink, hm?”

Glaring at him, Airi tried to take her wrist back from his grip. “No thanks. I’m underage.”

The way he looked at her made her think he didn’t believe her as his eyes roamed up and down her
body, sending foreboding shivers down her spine. “No way! I don’t believe ya. You hafta be at
least twenty two with those curves. They’re practically illegal!”

Clenching her jaw, her eyes darted around the crowded street. “If you don’t let me go, I’ll scream
and then everyone will know your business doesn’t treat their potential customers very nicely.”

He snorted. “Why would we? This is an S&M themed host club. No one would be surprised to see
you playin’ hard to get.”

Beginning to panic, she stomped her heel into his foot and he yelled out in pain, finally letting her
go. Taking the opportunity, she ran down the street as far away as she could from the man. “You bitch..!” She heard from behind her as she swiped into the station.

Shakily exhaling, she got onto the train back to Shibuya. That was too fucking close. Fuck.

Her phone buzzed and she took it out of her bag, cursing as her hands wouldn’t stop shaking from what had just happened.

Ak: Where are you?
Ak: I came by with some leftover monjayaki and you weren’t home.

She bit her lip. Should she tell him? No...She didn’t want him to worry over her even more. She’d already been a burden.

Ai: Sorry, I had to work late today.
Ai: I’m on my way home now.
Ai: Keep the monjayaki for yourself. You need the variety.
Ak: OK. See you tomorrow.
Ak: Morgana says goodnight.

Putting her phone away, she leaned back with a sigh. Maybe she should take some self-defense classes. All she knew were cheap shots and experienced men would know how to block those.

She looked down at her skinny arms and poked at her bicep. Yeah, she needed to get stronger too. She couldn't be protected all the time, by Ryuji, Ann, Morgana, or Akira.
Chapter 93

---5/28 SATURDAY, AFTER SCHOOL, SHUJIN ACADEMY

Packing her bag quickly, Airi stood up from her seat in the classroom. Akira blinked at her sudden movements, finishing his leftover monjayaki from yesterday. “Where are you going?” Ann turned around in her seat as well, looking up at her quizzically.

“There’s a student council meeting today.” Airi answered distractedly, checking her phone for the time. “No doubt Niijima-senpai’s going to address the Phantom Thieves...Oh,” She frowned. “I should also tell her about the scams. I almost forgot about them…”

Akira perked up. “Right. The ones happening in Shibuya. Can the school do anything about that?”

Airi sighed. “Probably not. The school can’t control every student’s actions, even if Kobayakawa would want to.” She rolled her eyes at the thought of the portly principal. “The most we can do is issue a warning…”

Ann pulled out her phone, idly scrolling through her texts. “I don’t think there’s that many people in our school that would fall for them.”

Airi huffed wryly. “You’d be surprised. Academics don’t equal common sense. Anyway, I should get going. I’ll see you guys later.” She waved and left the room, heading upstairs to the council room.

There were other class presidents and representatives going the same way, and they all filed in. There weren’t enough chairs in the admittedly small room, so some had to stand.

Makoto was already there, shuffling papers at the front of the table. “Good afternoon, everyone. Let’s start the meeting. As of yesterday, our budgets for the science, art, and chemistry clubs are being subsidized…” Time slowly passed as she addressed every concern that was on her pristine and orderly list, much to the impatience of other members. “…Now, moving onto the final topic. The Phantom Thieves fiasco from a month ago. Does anyone have any clue as to who these students are?”

Everyone shook their heads. A class representative from 3-C scoffed. “Why does it matter? Even if it’s a prank, they exposed Kamoshida for who he was.” They argued, crossing their arms in their seat.

Another representative nodded in agreement. “Yeah, I had three girls in my class who admitted they were too scared to say anything against him. Whoever they are, the Phantom Thieves kind of saved them.”

A class president glared at them. “Are you two naive? They got a gym teacher! They’re probably some gang forming in our school!”

Airi held up her hands. Of course they would end up arguing. “Calm down. I think we can all admit we’re glad that Kamoshida isn’t here anymore.”

They scowled at her. “Well what about you, Kimisawa-”senpai”?” They mockingly added the suffix. “Did you know anything about the Kamoshida thing? You’ve been hanging around those two delinquents and that gaijin.”
Tightening her jaw at their attitudes, Airi shook her head. “No. I honestly had no idea about any of this until I noticed Mishima-kun’s bruises. I...I’m ashamed of not noticing earlier.” She looked down at her feet. At least that was a truth she could say. “And Tsukishima-kun in my class as well. I never questioned why he always had bandages...We all should’ve noticed sooner.”

Everyone looked down in silence, knowing that they also hadn’t addressed this.

Makoto awkwardly cleared her throat. “Well...if no one has any new information, then the meeting is adjourned—”

“Wait,” Airi interrupted. “I have something to report.”

The council president looked at her curiously. “What is it, Kimisawa-kouhai?”

Airi bit her lip. “I’ve been hearing a lot of rumors about students being scammed in Shibuya. Supposedly, they’re approached by guys in suits, asking if they want to make easy money.”

Makoto frowned speculatively, one hand coming up to grasp her chin. “That’s troubling to hear…”

Airi nodded in agreement. “Yeah. Apparently they target high schoolers...I think we should make a school wide announcement about it to warn the student body. It could be more sinister than that.”

Someone snorted. “What, you think the yakuza or something is involved?”

She nodded grimly. “You can’t say they’re not. I’m sure you all know how the yakuza works. Once you get in, you can’t get out without consequences. We can’t let any of our classmates fall into that trap if it is.”

They quieted at that, staring at her with wide eyes. “You serious...? All right, we’ll all warn our classes.”

Makoto nodded, a dark look in her eyes at the mention of yakuza. “I’ll let the principal know about this as well. If that is all, then the meeting is adjourned. Kimisawa-kouhai, please stay behind.”

Airi bit her lip, nodding to her superior. She got odd looks from the other council members for being singled out but they left the room one by one, until it was just the council president and cellist.

Makoto stood up from her seat at the head of the table and gazed directly at her, red eyes meeting red eyes. “...Are you sure you don’t know anything about the Phantom Thieves?”

Airi subtly swallowed. She didn’t want to lie to her, but this was more important than obeying her superior. This was more than the school. She couldn’t give it up. “Yes, Niijima-senpai.” She ultimately decided to lie. “I don’t know anything more than anyone else.”

Makoto sighed, years of pressure pushing down on her shoulders from her answer. “I see...”

Airi furrowed her brow in worry and hesitantly took a step closer. “...Are you OK, Niijima-senpai? You look really stressed. Maybe you should take some time for yourself...”

Huffing, Makoto shook her head. “No. I have too many responsibilities to shirk any of them.” She quirked her lips in a minuscule smile. “Thank you for your concern.”

The cellist nodded slowly. “If you say so...Just know, we’re all here for you too. You don’t have to carry the whole student council by yourself.” A thought hit her. “Oh, I heard you know Aikido,
right? If you have some free time, could you maybe teach me the basics..? Or have any recommendations.”

Makoto stared at her in surprise. “Aikido?” She repeated. "You want to learn..?”

Airi nodded sheepishly. “Yeah. Something happened yesterday that convinced me I should probably learn some self-defense…” That and some martial arts would help her get a little stronger.

The council president grasped her chin thoughtfully. “I see...I’m not sure if I have any time to teach you myself, but I can lend you my old instructional guide? It explains the art and basic forms, teaching you how to meditate and such.”

Airi perked up and beamed. “Yes! That would be very helpful! Thank you, Makoto-sen- Oh!” She covered her mouth at the slip up. “Sorry. Niijima-senpai…”

Makoto gave her a small smile, softening her cool facade for once. “It’s all right, Kimisawa-kouhai. It would be nice to hear my own name for once.”

Blinking, Airi slowly lowering her hand. “Then...Makoto-senpai,” She gave her a friendly smile. "Please, call me Airi.”

Makoto hesitated. “...Airi…-chan?”

She brightened. “If you’d like! I don’t mind.” Receiving a small smile in response, Airi bowed and finally left the council room to head to work. It was nice to see her superior open up a little. She was always so busy and rarely let her polite facade down...

Leaving the flower shop with a sigh and her wallet a little heavier, Airi let her braid fall from the bun, leaving it to sit on her shoulder. Maybe it was time for a hairstyle change? Perhaps when they changed uniforms. She didn't want to cut it. She could admit she was vain about her hair, since her mother used to praise her coloring.

She walked aboveground, taking her phone out to text Yusuke. They had one last chance to convince Hamasaki-san at the hospital. If she refused again, then...that was it. They wouldn’t be able to help her any further.

Ai: Are you free right now?
Y: I am available.
Y: Is there something you wish to do?
Ai: I was thinking we can go visit Hamasaki-san.
Ai: She’s the last apprentice I know of.
Ai: Ohya-san, the reporter, said the article is being published in a couple days.
Y: I see.
Y: Shall I meet you on Central Street?
Ai: Sure. See you soon.

“-says I have no chance to get elected, so why come to me?”

“Have confidence in yourself.”
Ears perking up at the familiar voice, Airi turned her head from her phone to see Akira talking to that politician from the gyudon shop, standing next to the unused tram in the middle of the station square. Her leader was dressed in casual clothing, having changed out of his school uniform. The politician was an aging man in his early 40s with a large nose and expressively large black eyes, with black hair that was starting to thin out from stress and a poor diet.

The politician crossed his arms. “Perhaps one day, I will believe in myself...again.” A smile grew on his tired face. “But you sure got me there. You’re a strange young man, Kurusu-kun. Very well. If learning how to give a great speech is what you seek, then I’d be happy to instruct you. In exchange, I would like for you to continue assisting me. Let’s get started, shall we?”

She saw Akira nod, and a bit of blue sparkled in the corner of her eye. She blinked and swerved her head, the blue disappearing in the myriad of neon signs and lights that dazzled Shibuya. She could’ve sworn she saw some sort of butterfly…

Akira turned around to head home after bidding goodbye with his newest deal, but paused when he glimpsed pink hair in the crowd. “Airi?” He walked up to her. “Did you just finish work?”

She blinked, refocusing on him. “Oh, yeah. I got off a few minutes ago…” Putting the blue butterfly out of her mind, she tilted her head. “Did you strike a deal with him?”

Akira rubbed the back of his neck. “You saw that, huh...Yeah, I did. If I can learn from him, I can probably get us more money when we’re fighting Shadows.”

She furrowed her brow and grasped her chin thoughtfully. “I wonder about the morality of mugging Shadows…” She pondered. "Do they use it to buy stuff?"

Morgana snorted, leaning on Akira’s shoulder from his spot in the bag. “Anything they hold over in that world is something that doesn’t affect them in the long run.” He lectured, showing off his knowledge. "Shadows don’t have a societal market to spend that money on, so we should take as much as we can.”

She nodded slowly, still reluctant to be robbing them. “OK…”

Akira shouldered his bag, making sure the feline was safely tucked in. “Let’s go home?”

Airi shook her head. “Sorry, but I’m meeting Yusuke-kun on Central Street. I talked with the reporter and she said the article’s being published soon, so...this would be my last chance to help out Hamasaki-san. She works at the hospital.”

His eyebrows lifted in surprise. “Oh, right...we hadn’t gotten to all of them that day, huh. Do you want me to stay..?”

She smiled. “Sure, if you want to. Maybe you can even visit Shiho-chan yourself. She’s been meaning to thank you for that bouquet.”

Akira rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. “It was only the once…”

“Nee-san.”

Yusuke walked up to them, wearing his usual casual outfit consisting of a gray suit jacket, pink shirt, and black slacks. “I suspected you would be here when I couldn’t find you on Central Street.” He stated with an air of satisfaction at his correct deduction.

Airi winced. “Oh, sorry Yusuke-kun. I bumped into Akira here and I stopped to chat…”
Yusuke turned and inclined his head at his leader. “Akira, good evening. Are you joining us once again on our endeavor?”

Akira nodded, idly tweaking a strand of hair out of his eyes. “If you don’t mind…”

Morgana stretched his paws out into the air with a yawn. “Have you found any other apprentices, Yusuke?”

The artist nodded. “I have, actually. I have yet to approach her but I have confirmed her name and location. She is nearby as well, much closer than the hospital.”

Airi blinked in surprise and took out her phone, bringing up the list. “Who is it? Do you know her?”

Yusuke idly brushed some hair out of his eyes. “Her name is Arisawa Mina. She works at a jewelry store in the underground mall.”

Her eyes widened at the familiar name. “What?! Arisawa-san?! Really...?” Her shop was only a few stores down from the flower store where she worked.

Yusuke nodded. “Do you know her well? You both work in the same location…”

She shook her head. “Not really. I hadn’t really expected her to be an apprentice, to be honest. Every other one we’ve met with have been sort of...um…” She glanced away. “Moody.” She ended awkwardly.

Morgana waved his tail behind him. “You mean they’ve been downtrodden for so long that despair was all they knew.”

Akira rolled his eyes and gently bopped him on his head. “We’re helping them.” He reminded. "It's not their fault they're depressed."

Yusuke watched with amusement but took a few steps toward the stairs that led down into the subways. “Shall we go then? It’s nearing 7PM soon.”

They all nodded and the small group of Persona users walked underground, entering the mall. It was packed with people on a Saturday night, but the crowds steadily decreased as most were heading home or to other parties. Making their way past the clothing stores, they stopped in front of one particular jewelry store, Yusuke walking behind them. It was mostly empty now, most of the shoppers crowding around the cheaper stores.

Akira blinked in surprise when he realized where they had stopped. This was…

“Hello!” The employee greeted them warmly in her black suit, her taupe hair pulled into a low ponytail. This must be Arisawa Mina. Her eyes landed on Akira and she perked up with recognition. “Oh, hello again! Did your lady friend like your gift?”

The artist and cellist looked at Akira in surprise while he rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. “Yeah, she did…” He glanced to his left at Airi. “This is where I got your hair clip.” He murmured to her.

Airi perked up. “Oh, really? I didn’t know…” She turned and smiled at the jeweler. “Thank you for helping him. I really do love that hair barrette!”

Akira blushed at the statement, feeling his heart skip a beat. It was just a clip…
Mina smiled back, the corners of her eyes crinkling just a little from age. “Of course, Kimisawa-chan! I remember it like it was yesterday. He said he wanted to show his appreciation to the first person who was kind to him.” She clasped her hands together dreamily. “It sounded so romantic...Are you guys a couple? You have to be!”

They both blushed, their eyes meeting for a moment before they both quickly turned their heads away from one another. “Uh…” Airi stammered, feeling her cheeks heat up. Why did everyone assume they were together? They weren’t...right? “A-Anyway, Arisawa-san, your first name is Mina, right?”

The jeweler blinked. “Yes, it is. Why?”

They glanced at each other and walked further into the store, making sure to be quiet. “You were one of Madarame’s former apprentices, right?” Airi whispered. “We want to ask you some questions…”

Her eyes widened. “What..? How did you know?” Her eyes darted to the lone customer in the store, browsing unaware. “Give me a second, it’s time to close anyway.”

She walked over to the potential buyer, explaining that the store was closing and they unfortunately had to leave now. They left and she made sure to take all the jewelry from inside the display cases, placing them in a heavy safe in the back room before coming back out. “All right. Let’s talk then.” She stated quietly, fidgeting with her hands. “I hadn’t expected my past to come back like this…”

Taking a step forward, Yusuke came into view from behind the two Yongenjaya residents. “Arisawa-san, I don’t know if you remember me, but-”

“Yu-chan..?” Mina gasped, covering her mouth.

They stared at her in surprise. “’Yu-chan’?” Airi blinked. That was a very cute nickname. Did they know one another?

Yusuke furrowed his brow in confusion. “You...know me?”

Exhaling shakily, she nodded. “Of course, how could I not..?” She smiled sadly. “I helped raise you...”

His eyes widened and he took a step back. “What..? You raised me?” He repeated disbelievingly.

Sighing, Mina took a seat on one of the stools. “I was one of Madarame’s first apprentices after he debuted “Sayuri,” along with Toushiro, Sousuke, and Chiyo...When he took you in after your mother passed, I was the one who took care of you. The others didn’t of course, they focused more on art. My paintings suffered as a result, and he eventually kicked me out.” She smiled, bitterness dancing across her features. “I didn’t want anything to do with painting after that, and he had smeared my name enough that the community shunned me…I was lucky, though. My parents took me back in and I went into jewelry design.”

Yusuke opened his mouth, closed it, then opened it again. “I-I see...I apologize, but...I truly don’t remember you.” He bowed his head apologetically. “Hearing that you had taken care of me when I was younger though, I can’t help but feel grateful to you.” He bowed at his waist.

Shocked, Mina quickly got up and placed her hands on his shoulders, straightening him up. “Don’t. I did it because you were a good kid who didn’t deserve to be stuck there. I tried to take care of you as best I could, but it had only been a few years…” She sniffed, bringing up a hand to wipe away a tear as her eyes clouded with moisture. “I’m guessing since you’re here about Madarame, you’ve
also detached yourself from him?”

Yusuke nodded. “Yes. I…” He grimaced. “I was ready to throw myself down at his feet. To paint for him until I no longer could because I was the only one left…But these two,” He turned to his companions, a small smile growing on his lips. “They convinced me that Madarame was only using me, that I deserved my own future…I am truly thankful.”

Akira smiled back. “It’s no problem. We couldn’t just sit back and watch you be used.”

Airi nodded in agreement. “Yeah, and you weren’t the first apprentices, Arisawa-san. There were many in between you leaving and now. To get to the point, would you be willing to let your story be heard?”

Mina tilted her head quizzically. “For what reason..?”

Yusuke took over the conversation again. “To expose Madarame for plagiarism and abuse.” He stated grimly. “Many of the apprentices had disappeared, either dead or in hiding, not wanting to enrage our former sensei. We had only found five other apprentices, and most of them agreed to share their stories to a reporter.”

Her eyebrows rose. “A reporter? Is this being published..?”

Akira nodded. “Yeah. We’re hoping that with this article, the apprentices can gain their artworks back under their rightful name. This will expose him for what he really is, and you’d be able to be painters again.”

Mina grasped her chin thoughtfully. “I see...And this reporter is really doing this?”

Airi smiled. “Don’t worry. She assured me yesterday night that she had to for her job. She wasn’t going to put in so much effort, but I guess the stories really moved her.”

Akira narrowed his eyes and turned to look at her with a suspicious frown. “Yesterday night..? Didn’t you say you were working?”

She stiffened, knowing she had slipped up. “Uh…” Her eyes darted away sheepishly.

His frown deepened. “...We’ll talk about this later.”

Giving them a concerned glance, Yusuke turned back to the older woman who had apparently cared for him. He didn’t know how to feel about that, considering how had no memories of her. His memories were rather hazy after his mother’s death and before he turned six when he began taking art seriously. “Arisawa-san, if you’re comfortable with it, might you be willing to lend your voice?”

Mina smiled gently, a tinge of sadness in her eyes. “How could I say no to Yu-chan? Just let me know when she’s coming to interview me.”

Yusuke let out a sigh of relief. “Thank you. Everything will be much better once this article is published, I swear.” He smiled slightly awkwardly. It was rather uncomfortable being in her presence when he could see she had certain expectations of him. “If you’ll excuse us, we have one more apprentice to approach for the night.”

Mina waved him away. “Go. I know how concentrated you get when you set your eyes on a goal. I have to close up here anyway.”
With a bow, the Persona users left the shop and the underground mall, walking up onto the street level. Airi discreetly sent a text to Ohya about getting another interview, receiving a drunkenly typed text in response.

“So,” Akira began casually as they walked toward the hospital, barely anyone around in this part of Shibuya. “What’s this about you being out last night?”

Airi sweated. “Er...I was working…”

He narrowed his eyes, feeling Morgana shift in his bag. “Uh-huh...And after that?”

She bit her lip nervously. “...I went home…?”

He sighed, the corners of his lips twitching downward. “Why are you lying to me..?” He asked, disappointed that she wouldn't confide in him.

Yusuke watched on impassively, not minding as he was left behind in the conversation.

“Uhhh…” She scrunched up her face before slumping. “OK, I was lying. Sort of...I did go to work, but after that, Ohya-san asked me to meet with her in Shinjuku.”

Akira furrowed his brow. “Shinjuku? I might be wrong, but every drama I’ve seen that’s set in Tokyo says Shinjuku is the red light district…”

Airi winced and avoided his gaze with a sheepish pout. “...You’re not wrong.”

He stared at her incredulously. “You went out to the red light district, at night, by yourself..?” His voice steadily grew louder. “What if something happened? You could’ve been kidnapped, or...or been forced to work at a club like Kamiya-san!"

She looked down at her feet as he continued to yell at her, feeling shame and guilt swirling inside. “I know...I’m sorry, Akira.” She apologized meekly. "I thought it would’ve been OK if I stuck to busy streets. Nothing really happened, though!”

His eyes sharpened at the key word. “‘Nothing really happened’? Meaning something did happen…”

She pursed her lips awkwardly, looking away from his disapproval. She didn’t dare face him while saying this. “A guy...might’ve tried to...drag me into his S&M club…” She mumbled out.

Staring at her blankly, Akira facepalmed. “You…” He began, voice muffled by his hand.

“What is this “S&M”?" Yusuke asked innocently, tilting his head. They both looked back at him in surprise. “Does the term stand for sun and moon? It would be an interesting concept to paint, though it has been overdone throughout the centuries…”

Morgana tilted his head on Akira's shoulder. “Aren’t S&M shirt sizes?”

Airi cleared her throat. Why was she educating them about this? “N-No. It stands for sadism and masochism. It’s a place where adults of legal age and consent go to...play out their sexual fantasies and fetishes.”

Yusuke nodded slowly. “I see…” Though the way he said that suggested he didn’t really understand.

Akira sweatdropped at his new friend's naivete. Was he really a guy or was he just asexual? He
shook his head. “Anyway, Airi…” He turned back and glared at her, trying to muster up every ounce of frustration he had within him from hearing that she had gone out, alone, in a dangerous place in the city where she could've gotten hurt, or raped, or murdered. What was she thinking?!

Airi flinched, closing her eyes in anticipation at the lecture she was going to get.

Noticing her backing away, he deflated. He couldn't yell at her. “…Don’t do that again, OK?” He relented. "At least have me with you.”

She peeked out of one eye, looking up at him shyly. “You’re…not going to keep yelling at me?” She asked hesitantly.

Akira ran an aggravated hand through his hair, messing up the already messy style. “I know you’ll just do it again if it meant helping someone. It was really irresponsible for you to go out into the red light district alone. You could’ve gotten hurt, and then where would I- we be without you?”

Airi bit her lip. “Sorry…” She wasn't used to people caring about what she did. She was used to being the one who did the caring. He really was worried about her, huh...

Softening, Akira reached out and gently clasped his hand with her’s, holding on securely. “Don’t worry me, OK? Call me to go with you.”

She looked up at him and nodded demurely. “OK…”

Morgana nodded in agreement, jumping over to her shoulders. “Listen to him, mom. It really was very irresponsible for you to go out alone. Who knows what could’ve happen to you?” He murmured quietly, curling around her neck. “I’m glad nothing did, though…We wouldn’t have gotten there in time.”

Airi reached up to pet him. “Yeah, sorry guys. I think I’ve learned my lesson with all of you scolding me…”

He purred, his tail lightly whipping her face. “Well, so long as you learned your lesson! You’ll have nothing to fear with me around!” Akira coughed loudly, and he side-eyed his human carrier. “…And Joker.”

The leader deadpanned, feeling a slight tug of disappointment at being referred to as his alter ego. He didn’t know why it bothered him so much though, and he shoved it to the back of his mind.

Airi laughed, not noticing her neighbor’s silence. “Of course! I’m always safest with you guys, after all.”

The feline preened and rubbed his head against her jaw before jumping back into his bag as the hospital came into view. “Who was this again?” Yusuke asked, idly brushing some hair out of his eyes.

“Hamasaki Chiyo. She’s the receptionist.” Airi explained. “I honestly had no idea. She’s very…um…” She glanced away for a second. “She’s not very lively for a former artist…”

He furrowed his brow slightly. “I...see...Shall we, then?”

They all nodded and walked into the hospital. There were still people waiting in the lobby, looking as if their souls were sucked out of them from being here too long. No one spoke and any who did were immediately shushed, either by their fellow patients or by the hospital staff.
Uncomfortable at the dead silence, they made their way to the front desk where Chiyo was. Noticing the shadows on her files, she looked up at them blankly through her round glasses. “May I help you?” She asked dispassionately.

Airi bit her lip. “Hamasaki-san. Have you thought about what I offered last time I was here?”

Chiyo looked down again, typing into her computer. “No, because I had refused.”

They glanced at each other uncomfortably. “Hamasaki-san,” Yusuke began, stepping forward to the counter. “You were one of Madarame’s former apprentices, were you not? Why are you not willing to take your artworks back?”

Her hands stilled, the clicking of the keyboard ceasing at his question. “...They no longer matter to me. I am no artist.” She answered coldly. “I am a receptionist at this hospital, working on her residency.”

He frowned at her answer. “Surely you must feel incited?” He pressed further. “He has been showcasing your work under his own name.”

“Again, it no longer matters to me.” She replied back shortly, resuming her tasks on the computer.

Akira crossed his arms. This wasn’t getting anywhere. “But what about what he did to the other apprentices?” He argued as well. “Don’t you care that they’re suffering?”

Chiyo slammed her hands against the keyboard, the loud sound attracting some of the patients’ attentions. “Why should I?” She looked up at them, a hint of anger in her usually blank eyes. “I suffered too. But look, I have a job now, and I’m alive. Why should I stick my neck out for them?”

Airi frowned disapprovingly. “You’re saying just because you suffered, they should suffer as well? But don’t you want to paint again?” This woman...This adult...

She scoffed, her real self showing through the cracks of her facade. “Painting brought me nothing but misery. I hate it and I would never wish to touch a brush again in my life.”

Taken aback, Yusuke stared at her disbelievingly. “...Is that truly how you feel? You would wish for your fellow apprentices, our brothers and sisters, to have their artworks stolen and to never achieve their dreams?”

Chiyo raised a brow. “Our? And who are you, then?” She narrowed her eyes at him, before they widened with recognition. “Ah...You’re Nakanohara’s shadow. The little boy with so much ‘talent,’” She said the word as if it was poisonous. “To be taken in at a young age. Well...I’ll let you know one thing, kid. Dreams are for the foolish, the ones who would sacrifice everything to achieve nothing. Art is subjective. Even if you painted what you believed to be your magnum opus, the critics would still ruin your reputation and future.” She stated matter-of-factly.

“When you become an adult, you either conform and get a real, stable job, or risk starving and being homeless. In the end, painting is worthless.”

They stared at her in shock. Were there any words to describe how they felt hearing her say that?

Gripping his fists, Yusuke clenched his jaw. “I see...Then we shall no longer bother you.” He pivoted on his heel and promptly walked out of the hospital and into the night, the automatic doors sliding open for him.

Frowning sadly at the receptionist who was now back to ignoring them, Airi and Akira ran out of
the hospital after the artist, stopping a meter behind him as they watched his back warily. “Yusuke-kun...?” Airi whispered, taking a step forward, slowly reaching out with a hand.

His shoulders, tense from the earlier confrontation, slumped at her voice. “...Is art truly so detestable for her..?” He whispered inaudibly. “Is it really so...meaningless?”

The two Yongenjaya residents glanced at each other, Morgana sneaking out of the bag and leaning on his carrier’s shoulder. “Well...” Airi began quietly as she placed her hand on his shoulder, trying to comfort him. “Art is subjective, yes. It’s not a stable income, and it is a hobby that usually consumes more than it produces.”

She winced when his shoulders continued to slump lower. “But...it’s up to you to make it something meaningful for yourself. That’s why art is something that’s synonymous with people.”

Morgana waved his tail. “That’s right. Remember inside Madarame’s Palace, how the paintings came alive due to how we and the Palace ruler perceived it? By itself, it is just paper and paint, but to us, it became a pathway. It’s the same here. It is what you make of it.”

Akira nodded in agreement, rubbing the back of his head. “If it’s something you enjoy, you should keep at it. Some people look at art as a job, or just a hobby, but you make it your life. It’s admirable that you’re taking that leap of faith...” He coughed awkwardly. “I don’t really know much about it, but it’s not wrong to keep doing what you’re passionate about.”

Turning around, Yusuke gazed at them for several moments before a small smile grew on his lips, lighting his gray eyes. “...You’re right. I am an artist first and foremost. She may not look back on her times as an artist fondly, but that doesn’t mean I have to do the same.” He inclined his head. “I suppose this would mean we’re done collecting testimonies.”

Airi nodded slightly. “Yeah. I haven’t found any others, and the due date is too close now...”

He closed his eyes. “I see...It’s rather late now. I suggest we all get home and rest.” He opened his eyes and smiled at her. “Thank you, Nee-san. You didn’t have to do this...”

She smiled back. “No, but I did and I'm glad to do so.”

Sighing, Yusuke turned toward the direction of Shibuya. “I’ll be heading home now. I shouldn’t be leaving Madarame for prolonged periods of time.” He inclined his head to them. “Farewell.”

They waved as he walked back to Shibuya. “Well...” Airi began hesitantly. “Want to visit Shiho?”

Akira blinked. “Sure. Is it still visiting hours?”

She nodded and they walked back into the hospital, ignoring the reception and heading toward the elevators. Getting off on the second floor, they walked up to room 203 and knocked.

“Huh...? Come in!”

Airi slid open the door and peeked inside. “Shiho-chan? It’s Airi and Akira...” She blinked, noticing that the patient was rubbing her eyes. “Sorry, did we wake you?”

Shiho shook her head from the bed and beckoned them in. “No, it’s fine. Come in.”

Airi slid open the door even more and the two thieves walked into the room. “Hi, Suzui-san.” Akira smiled slightly as he closed the door behind them. “Have you been doing OK?”
Shiho blinked in surprise at his unexpected appearance. “Oh, Kurusu-kun. I didn’t expect to see you…” She gave him a small smile. “Thank you very much for the flowers. It was very kind of you.”

Akira rubbed the back of his neck. “No, it just...seemed right. You didn’t deserve those things to happen to you.” He stated earnestly.

The smile fell and she nodded mechanically. “Yeah…”

An awkward silence permeated the room and Airi cleared her throat, taking a seat next to the bed. “How has therapy been? Are you still sore from yesterday?”

Shiho wrapped her arms around the duck plush, using it as a crutch. “It’s...been hard.” She admitted quietly. “I don’t know if I’m making progress or not, but the therapist said I am...I don’t know.” She sighed heavily, leaning back against the propped up pillows. “Is my nightmare really over...?” She stared up at the myriad of colors, the paper cranes dangling from the ceiling from a month ago. "Sometimes I wake up and think, 'I have to get to practice or else'..."

Airi frowned morosely. “Shiho-chan…” Reaching out, she gently placed her hand on top of hers. “I can’t speak for you, but as long as you’re moving forward, you can leave that behind. It happened, yeah, and it fucking sucks.” They looked at her in surprise as she cursed. “You didn’t deserve any of that. You can’t control someone else’s actions, but you can keep moving, right?” She gave her an encouraging smile. “Ann and I will be with you as your personal cheering squad, and we’ll get Akira and Ryuji too...We all support you.”

Observing her for a moment, a small but watery smile broke out on Shiho's face and she sniffed, bringing up a bandaged hand to wipe her eyes. “OK...Thank you.”

Akira smiled mischievously from the foot of the bed. “Do I have to wear a cheerleading uniform?” He joked, trying to brighten the mood. "As part of the 'Shiho cheering squad.'"

Shiho coughed, hiding her smile even as her eyes curved, wiping the rest of her tears away. “Maybe...It has to be a short skirt, OK?”

Airi burst out into laughter at the thought and Akira blushed.
Arriving back at the cafe after hanging out with Ann again at Inokashira Park, Akira’s phone rang and he took it out of his pocket, stopping near the bar.

An: Yusuke, any changes yet? How’s Madarame?
Y: Nothing at the moment. He is still bedridden.
R: Wait...You think this was too much for the old bastard’s heart?
Ai: Could be. There’s research done that proves people can die from feeling too sad.
Ai: Madarame is also pretty old. Kamoshida was healthy in comparison.
R: Whoa...Is he gonna die then?
Y: There’s no need to worry. His life does not appear to be in any danger.
R: I hope we didn’t fuck up on our first official mission…
R: Can he talk at all?
Ai: Has he been eating?
Y: So far, all he has said to me is, “I’m sorry.”
Y: I have been leaving soups and congee next to his bedside.
Y: They’re empty when I collect them, so he does eat.
Y: I haven’t been able to speak to him since though. He is in no state to hold a conversation.
R: For real...?
Ai: Do you want me to come over to help?
Y: It is all right.
An: If he ends up taking legal action against us, our leader will be in big trouble!
Y: You are under probation, correct? That would be problematic…
An: We’re gonna be OK...aren’t we?
Ak: For sure.
R: If Akira says so, I’m sure it’s true!
Y: I will contact all of you if any progress is made.
R: Let’s just wait for the change of heart for now.
An: Yeah...well, we’ll be waiting for your updates, Yusuke.
Ai: Take care of him and yourself.

Putting his phone back in his pocket, he sighed. The date was close now. Only a few more until the confession.

He glanced to his right where the bright yellow public telephone was and thought about the business card he was handed yesterday. Should he..? No...But what if...

“Are you going to call now?” Morgana whispered from inside his bag. “Kawakami would be working right about now…”

Taking a deep breath, Akira finally nodded and picked up the phone to dial the number into the machine. Was he really doing this? He found himself asking this a lot these days…
The call picked up and she answered cheerfully. “Hiii, this is Becky-”

He coughed awkwardly. “Um...it’s Kurusu.”

“Oh, it’s you.” Her voice changed back to its usual deeper tone and sighed. “We’ll, it’ll be ¥5000 with the request fee included, you know. Is that OK with you?”

“5000?” He mouthed to himself incredulously before shaking his head. It was the price to pay to strike a good deal, especially since this was his homeroom teacher. ‘Y-Yeah, that’s fine…”

“...OK. I’ll head over right away then…”

He hung up and collapsed in a booth, resting his head in his arms. Damn it, this was so embarrassing...

Sojiro raised a brow as he took off his apron for the night, watching his ward use the public phone instead of his own. “...What the hell are you up to?” He asked after several moments.

Akira tensed at the question, forgetting that his guardian would’ve been suspicious. “I...called for delivery.” He lied.

The barista narrowed his eyes. “Really now...Well,” He sighed. “As long as you aren’t getting in trouble, it doesn’t matter to me. I’m off. Make sure this “delivery” person won’t steal anything.”

Akira nodded and the barista left the cafe, heading home for the day. Now that the cafe was empty, he unzipped his bag to let Morgana out. It wasn't fair to keep him cooped up in there anyway.

Landing on the floor, the feline shook his body out and stretched. “I’m going to go scout the neighborhood, maybe visit mom.” He gave the teenager a look. “Don’t do anything weird, OK?”

Without waiting for his response, he darted out the door and into the night.

Akira sighed, now alone. ‘Now just gotta wait for Kawakami-sensei to arrive…’ He rested his forehead against the table. Why was he doing this again? Oh right, because then he could get away with things in class. Why was she even doing a job like this?

The bell on the door jingled, signalling someone just came in. “Hello..?” He looked up and saw Kawakami in her maid uniform, looking around the interior hesitantly. With a resigned sigh, he stood up and welcomed her in, gesturing to the stairs that led up to his room.

She nodded, going up to his room with her heels clacking on the tiled floor, and he flipped the sign on the door to say “Closed.” Going upstairs, he sat down on his couch and watched as she observed their surroundings.

“So this is your room, huh? Hm, how do I put this..?” She pursed her lips, eyeing the old wooden ceiling beams that looked like they’re about to collapse any second with a frown. “...Never mind. So, what kind of kid are you?”

He blinked at the question. What? She knew him, so why was she asking that?

“The way you opposed Kamoshida-sensei, I’d say that you’re earnest and have a strong sense of justice. That being said…” She eyed him. “You called a maid service and requested me?”

He shrugged awkwardly. “I thought it would be a good idea...I know you’re still wary of me.” He glanced away, lacing his hands together in front of him. "I'm not that bad of a guy, really. I haven't
hurt anyone.”

Pursing her lips, Kawakami looked away. “Right. Your criminal record…” Debating with herself, she rested a hand on her hip and smiled. “OK, then how about this…I’ll let you skip class a few times.”

He looked up at her in surprise. She would?

“It’s tough not having any place where you belong, isn’t it?” She smiled sympathetically. “I know I treated you kind of badly during your first couple of days, making Airi pick up my slack. I’m sorry about that…However,” The smile dropped from her lips. “I reserve the right to change my mind if your grades drop.”

He nodded. That seemed reasonable.

“And in exchange, you won’t tell anyone, especially Airi, that I’m moonlighting as a maid. Sound good?”

He nodded. “I promise.”

She brightened. “Then it’s a deal!”

He exhaled, knowing he made another deal. With his teacher of all people.

Kawakami sighed, wilting from her bright disposition. “What am I doing here with one of my students…?” She muttered. “Well, I guess I should get going.” She plastered a smile on. “Oh, please request me if you need any help with your housework, OK?”

Akira blinked. “Why?”

She shrugged awkwardly. “Well, I mean…we know each other’s secret, and it would really put my mind at ease…Besides, I’m, uh…” She hugged herself, ducking her head flusteredly. “I’m considered over the hill for this type of job, so I don’t get requested that often…I’ll show my appreciation by making it easy for you to ditch class!” She grinned hopefully. “Just think about it, OK?”

Gathering her skirt in her hands, she curtseyed. “Thank you for using our service, master.” Pivoting on her heels, she headed downstairs and left the cafe.

Hearing the bell ring as she left the building, he slumped over on his couch and let out a quiet groan. What was he doing anymore…

---5/30, MONDAY, MORNING, SHUJIN ACADEMY

“I’ve actually gotten into fishing lately, although it’s just pond fishing from time to time.” Inui-sensei spoke to the class. “I can’t go sea fishing because I get seasick easily. So much for my dream of being a sailor.” He stated monotonously.

Airi sweatdropped in her seat. Why not take motion sickness medicine?

“Oh right.” Inui-sensei began where he left off. “When people think of sailing the high seas, they tend to think of pirates. Even though they’re ruffians who plunder other ships and coastal settlements through force…” He crossed his arms. “For some reason, they ended up getting romanticized. Now then, Kurusu-kun.”
Sitting up in his seat, Akira looked up at the teacher with a questioning look.

“Who was the pirate who said that he hid his treasure in a certain place just before he was executed?”

He blinked. Was it..? “...William Kidd.”

Inui-sensei clapped. “That’s right. The answer is William Kidd, also known as Captain Kidd. Kidd was a merchant who had raised money from aristocrats. He should have been subduing pirates…” His lips twitched upward into a hint of a smile. “But in order to turn his commission into a profit, he ended up becoming a pirate himself.”

“Hey, did you know that? I had no idea!”

“Kurusu-kun is so smart, I’m kind of surprised.”

The thieves in the class glanced at each other, knowing they should research their Personas soon. They kept showing up in class questions, after all. Airi sent him a thumbs up, silently praising him.

“Hmm…” Morgana hummed thoughtfully. “Captain Kidd. You think Ryuji’s smart enough to realize he’s not just his Persona?”

“The money he used for his exploits was essentially the aristocracy’s.” Inui-sensei continued his lecture to the rest of the class. “He himself wasn’t considered rich. Still, several novels were written based on his legend, and people still look for his treasure today.” He blinked. “By the way, I’ve heard that there’s an island in Kyushu where Kidd’s treasure is said to sleep…”

“Kidd’s secret treasure, huh…” Morgana purred. “Regardless of its actual worth, there’s still value in letting that many people dream about it.”

Flicking the extra droplets off his hands, Akira exited the restroom to head back to class. It was raining, so maybe he could ask Airi if she wanted to study with him. They hadn’t done that in a while, what with dealing with Madarame’s Palace and the apprentice hunt. He was glad that they had been able to find more of Yusuke’s "siblings," even if one of them had refused and who knew how many others were out there. Adults were disgusting...

“It’s raining today…” Morgana remarked quietly, looking out toward the windows in the hallway from his spot in the bag. “What should we do?”

Akira shrugged and stopped in front of his classroom's door, placing his hand on the door handle-

“-why not? Kurusu-kun totally seems like your type!”

He blinked, hearing the voice of one of his classmates. He seemed like who’s type?

Curious now, he inched open the door and peeked into the room. The tallest girl in class, Matsumoto, was standing with Airi and Ann, seemingly grilling the class president. Was she asking Airi if she liked him?

He blushed at the thought, feeling his heartbeat speed up in his chest. It was something he came to accept recently. Though they only knew each other for a little under two months, he’d basically attached himself to her side like a kid with their teddy bear. With how much they hung out, it
wasn’t hard to imagine a real relationship with her. She was nice and a good cook, not to mention pretty. Ann was a bombshell, but Airi was a girl someone would bring home.

They were basically dating already, he thought with a small hopeful smile on his face, except maybe if they were official, there would be more hand holding and maybe a kiss-

“I’m just too busy, you know? I have the class to worry about, the student council, my grades, my job… I don’t want to be distracted by a relationship.”

Airi stilled, his hand falling limply to his side. A silence pierced his ears as that statement revolved around his brain. “I don’t want to be distracted by a relationship.”

Moving away from the door without a thought, he walked down the stairs, placing one foot in front of the other.

“I don’t want to be distracted by a relationship.”

His ears were muffled as if there was cotton stuffed inside, not hearing the sounds of other students walking past his snail-like pace. Unconsciously pulling out his umbrella to shield him from the onslaught of rain, he left the school building, wandering down the grey and washed out streets.

“I don’t want to be distracted by a relationship.”

Was that all he was to her..? A distraction? He already knew she was busy, he’d seen it with his own two eyes when she worked herself into exhaustion, accidentally falling asleep at the cafe for five hours.

He hadn’t been able to help her then, but he thought...he hoped, that he was able to comfort her at the very least. He’d been stuck in darkness for so long, shuffled from jail to court to probation. No one had wanted him around except her, and then Ryuji and Ann. Her presence was just so comforting, he couldn’t help himself.

Was he just a parasite, leeching off of her kindness? Didn’t she say she thought of him as handsome? Wasn’t she happy with him? Did he get everything wrong?

Was he not wanted here, too..?

“-ker? Joker...Joker!”

Akira snapped out of his trance right before feeling a soft paw swat the back of his head. He turned to glare over his shoulder at the feline who was leaning out of his bag. “What?” He snapped. Why did he keep calling him Joker when they were in the real world? Was he not wanted as Akira? Was he just a means to an end for the feline?

Giving him an odd look, Morgana pointed his paw in front of them. “Are we studying?”

Sliding his eyes away, Akira finally noticed that they were in front of the Diner, pedestrians passing by him on Central Street without a glance. It seemed his feet unconsciously brought him here. He didn’t even remember entering or leaving the train stations.

Sighing, he closed his umbrella and climbed up the steps, nodding when the host asked him if he wanted a table. Shrugging off his bag beside him, he sat down in the booth, staring blankly ahead. “The rain’s keeping the customers away!” Morgana remarked, looking around the establishment.

Since it was raining, there weren’t too many customers in the restaurant, leaving it with peaceful
ambiance. He found that it only enhanced the conflicting thoughts he had in his head, though. Was Airi just...pitying him? She was as responsible as an adult, so it's no wonder that she "looked" after him, but...

What was his worth then? Being in Tokyo, he thought he was someone, a friend to other people like him who had been wronged. Ryuji, Ann, Mishima, Yusuke, Airi...But to them, was he just Joker? Were they only friends with him because he was strong as a phantom thief?

What worth was there in Kurusu Akira then?

"Welcome, may I take your- Oh, Kurusu!"

Blinking at the mention of his name, Akira looked up at Yukimi in her usual waitress uniform. "Oh...hello, Kamiya-san." He greeted dispassionately.

Yukimi smiled, a real one this time, not noticing his sullen mood. "Hey yourself. What would you like to order? I’ll make sure it’s better than usual since you helped me out!"

He grimaced. “I didn’t really do much...it was all Airi.” That’s right. It was because of Airi that the person in front of him was happier. All he did was follow her around like...a distraction. “A coffee, please.”

She waved him away. “You helped, too! I noticed that day in the park you took care of those cuts I gave her...” She bit her lip. “I should apologize for that...Oh, hey.” She perked up, looking around the booth. “Where is she anyway?”

His eyes darted away. “Still at school.” He answered in a clipped tone.

Yukimi frowned softly. “Really? Why didn’t you invite her with you? You could’ve had a nice quiet date today, not that I want you to.” She frowned lightheartedly down at him. “I would’ve given you guys a free meal just for her.”

He sighed, aggravation tensing his shoulders as she kept mentioning the one person he didn’t want to talk about. ”My coffee?” He snapped.

She furrowed her brow at his attitude. “Oh...yeah, sure...” She replied quietly, moving to the kitchens to prepare his order.

He took out his books from his bag. He might as well study if he could. He didn’t want to be a bother by asking Airi to help him again.

“I don’t want to be distracted by a relationship.”

Yukimi came back with a hot cup of coffee, placing it on his table before walking away, not meeting his gaze.

Akira sighed tiredly, rubbing his temple. Guess he scared her off with his terrible attitude. He’d have to apologize later.

“What’s with you?” Morgana asked quietly, sneaking his head out under the table.

His lips tightened. “Nothing.”

The feline gave him a doubtful look. “I don’t believe you. Is it what mom said in the classroom earlier? You know, she wasn’t done talking-“
“Leave it.” Akira snapped, turning back to his math question.

He didn’t want to hear that she didn’t mean it in that way. He knew he wasn’t wanted. She was kind to him because that was her best quality and because he was the leader. At the very least, he could use his frustration to solve these questions faster.

His phone buzzed in his pocket but he ignored it. He wasn’t in the mood to hang out with anyone right now.

Packing her bag, Airi looked out the window at the torrential downpour. The rain constantly thudded against the windows, leaving them perpetually drenched. It was almost June, which meant that monsoon season was close. She’d have to check the house foundations to prevent leaking and rot, which meant more expenses from her emergency savings. Should she go to work today? There wouldn’t be many customers, meaning she wouldn’t get any extras…

“Senpai?”

Blinking, she turned around to see Matsumoto fiddling with her thumbs. She gave the tall girl a kind smile. “What is it, Matsumoto-chan?”

“Um…” Matsumoto stuttered, an embarrassed blush spreading from her ears down to her neck. “I wanted to ask you if...if you and Kurusu-kun are a couple?”

Her eyes widened. “Huh?!” A furious red spread across her face. ”W-Why would you think that..?“ Did everyone think of them as together?!

“Well...a couple days ago, I saw you guys holding hands…Like, a lot…” Matsumoto ducked her head, trying to hide her flaming cheeks even though she towered over the class president. “N-Nevermind, forget I asked..!”

Holding a hand to her forehead, Airi tried to smile reassuringly at her. “No, it’s...it’s fine. No, we’re not a couple, we’re just good friends-”

“Who live near each other and walks to school together every day.” Matsumoto blurted out before covering her mouth in horror.

Airi stared at her in shock. Did...Did everyone watch them like that? “Uh, yes...we do. It’s a long train ride…”

Clenching the hem of her blazer, the tall girl shed her shy self, replaced with a stranger whose eyes were burning with fervor. “I totally ship you guys together though so if you ever do get together, you should tell me so I can support you and your beautiful relationship. It is so wholesome and tooth-rottingly cute that I can’t help but squeal when I watch you guys from my desk during class!”

Airi stared blankly at her usually calm classmate. Where did this all come from? And shipping? Was that an online thing? “Is...there a reason you 'ship' us so hard?”

Pursing her lips, Matsumoto moved closer, face to face with her. “OK, so I wasn’t going to say this, but the whole class has a bet going on on when you guys would get together. Otani noticed like a week after Kurusu-kun transferred here how close he stuck to you.” She whispered. “We thought we should warn you since we all thought he was some kind of serial killer, which is why her and me tried to warn you that day with the calling card thing? But then after Kamoshida was arrested,
she noticed you guys smiling at each other. All. The. Time.”

She grinned teasingly. “So we started watching as you guys would give each other thumbs up during class, and texting each other. You make him lunch! That’s so cute and totally a couple thing!...I was also out shopping at Shibuya a couple weeks ago and I’m pretty sure I saw him with his arms around you...” She held her cheeks dreamily. “Ah, you guys would be so adorable! The beautiful, upstanding class president and the handsome but shy bad boy...”

Airi sweatdropped, an embarrassed blush spreading across her cheeks from how in depth that was. It went that far? “O-Oh...” She answered weakly. “Is that so?”

Matsumoto bobbed her head. “Yeah! Mishima-kun’s not very happy, but whatever, who cares! The point is,” She pointed her finger in the class president’s face, almost touching her nose. “We’ve seen him treat you like a high class lady. He follows you around like a puppy! Or well, a cat with his looks...” She shook her head. “I need to write this out later...The point is! Give him a chance?” She grinned hopefully.

“Yeah, give him a chance!”

Ann walked up with a shit eating grin and rested her elbow on Airi’s shoulder. “You are so lucky Akira left already, or else he’d probably be red from head to toe.” She teased.

Airi scrunched up her face. “Seriously, you two?” She sighed heavily. “...We’ll see.” She answered reluctantly. "I’m not...I’m not really looking for a relationship right now.”

Matsumoto’s face fell. “Aw, why not? Kurusu-kun totally seems like your type!”

Airi pursed her lips, feeling more and more uncomfortable with this conversation. She had never talked about romance with anyone until now, and with it being one of her closest friends was...awkward. “I’m just too busy, you know? I have the class to worry about, the student council, my grades, my job...” She sighed heavily, idly tugging her braid. “I don’t want to be distracted by a relationship.” She didn’t want to burden him. He already had a lot on his plate of responsibilities.

Besides, she didn't know if she really liked him like that. She had never had time to like anyone when she had school, work, and her house to worry about.

Ann frowned at her response. “Harsh. He really likes you, though.”

Airi blinked. “And how do you know that?”

The model rolled her eyes. “C’mon. He gave you an expensive hairclip on your birthday after knowing you for a week, he always hangs out with you, worries for you, he holds hands with you...” She listed off on her fingers. “And you’re always close to each other. How is that not a serious crush?”

Airi blushed, her face getting hotter with each evidence added. “...I told him he was handsome.” She muttered shyly.

Ann gave her a ‘there you go’ look, throwing her hands up in the air. “See? I’m sure you two can work it out!”

Matsumoto nodded in agreement. “Yeah! I support you guys! You’re totally my OTP!”

Airi sweatdropped and looked away. OTP? What? “If it happens, then it happens, OK? Don’t push it...” Looking at the time on her phone, she sighed. It was after her shift now, so she wasn’t going
to work today. “I’m going to go home. I have to make sure everything is waterproofed for monsoon season.”

Ann winced. “Yikes. I’ll see you tomorrow?”

Airi nodded, waving bye as she headed out of the school. Pulling her umbrella out, she took in a deep breath, inhaling the familiar and calming scent of rain. It would be the perfect time to grab a cup of coffee. Maybe at Leblanc?

Pulling out her phone, she sent a couple of texts to Akira. Maybe she could help him expand his horizons. Leblanc offered almost every kind available, so it was the perfect place to let him try more flavors and blends.

Ai: Are you free?
Ai: I was thinking of grabbing a cup of coffee at Leblanc’s.
Ai: Where are you right now?

She frowned when he didn’t reply. He usually would text her as soon as she hit the enter button. Maybe he was busy? He’d never ignored her before...

A little disappointed, she arrived home by herself, not bothering to get a coffee at the cafe. It wasn’t as fun if she was by herself, though Sojiro was good company.

Shaking off her umbrella, she placed it in the drying rack and closed the door. She could use the free time to do some housework. She’d been neglecting her weekly cleaning lately, and she could see out of the corner of her eye that the dust was building up on the cabinets.

Tying a rag over her face, she commenced cleaning.

Wiping her forehead with the back of her hand, she exhaled satisfactorily at the shining floors. Removing her gloves, she took off her mask and threw her now sweat stained clothes into the basket. Her fridge was low on food. She should go to the supermarket soon...

She sighed. Maybe she should pop over at Yusuke’s to help Madarame out?

She hated him for what he had done, to Yusuke and to the other artists, but she didn’t wish for his death. It would be easy for his body to give up from the shock of having his heart stolen. She wasn’t going to let him die when he should serve his punishment in prison.

She nodded to herself. Now it was time to air out the spare futon...

----5/31, TUESDAY, EARLY MORNING, YONGENJAYA BACKSTREETS.

Wriggling her nose, Airi put on a surgical mask once she finished eating her breakfast, consisting of grilled salmon, rice, and seaweed soup. Again with the pollen. Was it global warming? She remembered that the pollen wasn’t this bad last year.

Sighing, she left her house and headed over to Café Leblanc, bowing her head when she saw a few
of her elderly neighbors out on their early morning walk. Akira still hadn’t responded to yesterday’s messages and she was starting to get worried. Had something happened? Did he get injured?

Turning the corner, she stopped and blinked. He wasn’t there waiting for her at the entrance...

Furrowing her brow, she walked up to the door to the cafe and pushed it open. “Sojiro-san, is Akira here?”

Looking up from his newspaper, Sojiro raised a brow. “No. He left a while ago. Probably about 15 minutes.”

She blinked. He left without her? “Oh…” She tried to give the older man a smile as her chest panged at the knowledge. “Thanks. I’ll be going now.”

He nodded, watching her closely with a frown as she left the establishment before going back to his paper.

Airi kept her head down as she walked toward the station. Akira left without her? He had never done that before. At the very least, he would’ve let her know. She bit her lip. Did she do something wrong..?

She shook her head. No, she wouldn’t think that unless he told her outright. He promised to stay by her side. She won’t assume anything until she could see for her own eyes.

She glanced to the left of her desk, gnawing on her bottom lip. When she had gotten to school, Akira was already at his desk, books out on the table. She tried to start a conversation with him, but he kept his head down and only nodded or shook his head. Hurt by his silence, she tried to keep a smile on her face, giving him a thumbs up whenever he got a question right.

Not once did he even look at her today.

She sighed, looking down at her desk with a discouraged frown. Did she really do something wrong? After yesterday’s conversation with Matsumoto and Ann, she was a little uncomfortable thinking of him in that new light, but she thought…

A chair skidded and she looked up at him timidly as he stood up from his seat. “A-Are you going somewhere?” She asked shyly.

Akira nodded silently before leaving the room, closing the door behind him with a click.

She stared at the doors before biting her lip, feeling her eyes moisten up. Had she done something wrong..?
Akira sighed roughly, ruffling his hair. It was hard to ignore her today. He felt a sharp pang in his chest every time he didn’t respond to her questions. It was a lot harder than he imagined it would be.

When he had left earlier this morning to avoid her, Morgana had stared at him incredulously before shuffling back inside the bag, choosing to ignore his leader.

He already felt guilty enough for doing that, but he knew he should distance himself. He shouldn’t bother her with his problems; asking her to accompany him to the clinic when she could be working, helping him study when she had to keep her own grades up to stay on her scholarship, and her forcing herself to go to Mementos with them even when it made her sick.

He wasn’t someone she would want around for too long, especially with his problems. His phone buzzed, and he reluctantly took it out, noticing it was from Dr.Takemi.

He was still scared to go alone, but...he shouldn’t bother Airi anymore.

Chapter End Notes

Kawakami rank 1
Ann rank 6
The next couple of days passed by slowly.

Akira continued to avoid her, leaving the cafe in the morning before she would get there. He didn’t hang out with her, he didn’t ask her for anything, he didn’t speak to her. He never even looked at her.

It was like she didn’t exist.

It hurt. Especially when they went into Mementos. There had been a target available on the Phansite that they all agreed to go after, barring Yusuke. He wanted to come with but with Madarame's health, he had to stay to watch over his old mentor.

Once they entered Shibuya's distorted underground, Joker immediately set off toward the tracks, not waiting up for his teammates. Elegant, Skull, Panther, and Mona looked at each other before catching up with him. Mona changed into his bus form and opened his doors for them. Elegant climbed into the driver's seat but with a pang in her chest, she realized that Joker had switched seats with Panther, instead joining the pirate in the back seat.

Panther and Skull looked back and forth from their leader and their team caretaker with awkward glances, unsure if they should be saying anything, and it left the entire team in an uncomfortable silence.

Taking a deep breath, Elegant pressed her foot against the gas pedal and drove them into the tunnels, finding it hard to focus on her surroundings when she knew something was wrong with her and Joker. It was discomfiting because even though he hasn't said a word to her in days, she could feel his eyes drilling themselves into the back of her head. What did he want? Why won't he say anything to her? If she did something to upset him, she wanted to apologize...

"Shadow!"

With a gasp, Elegant quickly jerked the wheel and slammed the side of the bus against the lumbering Shadow, sending it forward into a wriggling heap. Shit, she wasn't paying enough attention..!

Without a word, Joker leaped from the bus and with a twirl of his dagger, jammed it into the emerging slime, not even letting it get a word in. Skull gaped at the ruthless maneuver before scrambling out of the bus with his pipe, intent on getting the other slime, but stopped short when their silent leader moved. With a swish of his coat, Joker threw his dagger at the nearest slime before running forward to yank it out. Using its dissipating body as a platform, he twisted himself in the air before striking down with the tip, killing the last one.

The team stared in shock, none of them saying a word. Their leader had never been so cold in his
methods, not even when he was threatening Shadows for their money.

Straightening back up, Joker jumped back into the bus and took his seat again, crossing his arms and legs and closing his eyes. Skull slowly climbed in after him, keeping as much distance as he could in the bus.

Glancing around nervously, Panther gave the noblewoman a shaky smile. "Um...Let's keep going?"

Elegant slowly nodded and with one look at her reticent leader in the rear view mirror, began driving again. "R-Right..."

Journeying farther into the Area, they finally found the portal that led them to their current target: a swirling red vortex that sucked reality around it. Driving straight through, Elegant slammed the brakes and the entire team walked up to the Shadow.

Their target scowled. "That bitch thought I wasn't worth her time...Says she was just being nice...I'll show her. I'll show all of you that I'm worth something!" With a rumble, his human body melted into the ground and an amalgamation emerged. With a flap of its wings, Andras screeched at them through its beak and crossed its arms over its muscular physique.

Panther stepped forward, whip in hand. "Take this!" She flicked her wrist and flogged the Shadow with each arch of her arm. The end of the whip hit its wings and a few of its feathers fell off in a flurry.

Incensed, Andras screeched once more and flew forward, hands outstretched into claws. Knocking the dominatrix down, it took its chances and flapped its wings to fly toward its next target.

"Shit!" Skull cursed, rushing after it with his pipe. "Elegant, watch out!"

Her hand in the middle of healing Panther, Elegant snapped her head up and gasped when the Shadow appeared before her, hand stretched out to attack her. Clenching her eyes shut, she held up her scythe with her right hand and braced for impact.

"Don't you dare hurt her!"

Hearing her leader's voice, Elegant opened her eyes to see Joker knocking the Shadow away from her. Teeth bared into a snarl, he pierced his dagger straight into the Andras. With a yell, Skull jumped up from behind it and swung his pipe down.

Screaming in pain, Andras slumped in its spot, admitting defeat. Once it dropped ¥6200, it turned back into its human counterpart. "Damn it..." The man sobbed. "I only wanted to be worthy of her...Why didn't she want me?"

Joker stared at him with an apathetic gaze. "Figure out your own self worth first."

Looking up at him, the man slowly nodded. "Yeah...You're right. I should try hard to improve myself. At least then, she'll give me a real answer..." Glowing brightly, the man disappeared and in its place was a bud of a Treasure that Mona immediately tackled out of the air, purring in delight.

Letting her weapon disappear, Elegant stepped behind Joker. "Thank you, Joker." She said softly with a hopeful smile. He protected her like usual. That must mean everything was fine, right?

Not turning around, he nodded and walked toward the exit, not waiting for any of them.

She stared after him and felt her hopes dissipate. What was going on..? Why won't he talk to her?
Someone took her hand in theirs and she looked up to see Panther give her a pitying smile. "C'mon, let's go..."

"Mona!" Skull yelled at their feline teammate. "Let's go! I gotta get back for dinner!"

"Treasure...." Mona drooled, eyes shining with elation as he curled around the Treasure.

When they got back into the real world, Akira immediately left without a word, barely holding out his bag for Morgana to jump in. Biting her lip, Airi decided to give him some space and went home at a slower pace, not bothering to catch up to him.

The longer he ignored her, she slowly gave up. The continued silence from him was like a dagger to her heart, each day driving it in deeper.

The class noticed as her mood slowly turned depressed, and Ann tried to speak to her about it but Airi waved her away. It wasn’t their problem. It was hers. She was the problem.

She tried to ignore it by visiting the school library, checking out all the books that mentioned thieves. There was Arsene, Captain Kidd, Zorro, Carmen, Goemon, Robin Hood, and even hers, Jeanne. The ones that weren’t thieves were tricksters, like Johanna, Milady, and Loki. There was even something from H.P. Lovecraft mentioning a Necronomicon.

No matter how interesting the lore was, it still couldn’t distract her. Even work was a blur of flowers and unidentifiable scents, fake empty smiles given to the customers.

At least she was able to get that aikido instructional booklet from Makoto. The council president had hesitantly handed it over to her, asking if she would take good care of it until she returned it.

Airi agreed immediately. She knew from the age and creases in the pages that this book was important to the other girl, and she felt honored that Makoto had trusted her enough to let her borrow it.

She tried practicing it at home in the tatami room, focusing on her core and doing the stances it instructed. It helped a little, making her moves more fluid even though there was almost no power behind them. Hopefully it’ll help the next time she was out in Shinjuku since...since she doubted Akira would go with now.

Adjusting her bag, she walked up to the decrepit house, admiring how the brown metals shined orange in the setting sun, and rang the bell. “Who is it?” The intercom spoke.

“It’s me, Airi.”

Footsteps thudded from inside and the door slid open a moment later with a crack, Yusuke giving her a look of surprise. “Nee-san? Is there something you need?”

She gave him a small smile, holding up the plastic bag in her hand. “I’m here to help you with Madarame-san. Is that OK?”

Yusuke slowly blinked at the bag, noting the shape of a thermos inside. “Oh...There’s no need, but if you would like to come in...” He gestured inside the dark house.

Walking past him, Airi wiped the bottom of her oxfords on the beaten mat before stepping further
in. The house hadn’t changed since the last time she was here, and she followed the artist into the kitchen.

“Here is where I have been preparing his soups and congee.” Yusuke explained, gesturing to the pots on the old stove. “He hasn’t been able to hold down anything solid since we defeated his Shadow.”

She nodded and took the thermos out of her bag. Unscrewing the lid, she poured out the still hot hearty stew she made last night into a bowl. Peering into the large pot on the stove, she noticed there was only potato, carrots, and the odd chunk of beef. “You’ve been doing OK, but he should get more variety in the stock.” She informed, stirring the soup with a spoon. “Is he up right now?”

Yusuke nodded slightly. “Yes. He stays in bed even when awake. I have never seen him like this…” He grimaced grievously. “I am unsure if he would even make it, considering how fast he had deteriorated.”

Carefully lifting the bowl, she turned to smile softly at him. “Well, I’ll try my best to help. I don’t want him to die…”

Giving her a small smile, he led her upstairs and into the master bedroom. Quietly inching the door open, he let her peek into the dark room.

There was no movement inside the darkness and the only sound she could hear was raspy breathing. It was fast enough that she knew he was awake, and she tip-toed into the room, making sure not to make too much noise even though the floorboards groaned underneath her feet. “Madarame-san?” She whispered, kneeling next to his bedside.

Now that her eyes had adjusted to the dark, she could see what he had become since last Sunday. He had wasted away from his former self and was now a sickly thin wisp of a man. Through his open kimono, she was able to count every single one of his ribs because his skin sagged around them. Hair left untied, it laid against the pillow in piles of oily strands, framing his emaciated face and his dark circles. Through the worn blanket, she could see how thin his legs were, the fabric framing his skeletal-like limbs.

It was such a huge difference to the man she had seen previously, and she was taken aback by the large amount of deterioration. Had Kamoshida also turned into this during his week long sabbatical? Did all their targets end up like this before their confessions?

The man didn’t acknowledge her, his chest rising up and down weakly.

She bit her lip and left the bowl on the nightstand before standing up. Leaving the room, she headed to the bathroom, taking a rag and wetting it under the water. The water was just barely warm enough, and it really spoke to her how Yusuke had been living here. Wringing out the extra moisture, she brought it back into the room, Yusuke watching her silently on the side.

Folding the rag, she gently wiped the elderly man’s face, chest, and the rest of his body. It wasn’t something new for her, she’d done it for the younger kids in San'ya when they were too sick to move.

She left the unmentionables for Yusuke to do as he had been performing the duty every day. Luckily, there was no excrement to change out of the sheets, though the former Palace holder hadn’t been eating enough to excrete anything substantial.

Rummaging through her bag, Airi brought out a vial of peppermint oil and wet the rag with it. Now
soaked with the essence of the relaxing plant, she rubbed it over his limbs. “Yusuke-kun, help me lift him into a sitting position.” She requested quietly, the artist doing as he was told.

Pulling the kimono down, she wiped the rag over Madarame’s back and chest. “Hhgh…” He breathed out as he felt the oils seep into his skin, warming his body up. The furrowed expression on his face smoothed out a little, showing that it was working as she intended.

“What sort of effect does the oil create?” Yusuke asked quietly, swathing his former Sensei in his kimono again and draping it gently over his shoulders.

“It warms up when it touches skin.” She explained, throwing the rag to the side and lifting the bowl again. “It helps with sinuses, muscle aches, and headaches. I thought it would help him.” She smiled, holding up the spoon. “Madarame-san, I have some soup here for you. Please eat….”

The older man didn’t respond, though his mouth cracked open about a centimeter. Carefully scooping up some soup with the spoon, she slowly drip it into his mouth. She used a chicken stock so it would be easier on his stomach, boiling it with onions, garlics, tomatoes, carrots, and celery.

After several minutes of continued feeding, she finally spooned the last bit of broth into his mouth, watching with a keen eye as he swallowed. “Let him down now…” She commanded, Yusuke balancing his former sensei until his back hit the mattress.

Glancing at them through the slits of his eyes, Madarame breathed out, falling asleep again after his meal.

Standing up, they collected their things and left the room, Yusuke closing the door behind him. They walked back into the kitchen and he began washing the dirty dishes, not minding the ice cold water spraying into the rusted sink. “…Thank you, Nee-san.” He smiled slightly in her direction before turning back to his chore. “I am truly grateful you took time out of your day for this. I apologize for not coming with in the last mission, but his health….”

Airi nodded, opening the old fridge. “Of course. I know you still care for him.” She eyed the somewhat bare racks, not seeing anything substantial that she could use. “…Why don’t I help you get some groceries to improve your soup? Is there a market around here?”

He inclined his head, turning off the faucet. “If you’d like, I won’t stop you. There is one a few blocks away. Shall we go now?”

Leaving the house together, they walked down the quiet streets toward the supermarket he mentioned. “Hey, Yusuke-kun…” Airi began quietly, idly gazing at the much richer houses around them. She could never afford anything close to this. “Have you thought about what you would do when Madarame-san confesses?”

Yusuke glanced at her from the corner of his eye. “Can you clarify? I’m afraid I don’t quite understand…”

She exhaled. “I mean when he confesses, he’ll most likely hand himself over to the police. It’s what Kamoshida did. He begged for it even.”

They turned the corner, seeing the bright lights of the market up ahead, illuminating the asphalt. “If he goes to prison, will you be OK?”

He stayed silent, even when they walked into the market, picking up a basket along the way. “…I’m not sure.” He confessed as they browsed the vegetables section. “To be honest, he is my
guardian in name only. I am unsure of what to do afterward.” He idly picked up a carrot, examining the creases and dirt on the surface with a conflicted frown. “I doubt there are any emancipation rights…”

Airi hummed, picking up a pack of celery and placing it into her basket. “Well, you can come to us if anything.” She smiled, the corners of her lips falling. “I know Akira won’t let any of us down…”

He blinked slowly, tilting his head as he observed her. “Had something happened?” He asked. “You seem withdrawn…”

She bit her lip and shook her head. She shouldn’t bother him with this. “No, everything’s OK.” She tried to smile reassuringly at him as they browsed the aisles. “Anyway, I think we need more stuff…”

They shopped around for a while, finding ingredients for a good and hearty stew. Leaving the supermarket, they walked back to the old house, opening the door with a crack. Setting the groceries in the kitchen, they got to work, washing the vegetables as well as heating up a pot of water.

“Oh…” Airi began as she chopped the celery. “I found out where your mother is.”

Yusuke stilled, his knife just about to dice the potatoes. “…Where?” He asked, his voice shaking slightly.

“She’s also at Aoyama Cemetery.” She replied quietly, her hands stilling as she let out that information. “When we’re ready...do you want to visit her and Ayasakawa-san?”

He gripped the handle of his knife. “…Yes. I would like that.”

“Of course.”

Arriving home, she immediately went for a bath. She stunk like vegetable soup, and she knew the odd looks she got on the train was because of that.

Before she left, Yusuke had informed her that Madarame had woken up again, though he still refused to say anything while he stared blankly at the ceiling. Hopefully it meant that the confession was soon. Maybe it’ll coincide with the tabloid…

Drying her hair with a towel, she sat down on a couch and turned on the TV. “Wild-Duck Burger stock plummets after employee posted pictures of himself engaging in unsanitary practices.” The news reported. “The scandal occurred just before a stockholder meeting, having dire effects on the fast food chain. As for the man behind the scandal, he claims that he was ‘fully nude at work before he realized it.'”

She cringed, turning it off again. Some guy stripped near food that was supposed to be served? She didn’t want penises in her burgers, thanks. She’d stick with BBB.

Her phone buzzed and she unlocked the screen.

Y: Thank you for your help earlier.
Y: Madarame seems to have regained some strength. I heard him walking around upstairs.
Ai: That’s good!
Ai: Let me know if you need more help.

Letting her hands fall in her lap, she sighed. She was glad to have helped Yusuke with this, but her mind couldn’t help but concentrate on something else.

Tomorrow was the second to last day of the exhibit, but...

Biting her lip, she brought her phone up.

One more try.

Ai: Hey, can I ask what I did wrong?
Ai: You haven’t spoken to me since Monday…
Ai: If I did something, I’m sorry.
Ai: Please…

She bit her lip, not receiving any replies. Something splashed against her screen and she wiped it off, only for another to mar the glass.

Sniffing, she brought a hand up to wipe her eyes as more tears crawled down her cheeks.

Did he not like her anymore? Was she a burden?

Was he going to leave her behind, too…?

Her lip quivering, she brought her legs up, hugging them as she cried into her knees, her sobs echoing through the empty house.

“My little hime-sama!!” Her dad cried in happiness as he picked her up, swinging her around in circles outside of the local theater she had performed in.

She laughed, cheeks red in embarrassment and joy. “I won, Tou-chan!! I won!”

He nodded his head excitedly, bringing her close to hug her in his arms. “I know! I’m so proud of you!” He nuzzled his chin on top of her head, letting the short bristles scratch her hair.

Her mother smiled brightly at the sight. “That was beautiful, honey!”

Airi turned around, giving her mommy a big grin. “Thanks, Kaa-chan! I obliterated them!”

Her mother sweatdropped at her choice of words.

Putting her back on the ground, her dad rested his hands on his hips. “How about we get some cake to celebrate your recital?”

She gasped in delight, eyes shining at the thought of sweet sweet delight. “Really?!?”

He nodded rapidly, one hand outstretched. “Let’s go, my hime-sama! The bakery should still be open!” Taking his hand, she ran down the street, her dad matching her pace.

“Be careful with our daughter, Anata!” Her mommy chided as she followed behind at a slower
march.

She patted her stomach. She had sooo much cake that she felt a little sick, but it was worth it!

Her dad laughed jovially at her belly. “I’ll go pay the bill. Why don’t you wait with your Kaa-chan outside?”

She nodded, sluggishly getting up from the chair and exiting the shop. Her mommy was stood under the awning, looking up at the moon with a soft look on her face. It was one of her favorites. Sometimes she would wake up to go potty and spot her mom near the windowsill, the pretty light shining her hair, making it look like silver. “Kaa-chan…” Airi yawned, rubbing her eye.

Looking down at her daughter, she smiled. “Did you eat too much? We can go home now. Tou-chan knows the way.”

She nodded, hugging her mother’s leg in a sleepy embrace. They slowly walked down the empty streets, knowing the path by heart. The celebration had cleared out hours ago, leaving no stragglers around the neighborhood. It was a bit far, but they were safe...

A clicking sound was heard, and she felt her mother tense. “Kaa-chan?” Was it something bad?

A hand was placed on her back, urging her forward. “Be quiet, Airi.” Her mother whispered.

Her eyes widened. Her mother didn’t call her Airi unless she was serious. Her sleepiness fading away, Airi hunched her shoulders.

“Kimisawa.”

They turned around to see a man in a black suit walk out of the shadows, a metal thing in his hand. She remembered seeing it in Castle In The Sky a couple weeks ago. It was called a “gun.”

Her mother hugged her closer, putting her behind her dress. “...Yes? May I help you?” She asked warily.

The man hmphed. “Yes, you can. Where is your husband?”

She took a deep breath. “He’s...in his office. He said he’d be late.”

He raised a brow. “Oh really? Because I just came from there. I was told he clocked out early.” His dark eyes slid down to the little girl. “Is this your daughter? What peculiar hair.”

He smiled, but it wasn’t like the ones her father would give her. Those gave her warm butterflies in her tummy. This one...struck something in her she didn’t like. It was the look of that kid in her class who loved to squash the snails in the playground, but at her. She didn’t like it at all.

She gripped her mother’s dress tightly. Why won’t he go away?

“What is it that you want?” Her mother asked tersely. “Is it money? We’ll give it to you, just please leave us alone...”

He chuckled, pressing his thumb on the gun. “I was given plenty, thank you. Where are the papers?”

She furrowed her brow. “Papers...?”
“Stop, Hisoka.”

Her father walked up behind them on the empty street, a cold expression on his face. She had never seen him like this, even when she accidentally broke grandma’s favorite dish. He stepped in front of her, hiding her and mom from the other man.

Hisoka chuckled, running a hand through his slicked back hair. “Ah, there you are, Kimisawa. Do tell, where are the papers?”

Her father’s frown hardened. “I don’t have them. You should know this, Hisoka. Why are you threatening my wife and daughter?”

A smile slowly grew on his thin lips, eyes narrowed like a predator. “You’ve been digging around in his files. You know that it’s against the rules.” He drawled, slowly taking a step, circling around the small family. “If you don’t have the papers, then they’re with Wakaba. Did she finish it?”

Her father only glared harder. “You already know the answer. She’s nowhere near finished. It’d be a few more years before we can compile all the data into something usable.”

Hisoka inclined his head. “Fair enough. I thank you for the information. However, you must be eliminated.” He tilted his head apologetically, a glimmer of sadness in his eyes showed before fading back into the inky darkness.

“Leave us alone!” Her mother shouted, her hands on her daughter’s shoulders beginning to tremble.

Hisoka chuckled. “I wish I could, honestly. If only I could just be a regular mugger, too. Screaming, ‘give me all your money, bitch!’” He shrugged, pointing his gun at them. “But unfortunately, I’m under contract. You should feel sorry for me, too. It’s not like I want to kill you.”

Her father inhaled sharply, taking a step forward. “Hey! That’s my wife and daughter!” He glared at the man. “Don’t do this, Hisoka. I’ll call the police if I have to!”

Hisoka brightened. “You would? Oh, please do. I’ll even wait.” He gave them a mocking curtsey, waving his weapon casually in the air.

Gritting his teeth, her father took out his phone, dialing 110. “Hisoka...we were co-workers. Friends. When did you change to become this...this monster? Why would you murder for him? Whatever he is to you, it's not worth it!”

The hitman gave his target a sad smile. “I wish I could tell you...old friend. It’s unfortunate for this to be our outcome...but I have no choice.”

Her father furrowed his brow. “Of course you have a choice!” He argued. “If you had just told me, this wouldn’t need to happen! You know he’s after the research for selfish reasons! What Wakaba and I are doing could help people!”

From the far distance, the familiar ringing of police sirens rang out in the neighborhood, getting closer to their location.

Airi perked up. She and her mommy and daddy would be safe soon from the bad man! A tire skidded nearby, and she smiled. The policemen were always really nice to her, and they looked out for the neighborhood, too! Like guardian angels-

She flinched and covered her ears from the loud noise that exploded. Her ears hurt, a ringing
noise echoing in her head.

Opening one eye, she looked up at her parents who were still standing there, just fine. What was that noise?

She looked around, feeling scared again, and gripped her mother’s dress even tighter. It pulled in her little fist, and she looked as her mother slowly fell back, hitting the cement just like when she would throw her doll on the ground. “Kaa-chan?” She blinked.

Another thud sounded out, and she turned her head to see her father in the same position. “Tou-chan? What are you doing?”

They didn’t respond, their eyes staring blankly ahead up into the night sky. Why weren’t they responding to her? Was it the loud noise? Did it scare them too much?

Taking a step closer, her shiny black shoes, worn only for recitals, splashed in water. There wasn’t water here before and it didn’t rain either.

She looked down, lifting up her foot, and saw red. So much red. It wasn’t water. It came from her mother who didn’t respond, who wasn’t blinking, her chest wasn’t moving-

Her breathing began to tremble, and she didn’t know why. Kaa-chan always got back up, playing her cello, smiling at dad- Dad!

She turned around, running up to her father. Just like mommy, he had red water around him too, soaking into his clothes.

Why? Why was this happening? Her eyes blurred, and she blinked, feeling something wet falling down her cheek.

She hesitantly brought a hand up, and wiped the tears. Why was she crying? They were fine, right? Kaa-chan and Tou-chan promised to be with her forever, right? They were going to have more cake tomorrow. They promised. They promised they promised they promised theypromisedtheywerefinetheywerefinetheywerefinetheywerefi-

“I’m sorry, Kimisawa-chan.”

Rubbing her eye, she looked up as the scary man kneeled next to her, still towering over her. He gave her a sad smile, a black gloved hand coming up to pat the top of her head. “I didn’t want to, you know?”

She stared at him. She didn’t understand. “Why? They’re fine.” Weren't they fine? Her parents were fine. They’re supposed to be with her forever.

Taken aback, he sighed. “I see…” His smile slowly turned darker, his pupils shrinking under the cheap city lamps. “You’re like me then. I’ll be back, don’t worry.”

Tires skid as three police cars drove up to them, the doors opening to show ten police officers, rushing up with their guns pulled out.

“Hands in the air and away from the girl!”
Hime-sama - Princess
Anata - In Japanese, it's translated as "you" but it's also an endearing way to call your husband/wife
110 - In Japan, that's the emergency contact code for police force only. They have 119 for ambulances and the fire department.
Staring at the texts from last night, Akira let out a sigh as he waited for the train. He missed her so much. It had been days since he last talked with her. He knew he was probably hurting her with his silence, both of them really, but this was for the best.

She was able to take several shifts at work, making more money for herself. She paid more attention to their classmates, she spent more time helping out the school, and he wasn’t taking up all of her time.

“I don’t want to be distracted by a relationship.”

Likewise, he was able to spend time working on his deals with the people around him, helping Yoshida, and even visiting the good doctor by himself. Luckily, he hadn’t needed to ingest anything since that little girl interrupted. At least she was recovering well, thanks to Dr. Takemi’s quick actions and medicine.

He spent the quiet mornings on the train reading, Morgana barely talking to him. The feline, whenever he had the chance, would give him an unimpressed look. Several times he opened his mouth only to close it again. Akira knew he was only going to berate him about avoiding his “mom.”

Even though he was able to accomplish more by himself, he didn’t feel happy about his progress. He only felt emptiness even as he smiled and encouraged everyone else around him. As if the darkness was back to swallow him up...

Hearing footsteps behind him, he turned around to see the student council president walk up to him. “I want to ask you something.” She smiled politely. “Why did Kamoshida change all of a sudden?”

He shrugged, not really in the mood to deal with this. “Maybe he grew a conscience.” He replied halfheartedly.

Makoto hummed, idly running a hand through her short brown hair. “Is that your hypothesis? It’s still too sudden. I believe it’s only natural to think that something must have caused it…” She glanced around him, not seeing his usual companion. “And you’ve been distancing yourself from Airi-chan lately.” She smiled mysteriously. “...Well, that’s more than fine. Thanks for your valuable opinion. I’ll take it into account.”

Pivoting on her heel, she left, walking down the platform.
He stared after her before sighing deeply. So now he had gotten more suspicious by distancing himself from Airi.

Great.

“All right, everyone!” Kawakami-sensei called out. “Quiet down!”

The class quieted, watching their teacher quizzically. She usually didn’t do anything out of her planned lessons, so this was new. Airi furrowed her brow. Was there a special reason?

“I’m changing my lesson for today.” She announced to the class. “Instead of a regular class, we’ll be reviewing last week’s materials. I suggest you listen carefully. But don’t think you can slack off, OK? I absolutely won’t allow it. No slacking off!” She emphasized the last words.

Airi blinked in confusion. Why was she enforcing those words?

“ Weird.” Morgana whispered from inside the desk. “She’s going totally against the curriculum. All that stuff about slacking off was a little odd too... Wait a second.” He paused. “Is this what she meant by “skipping class”??”

Akira shrugged. He knew it would’ve been suspicious if he just left the room and never came back. People would notice. Airi would notice, and then she’d turn to him with those sad eyes that pierced through his chest like a spear. It was worrisome that he had gotten used to that feeling this past week.

“I would’ve thought she’d let you leave the room or something...” Morgana murmured. “But I guess you can’t really complain. Kawakami’s graciously given us this free time, so we’d better put it to good use.”

Akira nodded in understanding, propping a book up to hide the metal scraps he took out from his pocket. Always carried some spares.

Airi hesitantly glanced to her left and stilled. What the fuck did he think he was doing? Her eyes darted from Akira to the front of the class where Kawakami was avoiding paying attention to their corner of the room, and behind Akira where Takeda was staring out the window, not noticing the person in front of him carving metal into lockpicks on his desk.

She gripped her mechanical pencil tighter, the plastic groaning under her fingers. Didn’t he know it was highly illegal to be doing that, especially in a classroom? If someone saw him, he could get in trouble. He should’ve left this sort of stuff at home.

She opened her mouth to berate him, but stopped. Right. He didn’t want her help anymore...

She pursed her lips and reluctantly tore her eyes away, focusing on her own books. She might as well focus on more important things then, such as helping Yusuke out. She wasn’t going to let whatever this was tear the group apart.

Getting back to the cafe with a sigh, Akira collapsed onto the counter, letting his bag slide off his shoulder onto the seat next to him.
The silence was killing him. He noticed earlier from the corner of his eye that Airi hadn’t tried to reach out to him today. He frowned deeply, doubt growing at the back of his mind. Was this really the right thing to do..? Obviously, she was more productive without him around, but she had been more quiet lately.

Or did he only notice that because she had filled so much of his life with her presence?

His phone buzzed, and he reluctantly took it out of his pocket.

An: The exhibition ends tomorrow...Madarame must have had his change of heart by now, right?
R: I’m sure it’ll be fine.
R: So far nobody’s come charging us with anything, yeah?
An: But wouldn’t he wait to press charges AFTER the exhibition?
An: What should we do if someone contacts us about it tomorrow..?
R: Try asking Yusuke. He’s still staying with Madarame, right?
An: Oh, that’s right...Where is Yusuke?
An: I wonder if he’ll be OK with Madarame...
An: Wait, where’s Airi?
Y: Sorry I’m late to contact you all.
Y: It seems something will certainly be happening tomorrow. Madarame is on the phone as we speak.
Ak: With who?
Y: Likely the media. I haven’t heard anything in this conversation about pressing charges.
R: Guess we just gotta wait then.
R: Airi?
An: I guess she’s busy again...
Y: Nee-san had assured me earlier today that she’s fine.
Y: I have noticed her smiles decreasing in quality lately.
An: Wonder whose fault that is.
Y: Let us meet in Shibuya tomorrow.
An: OK! See you then!

“The exhibition is finally ending tomorrow…” Morgana stated quietly. “I’m sure things will work out fine this time too.” With that, he shuffled back inside the bag, apparently done with talking to his leader.

Akira let out a sigh before his phone buzzed again. He turned back to the screen, noticing it was a private text conversation from Ann.

An: Whatever is going on between you and Airi needs to be solved.
An: I haven’t seen her this depressed since the beginning of last year when she was super busy and overworked.
An: I tried asking her what happened but she only said I shouldn’t worry about it.
An: Nothing happened except you stopped talking to her.
An: What’s your problem?

Akira frowned dispassionately.

Should he be telling her this? That his problem was that he wasn’t wanted unless he was Joker.
That the only reason why they continued talking, the reason why they were friends, was because
he was appointed as leader.

Morgana knew his name but still called him Joker in the real world. If he didn’t have the power of Personas, he doubted any of them would’ve approached him. Airi would’ve stopped once he’d settled into the school because she had better things to do.

He wasn’t really wanted. That was his reality.

Ak: I don’t want to bother her.
Ak: She’s busy enough without me giving her trouble.
An: ...What are you talking about?
An: Maybe you should clean your glasses since you can’t see the obvious.
An: Airi likes you the best.
An: Who does she hang out with all the time? You.
An: Who does she talk to all the time? You.
An: Who rushes to her side first when she’s injured? You.
An: Who does she trust the most? YOU.
An: She told you what happened to her in those institutions, but hasn’t told me or Ryuji.
An: Ryuji isn’t saying anything but I know he’s noticed, too.
An: And Yusuke of all people has noticed.
An: You’re her best friend.

He furrowed his brow. He was? He thought she was closer to Ann and Ryuji since they were middle school classmates. Their secondary occupations as phantom thieves meant that she had to skip work, meetings, studying sessions. She couldn’t afford to if she wanted to keep her scholarship and house.

He was just some guy from out in the sticks here to wait out the rest of his probation. He didn’t have to work, he didn’t have to study hard.

He was just distracting her.

An: Just talk about this to her.
An: Stop hurting her.

He flinched and his fingers stilled.

He was. He was hurting Airi. He promised to stay by her side, to protect her, because he knew she had been hurt by a lot of people in the past, and yet he...

He sighed and let his hand fall to the table. He was going about this wrong. He didn’t want to end their friendship just because she was too busy to date him. He shouldn’t focus on his own self-esteem when she was more important. Whether or not she actually wanted him romantically, he should’ve put her above that.

His feelings weren’t more important than her.

Ak: You’re right.
Ak: I’ll talk to her tomorrow.
An: Good. We don’t need the parents to be fighting.
An: Kids are scared.

He chuckled, putting his phone back in his pocket. Parents fighting, huh? Guess he shouldn’t be
upsetting their mom with his dad drama.

Getting up from his stool, he changed from his school uniform into some comfy clothes, an apron on top.

Heading back downstairs again, the door to the restroom opened, and Sojiro stepped out. “Hey, how’s it going?” He asked languidly, moving back behind the counter. “You getting any better at remembering how to handle different bean types?”

Akira nodded. “Just a bit.”

The guardian cleared his throat, walking up to his most used tools. “Now then…” Sojiro smiled. “There are three factors that determine the flavor for a cup of coffee: grind, heat, and time. First up is the grind.” He gestured to the grinder. “For the siphons we have here, we’re aiming for medium-fine.” He glanced at the teenager. “…Are you listening to me? What grind are you supposed to use?”

“Medium-fine.” Akira answered quietly, resting his hands in his pockets.

Sojiro smirked approvingly. “Right. Keep up the good work.” He crossed his arms. “It doesn’t net much profit given the effort it takes, but hey, money is money. I’m not gonna forgive you if you serve our customers crap coffee though.” He glared slightly. “Just remember that.”

Akira nodded just as a phone rang out.

Furrowing his brow, the older man took his out, staring at the unknown number. “Who could this be…?” Taking a step away, he answered the call. “Yes, hello?” His eyes widened and he frowned aggravatedly. “…How’d you get this number?” He narrowed his eyes. “Now? Where?” He sighed. “…Fine.”

He hung up, shoving his mobile back into his pocket before turning to his ward. “Sorry, something just came up. We can keep going with the lessons some other time.”

Akira blinked. “Is it trouble?”

Sojiro huffed in amusement. “What, you worried about me?” He shook his head. “…It’s nothing you need to concern yourself over. Just do the dishes while I’m gone. Oh, and remember to shut off the gas before you close up shop. If Airi comes over, you guys need to hang upstairs and not down here, otherwise people will think the cafe’s still open.” He paused.”…Where is Airi, anyway? She hasn’t come by in a while.”

Akira glanced away. “She’s…busy.” He lied guiltily. Was it a lie, though? She was always busy. “I’m sure she’ll come by soon.”

Sojiro eyed him for a moment. “…All right, what did you do.” He asked flatly, not believing a word his ward said.

Akira winced. “Um…” He rubbed the back of his head. “…I thought avoiding her would give her more time to work. I didn’t want to bother her…”

The older man stared at him before sighing, shaking his head. “Are you an idiot? Why would you even think that was a good idea?…Did she tell you what happened ten years ago?”

The teenager hesitated. “You mean…her parents’ murders? Or the thing with Rui…?” If he was honest, there was still a lot of her that he didn’t know about. Sojiro must know her better than he
Sojiro gave him an odd look. “Her parents. Who’s Rui?...Anyway.” He shook his head. “...You know her parents are dead, but did she tell you it happened right in this neighborhood?”

Akira took a step back in shock. “What...? Right here?”

Sojiro nodded, crossing his arms. “They were killed on the other side of this neighborhood, after a community talent show. The police arrived to see her being talked to by the murderer.” His eyes darkened. “...They took him away immediately, and brought Airi to an institution a few towns away since her father had connections. Poor girl didn’t even have time to process the funeral before she was dropped off without a word.”

He sighed. “I tried to take her in, but everything happened so fast that I lost her location after that institution was forced to close...Then she just came back out of nowhere over a year ago, moving into her old house. It was left empty since no one wanted to deal with bad vibes. I try to help out when I can, but all she asked for is that I let her keep coming here because I remembered her…”

He glared at the teenager. “Knowing her parents had to leave her behind in this world, and this Rui girl too I gather, why didn’t you just talk to her? You think she wants to lose a friend like this?”

Akira flinched, ducking his head in shame. “Yeah...I realize that now. I just thought...If I didn’t take up so much of her time, she could get more money, earn more on her scholarship…” He shrugged helplessly. “I know now that I messed up….” How much did he mess up, though? He couldn’t be that important to her, could he?

Staring at him for several moments, Sojiro heaved a sigh, scratching the back of his head. “Well, you’re just a kid, so I guess I can’t expect you to know what you’re doing, but you better fix this. If you’re going to keep working here, I can’t have you scaring her away.” He huffed. “It’s nice having someone around to help at times like this, though. You’re actually a harder worker than I thought.” He smiled faintly. “Keep it up.”

Akira nodded determinedly. “Yeah, I’ll fix this. It’s my fault, anyway.”

Sojiro nodded. “OK, I’m off.” He took off his apron and placed his white fedora on top of his head. “Don’t eat all our food while I’m gone.” He advised before leaving the cafe, the bell jingling at his departure.

Akira sighed, shoulders slumping. “I need to apologize…”

“You better.”

Morgana darted out of the bag and onto a bar stool, glaring at him. “I’m letting you know this is completely your fault.” He stated a matter of factly, flicking an ear out of irritation. “You didn’t listen to the entire conversation before you jumped to conclusions and caused you and mom days of suffering.”

Akira furrowed his brow. “The entire conversation? What else was there...?”

The feline rolled his eyes, idly grooming a paw. “I’m not telling you. You brushed me off when I tried to help you that day at the diner. You’ll just have to grovel for forgiveness.” He stuck his paw out at him. “Mom might not even forgive you.”

He winced at the thought. Guess he was the fool.
Chapter End Notes

Yoshida - rank 2
Takemi - rank 4
Sojiro - rank 3
“What’s up with that old geezer?” A male pedestrian asked callously as the crowds stared up at the Shibuya 109 screen.

On the large television was Madarame, sitting at an announcement table surrounded by several microphones and cameras. He seemed to have recovered enough from his weak spell, but had clearly deteriorated from his former self.

Every screen in Shibuya was showing the exact same live stream, and every newsstand had a fresh copy of the tabloids. The articles flew off the shelves from the convenience stores, the pharmacies, and everywhere that sold it. A man picked up a copy as well, reading “Master Artist = Master Liar?! Madarame steals paintings from apprentices for years, claims as his.”

A female citizen raised a brow at the screen. “Is he crying..?”

“Of course he is!” Her friend yelled, holding up the magazine. “It says here he’s been stealing from his apprentices for years!”

She eyed them dubiously. “Is that really true?”

“I…” Madarame began, his voice broadcast all over the city, and even the country. “I have committed crimes that are unbecoming of an artist.” The cameras flashed in his face as he started his confession. “Plainly put… I, um...” He clenched his eyes. “Plagiarized work... I-I tainted this... this country’s art world... and... even “Sayuri”...!”

Tears began streaming down his face as he beat the table in guilt and shame. “How could I... I possibly... apologize to- to everyone for...?” He sobbed. “For what I've done... Aaaah...!” He covered his face, trying to dam his emotions. “To Chiyosuwa... Mina... Toushiro... Daichi... Natsuhiko... Yukimi... Yusuke...” His breath hitched as he continued the long list of names. “To Sousuke... Keiko... I am truly sorry!” He gritted his teeth as he clenched his hands around his head. “Keiko...!”

“He’s crying way too much…” Someone muttered. “And those names... who are they?”

“Wait... some of those names are in this article! These are stories from his former apprentices!”

“And that was from the urgent apology conference by Madarame that took place just a moment ago.” The newscaster informed once the channel changed visual feeds, shuffling his papers. “After reporting to the association, Madarame has agreed to the police’s request to turn himself in.”

“Wasn’t he on TV the other day?”

“I can’t believe I actually went to his gallery and thought they were amazing…”

“On top of charges of abuse to his pupils, Madarame has confirmed that his artworks were not his own. An article published today from Maiasa had claimed that not only had he abused and stolen from his pupils, he had organized hits against them if they tried to speak up about it. The names he
had listed in his speech matches up with some of the testimonies within the article.”

“A picture had been included, showing a storage room full of duplicates of his most famous painting, “Sayuri.” Some believe the rumor that it had been stolen was created for fraud and that it had also been originally painted by a pupil. This large-scale criminal act has caused a great shock to the art world, and…”

“That old man’s done for.”

“What a terrible person.”

“After the conference, Madarame was taken to a police hospital for interrogation due to his age. However, initial psych evaluations state that he is mentally sound and likely responsible for his actions.”

“There’s no need to be nice to an old geezer like that.”

“Why’d he spill the beans himself? Doesn’t that seem weird?”

“Also, a group calling themselves The Phantom Thieves posted a dubious note at Madarame’s exhibit. The police will investigate their relation to this case, but for now, did not identify them as suspects.”

“Phantom Thieves? Do these bandits have somethin’ to do with that old geezer’s apology?”

“Ohh, I’ve heard of them before. They supposedly steal evil hearts; it’s why the culprits apologize.”


“But I feel like I saw somethin’ about that online too. They sent out a calling card for real.”

“So it was like, “We’re going to take your heart?” That’s impressive if someone really did that.”

“Phantom Thieves, huh..?” A male teenager in a blue diamond patterned vest muttered, idly brushing some of his light brown hair out of his face as he stared up at the screen with a spark in his warm eyes. Exhaling, he walked away without a word, ignoring the commotion around him.

“Phantom Thieves again…” Makoto whispered, furrowing brow up at the TV. She grimaced, conflicted, before walking away to complete her errands. In the back of her mind, she wondered if they were really as just as they said they were…As just as her father had been.

The group met up at their usual spot in Shibuya station, looking through the large window panes to see a throng of people gathered around Shibuya 109’s large TV screen. “You guys see the news about Madarame?!” Ryuji asked excitedly, crouching on the ground. “It’s just like what happened with Kamoshida!”

Ann nodded with a grin. “And they mentioned the Phantom Thieves!”

Airi smiled, leaning against the railing next to Yusuke. “Along with all the apprentices...Our first official success.” She sighed happily.

Ryuji beamed up at them. “Man, this is startin’ to get interesting...If we do it right, we can change
people’s hearts.” He whispered gleefully, crossing his legs as he sat down. “With this power...we might be able to do more than just gettin’ back at society. It’ll be a big deal!”

Akira nodded, smiling faintly. “This will be fun.”

Ryuji grinned up at his friends. “Let’s keep pushin’ on then!” He got up from the floor, dusting off his jeans. “As for me, I hope we just keep gettin’ more and more famous!”

Airi sighed. “Don’t let the fame get to you already…”

Squeezing his face out from the bag, Morgana stepped on Akira’s shoulder. “Something like this happening twice is massive too. It’s too great a coincidence to occur normally.”

Ann smiled brightly, idly twirling a ponytail. “If we continue doing this, we’ll definitely be able to give courage to everyone who needs it.”

Glancing out of the corner of his eye, Yusuke held up an aristocratic finger in front of his mouth. “...We may want to quiet down a little.” He warned in a murmur.

The group looked up and tensed when they saw two officers stood nearby through the crowd of pedestrians in the station, talking to one another. Ann blinked. “Do you know them?”

Ryuji glared at her. “You moron!” He hissed. ”Those’re attendance officers!”

“Hello there.” The black suited officer walked up to them with a polite nod. “May I speak with you all for a moment?”

Sweating, Ann plastered a smile, lacing her hands behind her back like an innocent child playing coy. “Ah, yes! How can we help you?”

Morgana sighed, the sound coming out like a meow to outsiders. “That monotonous acting of hers never fails to send a chill down my spine.”

Smiling harder, she glared at the feline from the corner of her eye.

“What are you all doing here?” The officer asked amicably. “Are you friends?”

Akira nodded hesitantly, feeling a drop of sweat crawl down his neck from the sight of officers. He may just dislike cops on sight now. “We wanted some tea…”

The other officer, a more stern man based on his crossed arms and frown, turned to squint at him. “Hm, is that so? And how would you do that in a place like this?” He asked skeptically.

Biting her lip, Airi smiled politely and walked up to her leader’s side. “There’s a nice tea house a couple blocks from here called Zenkashoin. We planned to meet up here so we can go together.”

The suited officer nodded, appeased with their reasoning. “All right. Just make sure you disperse before it gets too late, OK? Lately, there has been some odd occurrences, and the news about that artist earlier caused quite the stir.”

Ann smiled angelically. “We’ll be careful!”

The officers turned and walk away, and the thieves grouped together closer to avoid any eavesdroppers. “It’s still light out…” Ryuji kicked the floor with a grumble. “Man, those guys must have way too much time on their hands.”
Airi sighed, idly grasping her arm as she moved away from Akira and back next to Yusuke. “It’s not surprising. I bet every officer was put out in the streets to question everyone they could find.”

Jumping out of the bag, Morgana curled up around the cellist’s shoulders. “…From now on, we’ll need to be even more cautious than before.” He advised grimly. “Look at us! Right after the second Thieves incident, both prior victims are meeting up.”

Ann furrowed her brow. “Wait, you mean people might be listening to us..?”

Ryuji shrugged, resting his thumbs in his pockets. “Eh, it’ll be fine. Look around.” He gestured to the busy passageway, not a single person glancing their way. “We’re the only people worryin’ about it.”

She pursed her lips. “I guess you’re right…”

“By the way, Yusuke…” Ryuji turned to the artist. “You able to get anything out of Madarame? Remember how he was talkin’ about that suspicious person in the black mask?”

Yusuke shook his head. “Well...I pressed him for answers, but he doesn’t even understand what happened to him to begin with.”

Ann crossed her arms. “It’s not like he actually saw his desires get stolen, after all.”

Yusuke nodded, leaning against the railing. “It’s likely that he may be sent to prison. In that case, gaining information will be difficult…”

Ryuji crossed his arms. “So, what’re you gonna do now?”

The artist straightened up. “I’ll be leaving that house.” He announced resolutely. “I can’t draw in such a place anymore. Not after confronting the ugly truth within its walls.”

They looked at him in surprise. “Do you have somewhere to go?” Ann asked.

He nodded. “The school dorms. I can stay there free of charge thanks to my fine-arts scholarship.”

“A scholarship?!” Ryuji yelped, staring at him with wide eyes. “Wait, you’re that good..?” He whispered disbelievingly.

Airi bit her lip worriedly. “Are you sure you’ll be fine in the dorms…?” He barely did well when Akira and Ryuji were in the room with him painting. How was he going to last in a dorm building with thin walls?

He glanced down at her and hesitated. “I recall Nee-san’s offer to house me as well, if it's not too much trouble.”

She blinked. Right, she had said he could hide at her place over a week ago. “I-I could, I mean…”

Yusuke inclined his head with a slight smile. “It would be preferable. I know you would do your best to care for my artistic activities, though it’s not mandatory on your part. I am conscientious of my messes and will do my best not to disturb you.”

She laughed at his hopeful tone and lightly bumped shoulders with him. “Don’t worry, I want to. It’s not any trouble.”

Akira snapped his head toward her at the emergence of what he thought were their words. They always said ”I want to” to each other. He subtly swallowed and he looked away, trying to push
down the jealousy. Was he being replaced...

Glancing over at his leader, Ryuji grinned hesitantly. “...Guess you could ask her to model for you whenever you want!”

Airi sweatdropped. “I don’t have any say? OK…”

He rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. “Now that Yusuke’ll be livin’ with Airi, it’ll be easier for us to meet up whenever we want.”

Yusuke smiled slightly, bringing up a hand to massage a shoulder and rolled his neck. “For the time being, we should wait and see how this case plays out.”

Ryuji tapped his foot. “And it’ll prolly take some time findin’ a target as big as Madarame.”

“Well,” Ann rested a hand on her hip. “We should just act like normal students while we look for our next target, OK?”

Morgana purred, kneading Airi’s shoulder with his paws. “We’ll be entrusting that to you again, Ryuji.”

The ex-runner nodded. “All right. Guess it’s just more prep ‘til then.”

Airi perked up. “Maybe we can finally do that spa trip? Ann?”

The model grinned. “Oh yeah. You haven’t used that coupon yet?”

They chatted as they picked up their bags and left the passageway, not noticing a pair of red eyes following after them. “Kitagawa Yusuke…” Makoto murmured speculatively before walking in the opposite direction of the group, disappearing in the crowd of people.

Hearing a whisper, Akira turned his head to eye the crowd, trying to find out who was staring at him. Who said that?

“Akira?”

He turned back, seeing Ann looking at him curiously. “Why’d you stop?”

He shook his head. “No reason…” There was no point in searching for whoever that was when there was more important things to do. Like mending his relationship with Airi.

They continued to walk, heading out of the station and into the streets. Yusuke, Ryuji, Airi, and Morgana walked in front while Akira and Ann hung back. “So,” She crossed her arms as they passed Central Street, making sure the others wouldn't overhear her. “When are you going to apologize?”

Akira grimaced, adjusting his bag. “...As soon as it’s just us.”

She snorted. “I saw you trying to earlier when we met up, but she didn’t even look at you...Was this worth it?”

He pursed his lips and looked down, watching as his feet stepped in front of each other, one after another. “...No.” He admitted quietly. "I didn’t realize that I was hurting her in a different way, not just as friends. I promised to stay by her side and…” He sighed. “Yeah.” He hadn't realized he had been hurting her. He only cared that his worth was lower than her time and efforts. That no one really wanted him around until now, and he could admit to himself in the privacy of his mind that
he was still adjusting to the thought of friends who wanted him around. Even if it was just because he was Joker.

Ann stared at him in surprise. “You promised to stay by her side? Wow…” She covered her mouth as she looked away, a blush on her cheeks. “That’s so romantic…”

He sweatdropped, rubbing the back of his neck in embarrassment. “...Sure, why not.” He was just being truthful. He hadn’t wanted to detach himself from Airi’s warmth, but he was just a leech.

Yusuke glanced around the bustling metropolis. “Where exactly are we headed?”

Airi smiled, leading them into a building and to the elevators. “To Zenkashoin, of course.” She glanced to the right where the same officers from before were stood, trying to seem inconspicuous even as their eyes strayed in the thieves’ direction. “We can’t be suspicious.”

The doors slid open, and they rode it up to the 5th floor where it opened up again. Morgana jumped back from her shoulders and into Akira’s bag. Immediately, the noise from the outside faded as they walked into the calm and quiet modern tea room, its interior brightly lit from the large windows that overlooked Central Street. There were a few other diners, but it was mostly empty, with a few of the staff milling to and from the kitchen.

“Welcome to Zenkashoin.” The host bowed. “Table for five?”

Airi nodded. “Yes, please.”

Holding five menus, they led the group near the back of the shop to a large table. “What kind of tea would you like to start with?”

Sitting down, they ordered their own individual pots and the host nodded, heading to the kitchens. Akira frowned slightly, noticing that Airi sat as far away as she could, next to Yusuke.

“Sorry for leading you guys here.” Airi apologized, perusing the extensive menu. “I know it’s a little expensive, but since we said we’d be here, and the same officers were standing by the corner, we might as well enjoy a little snack.”

“No problem, Airi…” Ann replied distractedly, grinning at the desserts. “Ooh, everything sounds so good! What should I order?”

Ryuji looked around at the post modern Japanese decor and out of the large windows that showed Shibuya. “Uh...Have you been here before, Airi?”

She smiled with her eyes closed. “Nope! This is my first time, too. I saw it on a review site before and it was the first thing that popped into my head when Akira mentioned tea.”

Yusuke eyed the black decor on warm yellow wood, lacing his hands together on the table. “The atmosphere in here is very calm compared to outside. I can appreciate its tranquility brought about by its feng shui.”

Airi laughed quietly in agreement. “Right? I really like it here so far, though…” She eyed the prices, one small dessert plate already costing over ¥900. “It’s a little out of my usual budget.” She confessed reluctantly.

“I’ll pay.” Akira piped up, subtly unzipping the bag for Morgana.

“Do you even have enough?” The feline asked skeptically, hiding under the table.
Airi glanced at him for a second before her eyes darted away and Akira frowned, even as the waiter came up to take their orders. Was she really done with him?  

After their brunch at the tea room, the group walked Yusuke to his now old home and helped him pack up his meager belongings, most of it being art supplies. Canvases, both finished and unfinished, acrylic tubes, paint brushes, and even a tarp. Ryuji and Akira were given the task of carrying the canvases, while Airi and Ann found a bunch of plastic bags in the kitchen to carry all the smaller items. Yusuke went into his small room, taking out his meager clothes and school uniforms, and looked around forlornly. Letting out a small sigh, he packed his things into a spare duffel bag and left, never looking back.  

They were given odd looks as they carried the stuff on the train, taking up a bunch of space. Ryuji cursed when he accidentally squished his fingers against the canvases and the safety pole, and almost dropped them all if Akira didn't bump his shoulder against them. Yusuke scowled and proceeded to scold him for being so careless, and Airi only sighed before stepping in, stopping their squabble.  

Getting off at Yongenjaya just as the sun disappeared on the horizon, they brought everything to Airi's house, pausing in the little yard past her gate so she could get her keys. “Well…” She exhaled as she opened the front door. “Welcome home, Yusuke.”  

Bowing, Yusuke carried his things in, making sure to take off his shoes at the step as he carefully held a covered up canvas in his arms. “Thank you again, Nee-san. I will try to be on my best behavior.”  

She waved him away, closing the door once everyone was indoors. “Don’t worry about it. I’m happy to house you for however long you need.”  

They brought his belongings into the living room and took a seat. “I’m so jealous…” Morgana grumbled as he darted out of the bag and onto the coffee table. “I wish I could live with mom, too…”  

Akira glared at him slightly. “Hey…”  

“So…” Airi began, again sitting as far from the leader as possible. “I should probably lay some ground rules and stuff since you’ll be living here.”  

Yusuke inclined his head, lacing his hands on his lap. “Please.”  

She held up one finger. “No loud noises, though I’m sure you’re well aware of that. Any food in the fridge is yours, but if you want something special, you’ll have to buy it with your own money. Oh, while you’re living here, I hope you don’t mind helping out with the bills.” She held up a fourth finger. “I only have two rooms, one of which is a Study. You can paint in there, but keep a tarp under the easel so it doesn’t stain the floors. The other one is my room, but…” She paused, shifting awkwardly on the chaise. “No offense, but I’m not really comfortable sharing that space with you, so you’ll have to sleep down here.”  

He nodded. “Understood. This couch is more than comfortable compared to the bench in my old studio.”  

She gave him an odd look. “Uh…You don’t have to sleep on the couch, I have a futon you can sleep in. I’ll get that for you later.” She grasped her chin. “Hmm…what else…”
“What about bathroom rules?” Ann piped up, looking up from her phone. “You only have one bath, right?”

Airi gasped and nodded. “Right, yeah. The bath is upstairs. I’ll get you your towels and stuff, so please clean up your own messes.” She clapped her hands. “All right, I think that’s all for now..? Let’s get you settled in.”

He nodded, shouldering his pack. Getting up from the couch, Ryuji volunteered to carry the heavy easel up the stairs and into the study, waiting as Akira spread out a plastic tarp in the corner before placing it down with a clonk.

Clearing out a sparse bookcase, Airi placed his paints and brushes on the shelves, shifting it so it would be closer to the corner but not blocking the window. “Is this OK with you, Yusuke?”

Yusuke smiled, brushing some of his bangs out of his eyes. “Yes, more than enough. Thank you.”

Ann grinned and gave him a thumbs up. “If you need any more help, Yusuke, let us know!”

Yawning, Ryuji stretched his arms in the air. “I think we should head home now. It’s gettin’ late and we got school tomorrow…”

She nodded in agreement, picking up her bag. “Yeah, let’s go then.”

The group walked down the stairs and the two blonds put their shoes back on. “See you guys tomorrow!” Ann waved as she closed the door behind her. “And welcome to your new home, Yusuke!”

Taking the opportunity now that the blonds were gone, Akira opened his mouth. “Airi-”

“So let me get your futon!” Airi smiled at Yusuke, heading back upstairs to grab the heavy blankets and brushing by her leader without a glance.

Akira deflated, frowning as he was once again ignored. Was she really done with him..? Had he really messed up that badly?

The artist glanced over at his gloomy leader and leaned against the wall. “...Is there something you’d like to say to her?” He asked quietly.

Akira ruffled his hair and held back a frustrated scowl. “...Yeah. Sorry, I know you’re settling in and all, but...I need to talk to her.”

He inclined his head. “I suppose this must have something to do with the past week?”

Akira glanced away awkwardly. Did everyone notice? “Yeah…”

Coming back down the stairs, Airi struggled to keep the thick fabrics of the spare futon in her arms. “Um…” She bit her lip, trying to shift her grip. “You can sleep in the tatami room...I’ll make room for you.”

Furrowing his brow, Akira took the blankets from her hands in one smooth movement and without any difficulty, placed it on the opposite side of the shrine on the straw mats.

She blinked before frowning, turning her head away from him and leading Yusuke inside. “I’m sorry I can’t give you your own room.” She apologized. “I can try to move the study into my room…”
Yusuke shook his head. “You have done more than enough already. This is fine.”

She smiled softly and gestured to the small door inside the room. “You can use the cabinet there for your clothes.” He nodded before unpacking his things, folding his school uniform and casual clothes onto the shelves.

Knowing this was an opportunity, Akira took a step forward. “Airi, can we...talk?” He asked hesitantly.

Airi tensed and refused to look in his direction, turning her back to him. “Do you need any more help, Yusuke?” She asked loudly.

Stilling his actions, the artist calmly looked up at her as he gingerly placed his most precious possession on the table. “No, I can finish here. Akira wants to talk.”

Pursing her lips, she walked out of the room and toward the front door where Morgana was waiting. “Morgana, do you need anything?” She pasted a smile on her face. “Salmon? Tuna?”

The feline perked up at the mention of fish before shaking his head. “No, mom. You should hear him out.” He gestured with a paw to the leader who silently followed her. “He has some things to say.”

Clenching her fists, she nodded jerkily. “Fine. Let’s talk then.” She stepped into her shoes and walked outside, leaving the leader to stumble into his shoes after her.

“Airi...!” He called out, jogging after her as she walked briskly down the empty streets. “Wait...!”

She stopped at the corner, right under a dim street lamp. “...So what. Now you want to talk to me?” She asked quietly, her back facing him.

Akira breathed out, stopping a few feet away from her. “I…” He began, licking his lips nervously. “I’m sorry…”

She stayed silent for a moment. “What are you sorry for?” She asked evenly.

Biting his lip, he rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. “I’m...I’m sorry for avoiding you all week. I know...” He paused, wetting his throat. “I know I shouldn’t have. I thought if I did, you’d have more time and you could...” His shoulders slumped and he hesitantly reached out with his hands. “You could spend your time on more meaningful things. I saw you went to work more often, and could study more since we stopped hanging out, so...” He let his arms fall limply at his sides. “Yeah...” He ended lamely.

“...That’s your reason?” Airi asked quietly. “You wanted me to have more time for myself?” She turned around, showing him the tears glossing over her eyes. “You avoided me, you didn’t talk to me, you ignored my texts and calls, and you didn’t even look at me. Because you wanted me to have more time for myself?”

He flinched, the sight of her almost tears sending a sharp pang in his chest. He caused that. He hurt her. “I know. I’m sorry...I thought...” He struggled to say it. “I thought I was a distraction to you. Like, who am I?” He shrugged glumly. “I’m just some guy from out in the sticks, stealing your precious time that you could use to work, or study, or...anything really. I'm costing you so much of your time and energy. I’m not worth that. I’m...” He felt his shoulders slump as he confessed. “I’m not worth your time...”

He didn’t feel worth it. She was kind, beautiful, and hard working to the point of self sacrifice.
Everyone in their class looked up to her, most of the school following suit. The only reason the other students in their class were nice to him was because of her. The only reason they were friends was due to unusual circumstances. He was an inconvenience to her...

Nails dug into her palms as she clenched her fists, and she walked up to him in two strides before squishing his face between her hands. “You idiot!” She yelled, a tear falling down her cheek. That was the dumbest thing she’d heard in her life. “You’re not a distraction! You’re not worth less than my job, or my studying! You’re one of the best things to happen to me!”

He stared at her in surprise, lips puckered like a fish from his cheeks squishing together. What?

“I trust you to guard my back as a thief, I trust you to listen to my problems,” She listed off shakily, her voice trembling from trying to hold back a week’s worth of frustration. “I trust you to keep me safe, and I trust you to stay by my side! You’re so fucking stupid!” She gritted, bringing a hand down to weakly punch his chest. “I thought...I thought you didn’t want me anymore….” She whispered, sniffling. “I thought you were going to leave me too just like…” Her parents. Rui. Takase. Too many people have left her life and damn it all, she didn't want him to leave too. "I thought you were going to leave me behind, like everyone else." She sniffled and held her head down, not wanting him to see her cry again. "You promised...You promised..."

His eyes widened at her confession and he quickly wrapped his arms around her, pulling her smaller frame into his. “I’m sorry, Airi…” He breathed, gripping her waist. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I know, I’m an idiot...I’m the fool…” He smiled weakly as he leaned his cheek against the top of her head, inhaling her calm scent for the first time in a week. “I’m sorry…I thought, you know...I got stuck in my own pity party, I guess...I didn't mean to make you think I was leaving or anything. I never meant to…”

Airi sniffled, lifting her arms to grip the back of his jacket. “You’re the worst...I thought I did something wrong...” She leaned into his chest, hearing that familiar heartbeat again next to her ear. “Why would you even think that you were distracting me?”

Akira stilled, blood rushing up to his cheeks in embarrassment. “I, uh...I heard you talking to Matsumoto-san and Ann that day…”

She tensed, looking up at him with wide eyes. “You did? You heard all of it?” She asked faintly, humiliation creeping up. Did he hear how she liked him? How she might've wanted a relationship?

“Er, no…” He glanced away. “I only heard you say you 'didn’t want to be distracted by a relationship’…” He repeated the line that had haunted him for days. He still didn't really think of himself as worth it, but if she said he was, then...who was he to go against her word?

She narrowed her eyes, remembering the conversation. “And that’s why you started avoiding me?” She rolled her eyes as she huffed. “If you listened for a little longer, this could've been avoided…”

He blinked, curiosity overtaking his previous embarrassment. “Like what? What didn’t I hear?”

She bit her lip, tearing herself from his embrace. “N-Nothing...!” She pouted a bit. “Anyway, you’re not a distraction. You’re my best friend and the person I trust the most. So…” She gripped the hem of her skirt. “Don’t be an idiot anymore. Talk to me next time, OK?” She pleaded quietly. She wouldn't be able to take it if he really did want to leave her life. She didn't want to say goodbye anymore.

Exhaling in relief, he smiled sheepishly and nodded. “Yeah. I’ll try not to be so stupid…”
She smiled softly, her first true one in a week. “Good. You promised to stay by my side, remember?”

He blushed as he rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah...I did.”

Walking past him, she grasped his hand and pulled him in the direction of her house. Fingers twitching, he entwined his with hers, his feet matching her pace.

He missed this.

Chapter End Notes

- Zenkashoin is a real tea room in Shibuya.

Airi- rank 6
Chapter 98

Chapter Notes

forgot to mention (i edited in last chapter) but Airi's at rank 6 now

Leaving Airi’s house with Morgana in his bag, Akira made it back to the cafe without any interruptions. The streets were dark and late enough that there was only the occasional drunk adult.

He was glad he was able to mend his relationship with Airi, that she had forgiven him so quickly. He almost lost everything he had because he was thinking too deeply into his own self worth.

Now that he really thought about it, his friends may be his friends because he was Joker, but it didn't mean they weren't his friends as Akira. Why would they hang out with him outside of the Metaverse if they only cared about him being leader?

He and Ryuji worked out together, hung out playing games and whatnot. Ann always asked him for advice and they would go out to eat unhealthy foods. Airi...Airi cared about him. Enough that she had cried because she had thought he was leaving her life.

It didn’t matter if he didn’t feel worth her time. He’d make himself worth it. He’d work hard to prove to himself that he was worth these friends, this team, her. Even if other people thought he wasn't worthy of anything.

Sojiro looking up as the bell rang. “Hey. If I remember correctly, you transfer lines at Shibuya, right?” He asked. “I heard customers say it’s gotten pretty dangerous over there. Don’t let yourself be a target, got it?”

Akira nodded. “Yeah. The school issued a warning to all the students.”

The older man nodded. “Good.” He glanced at the weather report on the TV. “Rainy season ends, summer begins...What a pain.”

His phone rang, and Akira pulled it out.

Y: You have my gratitude.
R: What’re you so polite for all of a sudden?
Y: I truly am thankful to you for making me come to my senses.
Ak: You’re exaggerating.
Y: I most certainly am not. I must express my gratitude earnestly.
R: You’re one of us now, man. We’ll be counting on you, mkay?
Y: Of course.
An: And if anything comes up, we won’t hesitate to lend a hand.
Y: Thank you.
An: Wait, where’s Airi?
Y: She is currently cooking dinner. I am reading the conversation out loud for her.
R: I’m so jealous. You get to eat her food everyday now.
Y: Indeed. An enormous improvement from my previous situation.
“Well,” Morgana purred next to his ear. “There were a lot of ups and downs, but we still pulled off our first job! Yusuke joined the team too, so let’s continue reforming society like this!”

Morgana huffed, swatting the human’s ear with a paw. “You finally got it through your thick skull that mom didn’t mean what you thought she meant, so yes.”

Noticing the TV was on, he walked up to watch the news. “And now, news from artist Madarame Ichirysai’s press conference where he confessed to crimes. He has admitted to selling copies of his famous painting “Sayuri” as the genuine article. Police intend to thoroughly investigate Madarame-san for fraud, as well as starting their search for all the missing apprentices.”

“Whoa…” Morgana ooh’ed. “Madarame is on TV! This is getting to be major news. The apprentices will be getting their second chance too. Everything worked out!”

Smiling softly, Akira went upstairs. Everything really had worked out. They stole another distorted heart, they saved another person, they gained a new member, and he and Airi were close again. He should’ve known that no matter how busy she was, she would always try to make time for them and for him. He wasn’t just some friend she kept around because she was too nice, or because he was her leader. He was the person she trusted the most.

He felt his chest warm up at the thought. He wouldn’t ever betray that. Er, again…

He paused in the middle of getting into bed. Tomorrow began summer uniforms. He should pull out the polo...

----6/6, MONDAY, EARLY MORNING, YONGENJAYA BACKSTREETS.

Putting on a white chiffon short sleeved top and the Shujin uniform skirt, Airi styled her hair differently for the first time in months. It was the first day of summer, perfect time to change it up a little.

Braiding her bangs out of her face, she left the rest of her hair to sit on her shoulders. “Yusuke!” She called out to her new roommate, walking out into the hallway. “Bathroom’s free!”

“Coming!”

It was strange to be living with another person again after over a year of solitary in her house. So far, Yusuke had been very conscious of his actions, making sure to clean up after himself and helping with chores such as washing the dishes after she finished cooking. The real problem will be when he starts painting in the Study. Hopefully he wasn’t too messy.

Pulling her white thigh highs up, she went downstairs to prepare a simple breakfast for them, as well as their bentos. She frowned when she noticed how much rice and food she was using. She’d need to do another run to the supermarket later. They always had flash sales around 6PM to get rid of extra stock and she could save more money if she bought more in bulk.

Hearing footsteps coming down the stairs, she looked up to see Yusuke enter the dining room. “Good morning, Nee-san.” He inclined his head as he took a seat at the table.

“Morning!” She smiled, scooping their breakfasts on separate bowls before bringing them to the
“Itadakimasu.” They intoned, digging into their meals. “So...How was your first night here?” She asked hesitantly, still feeling a little awkward with the other orphan. She had really only known him for two weeks, but she knew he was a good person, and that laid most of her anxiety to rest. It was just...She hadn’t expected him to be living with her. She had grown used to being alone.

“It was fine.” He chewed on the egg. “The futon was more comfortable than my previous one. I...also made sure to light some incense for the shrine.” He looked at her uncertainly. “That is...what I should’ve done, correct?”

She blinked before beaming at him. What a good little brother she now had. “Yeah...Thank you, Yusuke.”

Finishing their meals, he washed the dishes before they left the house, making sure the door was locked. “I should get you a copy of the house keys too…” She reminded herself as they walked down the streets. She eyed his outfit as he walked beside her. “Is that really your school uniform?”

Yusuke looked down at himself, picking at the deep purplish-blue button up. “Is this not what you envisioned? I quite like forgoing the jacket.” He eyed her uniform in turn. “Yours is very similar to your winter uniform…”

She shrugged as they turned the corner to Leblanc. “It’s interesting to see you change from a pure white jacket to a deep purple button up. I’ve never seen a school uniform in that color before…”

They walked up to the cafe where Akira was waiting with his back on the brick wall, dressed in the summer uniform as well. It was cloudy today, but there was enough light that it highlighted the slim tendons of muscle that were his bare arms, the rest being hidden by the white polo and plaid pants.

Airi blushed slightly at the sight and hesitantly waved. She missed seeing him in the early mornings like this. Was last night just a hopeful dream? Was the last week just a long nightmare? We're they...OK now? “Um...Good morning, Akira.”

He looked up from his phone and brightened once he caught sight of them, straightening up from the wall. “Good morning, Airi! Yusuke.” He stopped, staring down at her. “You...changed your hair?”

She nodded nervously, playing with the bundles of hair she left unbraided. “Yeah. I thought it would be a nice summer look...Does it look bad?”

Blinking out of his stupor, he shook his head. “No! No...It...It looks really pretty.” He replied quietly, glancing away as he felt his cheeks heat up. Now that she wasn’t wearing her bolero jacket, the new chiffon shirt conformed with her chest, showing how matured she was. Her hairstyle was also something he hadn’t expected, her usual left braid and occasional bun being all he’d ever seen from her. Seeing the loose strands gleam against the pale sunlight with her bangs braided away from her face really cemented a summer feel.

She beamed, feeling her heart skip a beat from the compliment. Everything was fine now. “Thanks!”

Feeling his bag rumble, Akira adjusted it so Morgana was able to lean on his shoulder. “Good morning mom, Yusuke!” The feline waved a paw at them. “How was your first night here?”

They began walking down the backstreets, dodging alleyways and narrow roads. “It was fine.” Yusuke replied calmly as they swiped their wallets at the turnstiles. “It was unusual to be staying in
a new environment, but once I woke up, I felt the difference between Nee-san’s house and Madarame’s.”

The train pulled up and they squished themselves into the crowded cart, standing awkwardly as it began its journey toward Shibuya.

“Was there a big difference?” Akira asked quietly, hugging his bag to himself. Airi glued herself to his side, Yusuke right behind her. He missed this closeness, though it didn’t help to be this squished. For the first time, their bare arms were touching, each brush sending a pleasant shiver down his spine.

Yusuke hummed, easily reaching up to hold a ceiling safety bar. “...The first difference was the atmosphere. From your visit to the atelier, I assume you were able to come to the conclusion that it was a dark and suffocating house. However, Nee-san’s house is well lit, and the atmosphere is very warm and inviting. The second difference being that there was hot water.”

Coughing, Airi held up a hand over her mouth as she laughed quietly. “Right. That shack didn’t really have any hot water, did it?”

He chuckled as he shook his head. “No. The hottest was lukewarm.”

Akira blinked and looked down at her. “You went over to the shack again?”

Airi nodded. “Yeah. I spent the last couple of days helping out with Madarame-san...” She pursed her lips. “I felt bad for him. He couldn’t really move or talk, so we took care of him.”

Morgana sneaked his head out of the bag. “You’re so nice, mom.” He stated quietly, the rumbling of the train tracks disguising his meows from the other passengers. “Are you going to be taking care of our next target, too?”

She scoffed. “No. I did it because Yusuke still cares for him. Whoever our next target is, I’m not giving him a sponge bath too.”

Akira blanched at the statement. “You gave him a sponge bath? Gross...”

“This is Shibuya. I repeat, this is Shibuya. The time is now 6:58AM, the next stop is...”

The train pulled to a stop and they got off as soon as the doors slid open. Transferring to the Ginza line, they waited for the train, surrounded by other students in summer uniforms. It was a sea of white polos with the occasional blue button up, swallowing up any grey or black suits.

“Morniiin’!”

They turned around at the familiar voice, about to greet their friend but stopped when he walked up to them still in his winter uniform.

Ryuji grinned at them. “The response to Madarame’s press conference was huge!” He exclaimed, rolling his shoulder as he gripped his blazer. “Everyone’s talkin’ about the calling card. Girl’s are checkin’ me out today...” He smirked slyly and dusted off some invisible dust from his jacket. “Maybe they can’t help but sense my overflowin’ phantom thief charisma?”

Airi sweatdropped. “Or...maybe look around you...” She hinted.

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Am I finally startin’ to be popular with all the fly hon-...” He paused, his eyes catching all the white polos and paled. “...Oh no!”
Akira snorted. “...You realize yet?”

The ex-runner looked down at himself in panic. “My uniform! That’s what it was! We’re s’posed to switch to summer uniforms today! I knew people were lookin’ at me…” He groaned. “Oh, goddammit!”

Yusuke tilted his head. “Forgive me if I’m wrong, but could you not just remove the blazer? You’re violating the dress code either way.”

Ryuji perked up. “You’re right! Thanks, bro!” Quickly taking off the blazer, he shoved it into his bag, leaving himself in his yellow ZOMG! Shirt and the regular Shujin pants. “Phew, saved for the day…Anyway, how was roomin’ with mom?” He grinned teasingly. “She snore?”

Crossing her arms, Airi stared incredulously at him. “I do not! He slept downstairs, so even if I did, he wouldn’t be able to hear!”

He snickered. “Or maybe you snored so loud, the entire house could hear it. Or are you a sleepwalker?”

Pouting now, she sent daggers with her eyes.

Coughing, Akira covered his mouth, disguising his laugh. The train pulled into the station and they got on, squeezing into the crowded cart. Getting off at Aoyama-Itchome, they waved farewell to Yusuke as he continued onward to Kosei and they left the station, joining the hordes of Shujin students walking to school.

“Holy shit you’re pale!” A male student snickered, looking his friend up and down. “Short sleeves are so not for you!”

“Shut up!” His pale friend shouted. “Geez...Anyway, did you catch the news yesterday? Watching that famous artist cry his eyes out over all the artwork he’s stolen...The same thing happened to Kamoshida, right?” He asked. “Both got weird calling cards, too...If you ask me, the same person is behind all this.”

The student nodded. “The news this morning a group called the Phantom Thieves are the ones behind the cards. I wonder how they get people to confess. I mean, they can’t literally be “stealing hearts.” Blackmail, maybe?”

Walking behind them, they gave each other sly grins, Ryuji snickering quietly. Seemed like more and more people were hearing their name.

“Did you see Madarame’s press conference?”

Glancing up in the middle of her bento, Airi paused and overheard their conversation.

The entire school was abuzz about the confession, with every student talking about it. Someone had even drawn a caricature of Madarame crying on the chalkboard in the back of the room. It was a little distasteful, but they didn’t know the details so she couldn’t say anything.
Even Makoto-senpai was interested in the news, though she seemed extremely stressed out about something. Hopefully, it wasn’t anything more regarding the Phantom Thieves. The student council president was very intelligent, boasting the highest scores in the school. There was no doubt she would be able to figure it out if she really applied her brain to this.

“You mean that guy who was all like, ‘How could I possibly...apologize for what I’ve done...Aaaah..?’” Takeda mocked before snickering at his reenactment.

“Think it was really those phantom thieves?” Tsukishima asked curiously. “You know, the whole stealing your heart thing.”

Takeda scrunched up his face. “That...There’s no way. But then again...it seems too convenient for it all to just be coincidence.”

Standing next to Akira’s desk, Ryuji pumped his fist in victory, ecstatic to hear people talking about their group. Not really paying attention to anything around him, Akira browsed his phone, checking the forums as he took another bite of his bento. He missed this too. He hadn't been eating healthy for a week, subsisting on curry and coffee, so this was heaven.

Opening the door, Ann walked up to them now that she had finished eating lunch in the cafeteria. She was dressed in the female summer uniform, but had a blue sweater wrapped around her waist in case she ever got cold. “How’s it going?” She asked. “Have you found our next big target?”

Airi held a finger to her lips. “We shouldn’t be talking about this in class…” She chided quietly.

Ann winced, taking a seat at her desk. “Oh yeah. I guess we shouldn’t…”

Ryuji sighed. “I just started lookin’ yesterday. No way I’m gonna find one that quick.”

She nodded. “Right, OK. By the way, I decided on the TV station. What about you three?”

Airi perked up. “Same. It would be interesting to see how they do things behind the scenes.” And she had never watched much TV so it would be an enlightening experience.

Ryuji scrunched up his face in confusion. “Huh..?” He jerked as soon as realization hit him. “Oh crap, the social studies trip! Ugh, I just wanna ditch it...”

Morgana sighed, crossing his paws out of the desk. “You’d better go to your school activities. Didn’t I tell you not to draw attention to yourselves?”

The ex-runner scratched his head. “Wouldn’t me suddenly turnin’ into a good student stand out more?”

Akira shrugged. “You already scored higher than a lot of people during midterms. Just...go out with a bang.”

Ann perked up. “Then let’s all choose the TV station! I heard we’re gonna get to watch them tape a show!” She clapped her hands excitedly. "Maybe there’ll be actresses there!"

Airi smiled at her enthusiasm. “Are you hoping Risette will be there?” She teased. "I don’t think she’d show up on that kind of show, though.”

Ann laughed sheepishly, knowing she was caught.

Ryuji froze before a smile grew on his lips at the thought. “Oh well. Not like I got anything better
to do than waitin’ for info to come in online.” He grinned. “Plus, Morgana’s right. Showin’ up’ll keep the teachers from gettin’ all suspicious of me.” He turned towards the door. “All right, I’m gonna head back. TV, huh…” He muttered to himself, rubbing his nose. “Maybe I should get a haircut…”

Overhearing his whispering, Airi sweatdropped as he left the room. Any shorter and he’d be bald.

“That guy is such an idiot…” Morgana whispered exasperatedly. “I hope nothing happens…”

Akira snorted, finishing off his bento. “Now that you’ve said that, something is definitely happening.”

Scooting her chair around, Ann sat facing their direction. “So Airi, how was Yusuke’s first night with you? Anything happen?”

Sipping her green tea, Airi shook her head. “Not really. He did spend a while in the bath last night...But that’s probably because his old house didn’t have any hot water. Other than that though, he’s basically the perfect roommate.” She beamed. “He did the dishes, he’s quiet, he cleans up after himself, and he even prayed to my parents’ shrine!” She sighed happily. It was nice to live with someone again.

Akira pouted. “I do all that…”

Airi laughed. “Yeah, but you don’t live with me. He’s such a good little brother.”

He glanced away shyly. ‘Not yet.’ But he’d leave that in his dreams.

The bell rang, and they cleaned up their messes for the next class. While Chouno-sensei was teaching English idioms, three phones buzzed in the room.

R: Feels pretty great having everyone talk about us, huh?
Y: Madarame is the only topic of conversation at my school.
Y: And as I’m his pupil, most of my peers have chosen to ignore me.
Ai: That’s horrible. They knew he was stealing your work and they’re treating you like that?
R: That’s bullshit.
An: Are you going to be OK?
Y: There is no need to worry.
Y: They had been treating me differently from others as it was.
Y: This is nothing new to me.
Ai: Still...I guess if you’re OK with it.
An: Yeah…
Y: More importantly, do we have any leads on our next mission?
R: You kidding? There’s no way we’d find a target that quick!
Ak: To Mementos we go!
R: Ooh, we could!
Y: Mementos?
Ai: Right, no one explained it to you. I’ll tell you later.
Y: Understood. I will keep myself free. Please tell me if anything comes up.
The bell rang and the class emptied out, leaving only a couple of students behind. Packing up his bag, Akira motioned for Morgana to jump in.

“Let’s just lay low for a while, so keep your head down, OK?” The feline advised quietly, snuggling inside the bag.

Just as he stood up, his phone rang.

M: **Hey, I found some great intel.**
M: **This time it’s bullying by a Kosei student they call a queen.**
M: **She’s been ordering around a male student who goes by the name of M. Kind of like the M in S&M…**
Ak: **That’s horrible.**
Ak: **Does the M stand for Mishima?**
M: **That’s a secret.**
M: **Here are the details.**
M: **The girl acting like a queen is Shimizu Hikari.**
M: **I wonder if it’s more likely that a girl will turn out like that if she has an S as her initial…**
M: **Well, I already posted the warning, so you should take it on when you have time!**
M: **Hopefully you don’t end up an M!**

He sweatdropped, putting his phone away. Morgana shuffled on his shoulder. “S&M means sadism and masochism, right?” He asked innocently. “What do those terms mean? Are they sad?”

“Uhh…” Akira sweated. He didn't want to explain this. “Ask your mother.”

“Hmm…” The feline whipped his tail back and forth. “Anyway, it seems like she’s a worthy target. Let’s find time to consult the others at the hideout. It’s also raining today, and it could affect Mementos, too…”

Phone buzzing again, he checked who it was from. Dr. Takemi. He sweated, feeling a shiver of fear creep up his spine. “…Airi?”

Looking up from the last of her notes, she blinked. “Yeah?”

He softened. It was just them again. He missed this too. “Are you free right now?”

She nodded, putting her books away. “Sure, yeah. Is it Dr. Takemi?”

He nodded, shouldering his bag. “She’s asking for another…appointment.”

Packing her bag, she stood up from her desk. “What is this for, anyway? I get that you’re doing this to get access to the good drugs, but why does she need this?”

He shrugged as they walked out of the classroom together. “Not sure. As long as I don’t die, I should be fine…” He stilled, noticing a certain student president lurking in the hall with a familiar magazine still covering her face.

Noticing he stopped, Airi looked around for the reason why and raised a brow as soon as she spotted it.

They walked up to Makoto who looked at them. “O-Oh…” She cleared her throat, her smile just a
bit off from nervousness. “You’re still here?” She looked at his side. “And Kimisawa-chan is with you now…” She huffed in amusement. “What have you thought about that shocking Madarame case? O-Oh, um…” She stammered and looked away. “Never mind. I was simply curious.” Gripping the manga in her hands, she walked down the hallway and away from them.

Airi stared after her superior. “How...How long has this been happening?”

Akira rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. “About...two weeks? Not sure.”

Morgana sneaked his head out of the bag, narrowing his eyes at the retreating senior. “She’s onto us. We should avoid her as much as possible without increasing her suspicions.”

Airi furrowed her brow. Why was she going after Akira specifically like this?

Taking a few steps toward the stairwell, they paused as they heard echoing footsteps behind them. Turning around, they spotted Makoto again just a few feet away, face immersed in the pages of her book.

Giving her an incredulous look, they hurried out of the building and to the station. “What even…” Airi shook her head at what she had just witnessed. Was her council president really stalking her best friend? Was it more than just the Phantom Thieves? Did she..?

She bit her lip as they traveled through the train station. No, that didn’t make sense. Makoto-senpai wouldn’t like him like that. She wasn’t someone who would date when there was school to worry about. Was she suspicious of him in particular? If she brought this to the Principal, he could get expelled or worse, detained.

Her eyes darted over to Akira as they walked down to the platform and her hands clenched. She wouldn't let that happen to him.

Super thanks to my friend Gavin for drawing this!! He actually drew this a few months ago but I thought, why not have it coincide when she finally changed haha
Getting out of the Yongenjaya station, they walked over to the clinic and rode the elevator to the third floor. The good doctor looked up when she heard her office door open and nodded to them before jerking her chin toward the examination room. Once they were all settled inside the room with Akira on the examination bed and Airi on a spare chair, she handed her test subject a cup full of mysterious liquid.

Swallowing his fear and dread, Akira quickly threw it down his throat, coughing when it tried to come back up. It wasn’t too bad this time...

Takemi checked his pupils, blood pressure, took a swab of saliva, and two more vials of blood.

Akira clenched his teeth at the needle again, but like before, Airi held his hand, silently supporting him. Having her with him really was a boost to his confidence. How the hell did he make it through a week without her?

Writing the results on the clipboard, the doctor nodded. “...OK, that’s all for today. If you’re feeling well enough, you can go home now.” The phone rang, and she turned around in her chair to pick it up. “Hello. Doctor Takemi’s Clinic of Internal Medicine.” Her eyes widened. “...What? Again?...That’s, well...that ship’s already sailed, so...” Hanging up, she placed the phone back and sighed. “...What a pain.”

Akira blinked. What a weird conversation. “What’s wrong?”

She turned her computer chair to him and leaned back. “You remember that girl from the other day? The Chief of Staff Oyamada’s patient?” She asked. “Her dad’s been bringing her here to be treated, even though I referred them to another hospital.” She glanced away. “I even told them about the medical error I made…”

He rested his arms on his lap. “They trust you.”

She sighed. “I’m just a quack, though…”

Airi furrowed her brow. “What happened in the last week?” She asked quietly. It had only been seven days and yet it seemed like an eternity since she was here. How much could've happened?

The doctor glanced in her direction. “I helped a little girl who was on the verge of death, and now they won’t stop coming here. I even asked for a million yen and her father still agreed…” She sighed. “I don’t understand…”

“Well...” Airi began hesitantly. “It sounds like you saved her life. Like Akira said, they trust you and not their previous doctor since they couldn’t solve it. I think it’s great.” She smiled softly. “You’re an amazing doctor and deserve more recognition.”

Sitting up in her seat, Takemi grimaced. “You say that, but you don’t even know what I did. The medical error I committed was well documented. Everyone in my field know about it. I led the development of a new drug for an incurable illness called Crawford-Ende’s disease.” She explained blankly. “Although I wasn’t the one who administered the medicine, it was the cause of the error.”
Akira pursed his lips, running the information through his head. An incurable illness that she was solving, but it went wrong? How? “...What happened?”

Sighing deeply, Takemi crossed her legs. “With Crawford-Ende’s, certain cells indiscriminately attack other cells throughout the body.” She explained. “When it reaches the muscles, the patient slowly begins to die...There hasn’t been much progress made on it- partly because there haven’t been many cases of it.”

Her eyes stared at the bright computer screen to the side, unfocused on anything while she told her story. “I worked with a pharmaceutical company that had reached the final stage of production, but...” She slumped in her seat. “One day, I was suddenly removed from my position.”

Airi blinked. “Why? It sounds like you had a breakthrough. The company should’ve been happy for it, right..?”

Closing her eyes, Takemi continued. “Chief of Staff Oyamada, my superior at the time, took over the entire operation.” She narrowed her eyes, clenching her hand around the clipboard at the memory. “I don’t know if he wanted the glory of developing a new drug or to become rich and famous, but...”

A muscle in her cheek twitched as she clenched her teeth. “He made careless mistakes and rushed completion so he could use it on a patient named Miwa. Miwa-chan had a reaction and lapsed into critical condition. The chief panicked and laid the blame on me.” She exhaled, hanging her head. “Miwa-chan and her family resented me...No matter what I said, I couldn’t change how they felt about me.”

“But...” Akira hesitated. “It’s not too late.”

She waved her clipboard. “Well, that doesn’t matter...The development of the medicine was suspended, so I had no reason to stay at that hospital. At least now I can keep working as a general practitioner, on my own terms, my own volunteer...” She glanced over at Airi who beamed. “...And with my guinea pig.”

He blinked. “Wait, you mean.?”

Taking a glass bottle out of her coat pocket, she showed it to the two teenagers. “This is the new medicine I’ve been trying out on you. This version is in the final stage of testing. It searches for those cells that take the offensive and destroys them upon detection.” She placed it back in her pocket. “That’s why it’s harmless for people who don’t have the disease...” She paused. “Probably.”

Akira sweated. Probably? So she wasn’t sure if this vaccine was going to kill him? “...When will it be done?”

She smiled slyly. “That all depends on how cooperative you are.” She frowned. “You’d better not flake on me this late in the game. I’m inching closer to the finish line, but I need your help to reach it.” Her eyes slid over to the class president. “...Or Kimisawa-chan, if she’s up for it.”

Airi raised her brows. “Um...Sure..?”

Furrowing his brow, Akira placed an arm in front of her. “I’ll do it.” He confirmed once more.

Takemi nodded, smirking lightly in amusement at his actions. “Good. In exchange, I can offer you medicine at a special price. I’m counting on you, guinea pig.”
He nodded solemnly.

She sighed. “Now, what should I do about that girl and her dad? Being mean and scaring them hasn’t worked.”

Airi sweatdropped. “Help them? Since you’re a doctor…”

Takemi groaned. “It’s been a while since I’ve had to deal with this kind of nuisance. It’s stressing me out.”

Airi scrunched up her face. “But...Don’t you need patients to keep the clinic open? If you need an assistant, I can always come help out.” It would mean she could get free medicine which was always a plus.

She glanced at the teenager. “Maybe. I’m not good with kids...In any case, that’s all I need today. You guys can go now.”

Akira nodded, standing up and shouldering his bag. “Let me know when’s the next session.”

She smirked. “Of course. Thanks for your hard work.”

Leaving the clinic, they walked out onto the streets. It was still bright out, with a few of the neighborhood residents enjoying their late afternoon. It wasn't particularly cold either, and it made for a pleasant walk out of a cold clinic building.

Checking her phone, Airi headed toward the supermarket. Akira blinked but made to follow her anyway. “What’s up?”

She turned back to him. “I have to buy groceries for this week. You guys eat so much of my food, and now that Yusuke’s living with me, I have to stock up…”

He winced, rubbing the back of his neck. “Sorry. I can always go back to my ramen…”

Airi huffed as they walked through the sliding doors, picking up a basket. “No. As “mom,” I should take care of you guys. But…” She bit her lip. “I might need your help.”

He nodded. He was always ready to offer whatever assistance he could provide, since he got good food in return. “Sure, with what?”

She smiled hopefully up at him and pointed at the sales signs plastered all over the wall. “Can you carry the rice? I'm not very strong but they’re having a sale, so I should buy as much as I can! I’ll probably use it all up by the end of the month anyway.”

He sweated nervously. How many bags did she want? “S-Sure!” He said with all the confidence he could muster, hoping to every god he knew that she wouldn't see through it.

She beamed and began browsing the produce, picking out the ones she wanted. He lagged behind, watching her as she expertly checked the vegetables for blemishes and health.

Morgana shuffled out of the bag, sneaking his head out. “Hey. Are you sure you can carry that much?” He asked skeptically. “Your arms are pretty skinny…”

Deadpanning at the insult, Akira straightened his shoulders. “Watch me.”

The feline shook his head. “You should choose your battles wisely, or you’re going to disappoint her…”
After an hour of browsing the supermarket and grabbing all the items on sale, they brought two full baskets of food up to the register, requesting four bags of rice as well. “Your total is ¥10,520 please.” The cashier stated.

Internally screaming at how much she was spending, Airi reluctantly handed over her credit card. Grabbing the groceries, she turned to Akira who was standing next to the four bags of rice, and smiled hopefully.

Gulping, Akira grabbed the handles, and tensing his muscles, lifted them off the ground. Each bag was about five kilograms, lifting ten per arm. There was a reason he used a dagger...

Airi bit her lip, watching as he struggled. “Is it too heavy..? I can take some.” She offered.

He froze before taking a deep breath. “N-No…” He gritted his teeth, a drop of sweat already rolling down his forehead. He was going to prove that he could do this. He was the leader of The Phantom Thieves, dammit! He was a man! “It’s fine...Let’s just go…”

She nodded uncertainly and they walked out of the supermarket, heading in the direction of her house. His arms were shaking with how heavy the luggage was, and he could feel all his neck muscles tense under his skin, veins popping with it.

Shuffling out of the bag, Morgana waved his paws in the air. “You can do it!” He cheered quietly, crawling onto the teenager’s shoulder.

Akira grunted at the extra weight, gritting his teeth at the strength he was exerting. One foot in front of another, one foot in front of another…

“We’re here!”

He perked up, noticing that they were in front of the Kimisawa residence. He’d been so focused on not dropping a bag on his foot that he didn’t even realized they had arrived.

As soon as she unlocked the door, he rushed in, taking off his shoes with a push of his heels and dashed to the kitchen before letting the bags of rice fall to the floor with a gasp. Panting, he rested his hands on his knees. He did it..! He proved he was manly!

“You did it..!” Morgana stared in awe, jumping down onto the ground. “You’ve got some guts to tackle that!”

“Uhh…” Airi sweatdropped, placing her own bags on the counter as she walked in behind him. Guess it really was too heavy, but...maybe she should humor him. “Thank you so much, Akira!” She clasped her hands in front of her with a smile. “I wouldn’t have been able to take all these back myself!”

Taking a deep breath, he straightened up, wincing as his biceps pulled at the action. ”No problem.” He ran a hand through his hair, trying to seem suave even though it came away drenched in sweat. He should work out more...

The doorbell rang and she headed toward the entrance. “Coming!” She opened the door to see Yusuke, shouldering his bag. “I’m…” He hesitated. “I’m home, Nee-san.”

Airi smiled warmly, opening the door all the way for him. “Welcome home, Yusuke.”

Smiling shyly down at her, he took off his shoes before entering the rest of the house, stopping once he saw the guests in the kitchen. “Oh. Hello Akira, Morgana. Are you joining us this
evening?”

Getting his breath back, Akira shrugged. “If it’s all right with Airi.”

Coming back in the kitchen, she smiled. “Of course. Let me just put the stuff away…” Shuffling through the bags, she sorted the meat and vegetables into two piles before diligently placing them inside the fridge, finally closing the door with a sigh.

Yusuke took a seat near the counter. “What is this “Mementos” exactly? You had mentioned it earlier on the phone.”

Jumping up onto the counter, Morgana sat down. “Mementos is everyone’s Palace.” He explained. “It’s the culmination of everyone’s minds and Shadows within one area. Palaces are individual people’s distorted hearts, however, and they aren’t in the same areas.”

Yusuke nodded, idly sweeping his bangs out of his eyes. “What qualifies a person as distorted? Madarame had taken advantage of countless people, yet it’s not a story that’s unique to him.”

Airi hummed, washing the vegetables under the water. “I think it’s knowing what you’re doing is wrong, but you continue to do it. Maybe in the beginning, they knew they shouldn’t, but the more they justified it to themselves, the more they believed it was OK…”

Akira nodded. “Seems like it. Kamoshida and Madarame were doing it for years, so…if their actions became easier to them, then that shows they’re distorted.”

Morgana purred. “Correct, you two. A distorted heart exists when a person refuses to acknowledge their actions are wrong. They deny it to the point where they begin to believe their actions are in the right. However, just because a person is distorted does not equal a Palace. It means that they show up in Mementos as a smaller target. It is only after years of such behavior that a Palace is born…I think.”

Resting his chin on top of his hand, Yusuke nodded. “I see...How fascinating. Thank you for explaining it to me.”

Their phones buzzed and Airi shook her hands free of water before taking her’s out.

An: Airi, have you heard anything from the student council president?
Ai: In regards to us? She has nothing. No one at the meeting had any clue.
Ai: In fact, I know a few of them supported us.
R: Miss Honor Student must be busy kissing ass somewhere.
Ai: Inappropriate, Ryuuji.
An: Yeah, you don’t have to be so harsh…
R: Sorry...
Y: What is this about a student council president?
An: The one at our school has kinda been keeping tabs on us.
An: She’s suspicious of us.
Y: Are you sure it is not merely a result of Ryuuji’s general misconduct?
Ak: Burn.
R: Shuddup!
Ai: She keeps asking me about the thieves.
Ai: I think I know why, though.
Y: To be honest, the four of you most certainly stand out.
Y: Do try to be careful.
Y: I cannot be there to look over you at school, you know.
Ai: Says the guy with blue hair.
Y: Says the female with hair the shade of roses.
Ai: ...Touche.
Y: The duty rests on your broad shoulders, Akira.
Ak: Got it.
An: I will make sure to keep an eye on Ryuji too.
R: Why do you gotta single me out…?

“You know, Akira,” Morgana began, licking a paw. “The others kinda overshadow you sometimes, but don’t forget: you’re famous too. Just make sure to be careful, OK?”

Akira deadpanned, putting his phone away. “Thanks. You’re saying this because I have black hair, right?”

The feline purred. “I’m only saying you’re not as eye-catching. It’s not a bad thing. It means you can get away with more because you’re not as conspicuous.”

He frowned at his explanation. “So I’m boring.” Great.

Airi laughed as she got the pans out and ready. “I like your black hair, though. It suits you. I don’t think I could picture you blond like Ryuji and Ann…”

Akira pulled a few strands of hair into his vision, them curling back up as soon as he let go. “...I think I could pull it off.” He defended himself.

Yusuke sighed, shaking his head. “It would absolutely ruin your image as our leader. I implore you, do not.”

Akira deadpanned. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

Shaking her head at their banter, Airi started preparing dinner. “Why don’t you guys go watch TV or something? Yusuke, you can try painting. I’m sure you want to get comfortable with it here.”

Yusuke inclined his head. “You are correct. I’ll go then. Please let me know once dinner is prepared.” Getting up from his seat, he walked upstairs to the Study.

Gesturing to Morgana, Akira moved to the living room where he turned on the TV, the feline taking a seat next to him on the couch. “The investigation of Madarame-san is still continuing now, on the night after the press conference.” The newscaster informed, photos of the shack shown on the screen. “There’s also reports of a strange letter from a group who calls themselves, “The Phantom Thieves.” Police are carefully investigating whether this group may have any relation to the case.”

“Ooh!” Morgana gasped, tail curled up in the air in excitement. “They’re talking about the calling card we sent! And they said our name on TV!”

Akira smirked, leaning back in his seat. “ Seems we’re gaining fame. Let’s keep at it, then.”

Hearing footsteps padding into the room, they looked up to see Yusuke. The artist took a seat on the other couch, sighing heavily.
Akira blinked, turning off the TV. “What’s wrong?”

Yusuke clasped his hands together on his lap. “...I am still unused to this new environment. I tried to paint something, anything, but...” He looked down, idly examining the beige rug. “I still expect Madarame to come in at any moment to spy at the piece from behind me.” He whispered.

Akira frowned sympathetically. “I’m sorry...You know we wouldn’t do that, right? Airi wouldn’t either.”

Yusuke inclined his head. “I’m aware. However, I can’t help these habits which have ingrained themselves in me over the years.” He sighed, leaning back in his seat. “I suppose I can’t expect my focus to be absolute when I am still adjusting.”

“Dinner’s ready!”

Perking up, the three stood up and headed over to the dining room, taking a seat with Airi. Akira smiled, looking down at the wealth of food in front of him. “Looks amazing as always, Airi.”

Yusuke nodded in agreement. “Indeed. I find your mastery over cooking to be very artistic of you.”

Morgana snickered, sitting up on the table. “Wait til you hear her play.”

He blinked. “Play..? You play an instrument?”

Airi smiled shyly, sweeping some hair behind her ear. “Yeah, I’m a cellist. I have my cello stored in my room.”

Yusuke raised a brow. “I see. How impressive. You too are an artist, in a sense.” A small smile grew on his lips. “...Perhaps I will have a chance to listen to you play?”

She brightened. “Of course! We can try me playing a piece, and you painting it out! I saw an experiment like that on the internet the other day.”

Yusuke nodded, smiling satisfactorily. “Thank you...”

Sitting down on her bed in a black tank top and pale yellow shorts, Airi dried her hair with a towel, checking her e-mails on her phone. Yusuke was holed up in the Study, trying to get used to painting in a new environment.

She didn’t say anything, but she had overheard his conversation with Akira earlier. She hadn’t expected to open her home to him, but she hoped he would be OK. He was really starting to grow on her, both as a person and as a little brother. Granted, he was actually older than her by three months but still. He depended on her almost as much as those kids back in the second orphanage. She’d do her best for him, at the very least.

Her phone buzzed and she checked the new e-mail.
Kimisawa-chan,

I want to thank you. I had just left the lawyer’s office in tears. Because of you and your friends’ actions, I was able to claim my artworks back. Due to Madarame’s live confession, Maiasa’s article, and most importantly your work, I was able to reclaim my art under my name again.

I had also put in the others under their artwork as well, so they can come in anytime to receive their dividend. All profits from Madarame’s latest exhibit is being given to us as compensation. I was even able to apologize to my ex-girlfriend about my behavior, and we’re slowly starting to be friends again. You have changed my life for the better, as well as all the other apprentices. I know Daichi is grateful, even if he would deny it.

I opened my small apartment to him and Toushiro, just until they get back on their feet. Yukimi had also reached out to me, letting me know she was able to move in with Mina in a much better neighborhood. It’s all thanks to you, Yusuke, Kurusu-kun, and your other friends. I cannot thank you enough. If you ever need anything, please know you can come to me or any of the others. We owe you our lives.

Sincerely, Natsuhiko.

P.S. Let me know when we should visit Ayasakawa-senpai and I will arrange for time with the others.

P.P.S. Since I didn’t see Chiyo’s story in the article, I assume she rejected you? She has always been an idiot. Don’t mind her if she was crabby, I’m convinced she was born like that.

Airi covered her mouth, her eyes blurring with tears. “Oh…” She sniffed, wiping her eyes as a wide grin spread on her lips.

This was it. This was proof that she was able to help these people. She honestly had no idea how much of an impact she could’ve made on their lives, but even just a little was better than nothing. This though? This was more than she expected. They had lives again, they had money, they had the freedom and hope to move on. And they were thanking her and the Phantom Thieves for it.

She beamed, her cheeks stained with happiness. This was why they were doing this. This was why they risked their lives in the Metaverse to steal those Treasures.

A knock interrupted her and she quickly wiped her tears. “Come in!”

Opening the door, Yusuke hesitantly leaned in. “May I interrupt-” His eyes widened at the sight of her tears. “Nee-san! Is everything all right?”

She grinned, gesturing for him to sit next to her on the bed. He did so hesitantly, eyes surveying the room he had not entered yesterday, registering the large instrument on the other side of the room.

“Everything’s fine, Yusuke.” She laughed. “Better than fine! Here!” She handed him the phone.

Taking it, he read the e-mail, his eyes widening as a smile was etched on his lips. “This is...This is wonderful news.” He murmured. “We gave them this courage, correct? It was due to our fight for their...our rights.” Closing his eyes, he breathed in. “This is a new beginning…”

Airi nodded, smiling warmly. “That’s right. No more stealing your hard work.” Biting her lip, she
extended her arms out, wrapping him in a loose hug. “We’re family, right? You can count on me too...”

Gazing down at her for a moment, he hesitantly brought his arms up, awkwardly hugging her back. “...Family. Yes, you’re correct. Family hug each other, do they not? Natsu-nii and Yukimi-nee both used to embrace me.”

Her eyes widened. He was unsure about something as simple as this? Guess it was up to her as big sister to teach him. “Yeah. People hug each other when they’re feeling happy, or just because.”

He nodded hesitantly, slowly trying to relax. “It’s warm...”

She coughed, trying not to laugh. “Yeah...Don’t go hugging strangers though. Only friends.”

Thank you to ayril for this cute little drawing of Airi! She used Hanyu Yuzuru's Grand Prix 2014 Barcelona outfit as the inspiration and it's actually one of my favorite costumes from him!
Chapter End Notes

Takemi - rank 5
Chapter 100 Special!

Chapter Notes

WE HAVE REACHED CHAPTER 100!!!!!!! Three months ago, I never would've imagined how far I would get with this shameless self-indulgent fantasy of mine. When I began, I anticipated a lot of criticisms since it centers around an OC and it was a bit mary-sue, and though I did get a few disparaging comments, soo many of you have encouraged and pushed me to keep on improving! I really can't thank you all enough for being here with me. Persona 5 has changed my life for the better, teaching me to reach for my goals even when I could risk everything. The characters have inspired me that even when you encounter roadblocks, it only means you have to sneak past it to get to the Treasure. It taught me that even the worst kinds of people have a side to them I'll never know, and I should be considerate of everyone around me regardless. I'm kind of tearing up right now, but I want to thank HanaHimus, Voidwing, Yukitalia, Ayri, LunarTheMooncake, Superedx, valeria1314151611, Snow1997, 15LarueA, personabrain, cherry, and everyone who has given me such supportive comments! Special super thanks to Phantom_Aficionado (originally Ghosty_ghost) because you've been with me since the very beginning!!!

Thank you for being on this journey with me and I hope you'll stick around even after the final chapter!! (whenever that is, who knows, maybe this fic will never end lol)

This is a special chapter and technically isn't canon, but since we've waited 100 chapters and still haven't gotten to the love confession, I felt that I should give you guys a little snack to appease your appetites for dat Aikira. (yes thats the official ship name) (I wrote this up in like 3 hours pls don't kill me) (this could be considered canon later but for now it's not)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

SUNDAY

Airi panted as she ran down the streets of Yongenjaya, her bag smacking her hip while her legs pumped up and down, trying to get to her destination in time. She couldn't believe the news she had gotten. How could this have happened? How did this completely slip her mind?

What he told her had flipped her entire world upside down.

How did he expect her to take this earth shattering news?!

"So, what're you two doin' today?" Sojiro asked languidly as he flipped a page of his newspaper, leaning against the coffee bean cabinets.

They were enjoying a quiet afternoon in the cafe, watching as the sun slowly set outside through the window. Airi found herself at a loss, having already finished her shift at work and her homework for the weekend. Since she was so busy in the first half of the day, she apparently just
missed Akira when he went out into the city, their paths never crossing today.

Pausing, Airi looked up at him in confusion, the rim of her coffee just at her lips. "Huh..? Today?" Was she supposed to be doing something?

He raised a brow, putting his paper down. "Y'know, his birthday."

She froze. "What."

Not noticing her confounded state, he nodded. "Yeah, it's his birthday today. He's turnin' seventeen." He resumed reading the article. "He mentioned somethin' about wanting to hang out with everyone today, but they were busy so he went out with the cat. Said he'd be back later."

She slowly placed her cup back on the saucer, the information running miles around her brain. Today was Akira's birthday? He never mentioned anything about that. They had only been dating for a couple months, but they'd been friends for longer. Did he not want to celebrate it?

She frowned, watching the liquid in her cup slosh when she tightened her grip on the handle. Was it because of his parents? She remembered that he had a strained relationship with them, though she didn't know all the details. He seemed a little lonely, even when they began hanging out, as if he was expecting them to drop him like a hot potato.

If that was the case, then...

Airi straightened up in her seat and down her coffee in one go, not minding as the hot liquid stung the roof of her mouth. "Sorry, Sojiro-san, but I have to go!"

He watched as she picked up her bag and dashed out of the cafe, the door almost slamming against the window from the force she used to tear it open. He smirked and went back to his paper, shaking his head fondly. "Kids these days..."

Which led her to now as she frantically ran around the supermarket, picking up ingredients for a party. He didn't like desserts that were too sweet, so maybe a matcha flavor? Or should she go dark chocolate. Tiramisu? There was just so many options and he never seemed to have a preference, even when they shared food together.

She wanted to cry. Why was it so hard to shop for him? She's known him for months, but she knew he wasn't picky with his food. Was there anything he did like in particular?

He seemed to really like her cooking at least. If she wasn't cooking for him, his diet would be horrendous since he basically lived off of ramen and curry. Yet somehow, he was still able to keep a fit and lean figure, always ready to leap into action with a tense of his deceptively strong muscles. She wouldn't deny that she enjoyed it, especially when he would pick her up with ease.

She never knew how mischievous he could be though when they started dating. It was like he made it his own personal mission to surprise her every day. Even when she was expecting it and braced herself, she was still caught off guard when he would suddenly appear with that handsome smirk of his, leaning down to steal a kiss. The worst was when he would do that out in public.

They were already caught twice by Makoto in the student council room, and even though the council president spent the rest of the afternoon scolding them for inappropriate behavior, she couldn't fight back the smile on her face at her two underclassmen.
That time when he surprised her at work also stuck out in her mind because he bribed her boss to let him work with her for the day. They spent that shift together with her teaching him the different meanings, and he would arrange bouquets to hand to her. She still kept that last one in a frame, pressed to make them last forever. A red camellia surrounded by anemones and white roses.

Then he gave her a cactus.

Her cheeks flushed red as she remembered he presented that to her in front of her boss and she resisted the urge to hide her face. Why did he have to do that?!

A market employee looked at her curiously as they restocked the shelves. "Miss, are you OK? Do you need to sit down? You're breathing really hard there..."

Shaking her head, she tried to force the words out of her mouth even though she was so flustered. Don't think about that in public. "N-No, I'm OK...Sorry."

Biting her lip, she took all three flavors from the shelf and threw them into her basket, moving further down the aisle for sprinkles and icing. It didn't matter that this was so last minute, she was going to make this the best day of his life!

She took her phone out, dialing everyone's numbers before putting it between her ear and her shoulder so she could keep her hands free. "Hello? Hey, I have to tell you guys something. It's about Akira..."

"No, I'm not pregnant, Ryuji!"

Akira sighed as he exited the gym, freshly showered after his intense workout.

Everything had been so hectic lately that he completely forgot today was his birthday. It wasn't until Sojiro gave him extra slices of tonkatsu with his breakfast curry did he remember. He never really celebrated his birthdays, not recently at least.

The last time he had a birthday cake was when he was around five years old, and his parents took the day off from work to commemorate it with him. Once they stopped, he would go to the bakery by himself and get a small slice of cake on the date, silently wishing himself a happy birthday even when he had nobody to celebrate with.

He thought since he had the Phantom Thieves now who were his friends- his family - he could spend the day with them. Except it turned out literally everyone was busy today.

Ann had a shoot, Ryuji was helping his mother with some errands, Yusuke was visiting a gallery, Makoto had a University fair to check out, Futaba was hacking into that person's files and needed to concentrate, and Haru had a business meeting to attend with Okumura Foods. Even Airi had work for most of the day.

"So," Morgana began as he leaned on his shoulder. "Is there anything else we should do today?"

Even the feline didn't know about today, and it really only brought his mood down further.
"No...Let's just go home."

Maybe Airi was free now. He really wanted some kisses.

Ever since they began dating, he just couldn't help himself. Any time there was an opportunity, he would steal a kiss from her; in the mornings to school, during lunch break, when they went home, when they separated. Even when they were thieves and the tip of their masks would poke their cheeks as their lips collided.

It was especially hard to keep himself in check during battle, watching her gracefully destroy the enemies as she twirled and spun, her coat and scarf fluttering around her like some kind of ethereal goddess.

No matter how many times he kissed her, no matter how many times their tongues curled together, no matter how many times he couldn't help himself and went further, he never got tired of it. It was like an addiction, one that he didn't want to cure. It was love and he'd wholeheartedly throw himself down that abyss so long as he could have this forever.

Feeling himself begin to tense from his heated thoughts, he shook his head. He just took a shower and there was no way he could hide the blood rush with his jeans.

Taking out his phone, he texted her. He was feeling for sushi...

Ak: Are you free now?
Ak: I was thinking we could go on a date.
Ak: There's this sushi restaurant Yoshida-san took me to before.

He sighed when she didn't respond and put his phone away. Even his girlfriend was too busy for him. Guess he wasn't getting those kisses...

Shouldering his bag and making sure the feline was secure, he began walking down to Shibuya station, intent on getting home. He just wanted to hide in his bed and sleep the rest of the day away. Maybe he could celebrate with just Sojiro and Morgana...

"Ryuji!" Ann scolded as she prepared the meat. "Put the beef down!"

"Oh c'mon!" He argued as he squeezed the still cold beef in his hands. "I'm helpin' to tenderize it!"

Futaba snorted as she typed into her phone, ordering express delivery while crouching over her seat at the counter. "You don't tenderize beef like that, n00b."

Yusuke slid his eyes to her as he washed the greens in the sink. "And you know how?"

"Of course!" She boasted confidently. "I learned from the best, and by the best, I mean Airi."

"Then perhaps you could help out as well, Futaba, since you know so much." Makoto suggested hurriedly as she counted inventory. "We could use another hand."
Stirring the soup, Haru smiled sheepishly. "It's a little crowded in here though so Futaba-chan should keep track of the delivery. Is it coming here or at Leblanc's?"

"Leblanc's of course." The hacker responded immediately, eyes glued to her screen. "I have his location. He's at the gym in Shibuya!"

"OK!" Airi breathed out as she quickly whipped up the flour, eggs, and sugar in her bowl. "Keep tracking him! We need this to be a surprise!"

"Roger that!"

Somehow, Airi had gotten everyone on the team to come over to her house. When she told them earlier that it was Akira's birthday, they all dropped their plans and immediately rushed to Yongenjaya. She had already purchased all the ingredients for cakes and barbecue, and everyone had volunteered to help out in some way.

Ann was to marinade the beef while Ryuji tenderized it, though he was supposed to use the mallet instead of his fist. Yusuke was in charge of vegetables and Haru was to keep an eye on the soup, making sure it would simmer but not boil. Makoto was to keep them on schedule and to make sure they had enough for everyone.

As for herself, Airi was charged with making the cake. They had about an hour, give or take a few minutes, before Akira would be back at Cafe Leblanc and they had to get there with all the food ready before he would arrive. Hopefully he'd be pleasantly surprised and touched, otherwise this was going to end up really awkward if he didn't actually want to celebrate today.

"-not cooking it until we get there, remember?!" Ann yelled at Ryuji who moved to the stove, taking out a pan from the cabinet.

He grinned, not listening to a word she said. "Naw, we gotta get this ready now! I'm starvin'!" He turned on the heat before pouring a generous amount of cooking oil on the heated metal. Taking a handful of the beef, he accidentally knocked over the cognac Airi kept (illegally) for cooking, spilling it all over himself, Haru, and the pan-

Airi's eyes widened and her heart stopped. No-!

The stove erupted in flames as the alcohol made contact with the fire, erupting high into the air. "Holy shit!" Ryuji screeched as he jumped away, staring at the fire with wide eyes. "Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck!"

Falling onto the floor, Haru quickly scooted away fearfully. "What do we do?!" She screamed.

"Calm down!" Makoto yelled, though her trembling shoulders showed that she was also frightened from this unexpected turn of events. "Um, do we have anything to put this out?!!"

Futaba screamed and covered her head, cowering in a ball as the flames reached the oil on the pan, causing it to spark. Quickly moving back, Yusuke made to cover her, wrapping his arms around her curled up self. "Ann, you specialize in fire magic, do you not?! Can you put it out?!"

Ann turned to him in disbelief, pulling her pigtails with hysteria clouding her eyes. "How would I be able to do anything?! I don't have powers in the real world!"

Everyone was frantic to stop the fire but there seemed to be no sure way to do so.

Gritting her teeth, Airi dropped her bowl on the counter and ran to the stove, ignoring their cries for
her to stop. Taking the lid, she slammed it on top of the pan, ignoring the flames that licked her wrists. Turning off the heat, she sighed in relief as the alcohol immediately burned out on top of her stove now that there wasn't any fire to keep it aflame.

There was a tense silence before everyone relaxed with a sigh, now that the immediate danger was over. Futaba peeked out between her arms, not seeing any embers. "Is it over..?" She asked timidly.

Looking up at her ceiling that now had a black scorch mark on its surface, Airi turned around and glared disappointingly at Ryuji. "Ryuji..."

He paled and backed away. "I-I'm sorry, Airi! I didn't mean ta', it just happened on accident!" He quickly clapped his hands together in front of him in a prayer. "Please don't kill me..!"

Narrowing her eyes, she let out a sharp sigh and her shoulders slumped, too exhausted to stay angry. "Apologize to Haru first. You almost killed her."

Sucking in a breath, he turned to the young heiress and crouched down in front of her, bowing his head guiltily. "Shit, right! I'm really sorry, Haru!"

Letting out a long exhale, Haru gave him a shaky smile, still rattled from her close brush with death. "It's OK, Ryuji-kun, but...please don't do that again."

He nodded rapidly before holding a hand out to her, helping her up from the floor. "I'll fix the ceiling too! A-And I can pay for the stove!"

Turning back to the stove, Airi examined it for any damages and found none. "The stove isn't damaged. Alcohol burns out quickly when there isn't fire." Shaking her head, she took the now half empty bottle of cognac and placed it elsewhere, far far away from any potential fire. "Guess that teaches me not to put the alcohol so close by..."

Calming down from the unexpected fright, Makoto moved to examine the bottle. "Why do you have alcohol? I understand it's for cooking, but how did you get your hands on it?"

Airi wiggled her fingers in her direction. "Special connections." She winked before wincing, letting her hands fall. Looking down at them, she finally noticed that the skin around her wrists were red and starting to bubble from the fire licking her skin earlier.

Noticing that she was injured, Yusuke moved over to a drawer, taking out the emergency medical supply. "Nee-san, you're hurt..!" Walking over to her, he examined her wounds with a keen eye, observing as she winced when he poked the raw skin.

Taking a recov-R gel, he uncapped it and smeared it all over the burns, the miracle medicine quickly doing its job. He took the roll of bandages and dressed her wrists, making sure the effected areas were adequately covered. "We should go to the doctor for a thorough examination, however I believe you should be fine."

Airi let out a sigh, experimentally touching the bandaged wounds. "Yeah, it should be OK. They're not hurting anymore at least."

Purple eyes caught the time on her phone and Futaba gasped. "He just left the gym! We only have thirty minutes left!"

Everyone froze before they ran back to their assigned jobs, this time Ryuji staying far away from the stove as possible. They had to finish or else..!
Exiting the station, Akira walked back to Cafe Leblanc, feeling completely wiped out. Today had ended up just like every other birthday. He was going to celebrate the day alone without any friends. Was this really what he deserved? They always asked him to hang out, but the one time he asked them, they said no. Some friends he had...

"Why are you so grumpy today?" Morgana asked curiously, blue eyes blinking as the street lamps automatically turned on.

Akira sighed heavily. "No reason..." There was no point in telling the feline what today was anyway.

Entering the cafe, the bell ringing at his arrival, he noticed that the lights were turned off, Sojiro nowhere in sight even though it was still during regular opening hours. Furrowing his brow in suspicion, he let the door close behind him and took a few steps further in.

His ears picked up the sound of shuffling from his room and he narrowed his eyes, hands flexing for a dagger. An intruder?

Now on high alert, he carefully walked over to the stairs, silently climbing up the usually creaky steps. One good thing about being the master thief was the ability to camouflage the sound of his own footsteps. That always came in handy in surprising Airi, after all.

He peeked through the railings but couldn't see anything since the light was turned off and the windows covered. Cautiously taking a few more steps, he finally landed in the attic.

"SURPRISE!"

He flinched, taking out a pocket knife just as the lights flickered on and he blinked.

Every thief was here in his room. Even Sojiro was sat on the couch, lazily waving a noise maker around. His usually homey room was decorated with sparse party streamers with balloons rolling around on the rough wooden floors. The table was pulled out and set up with the portable stove; beef, lettuce, soup, and an assortment of sauces placed on the surface. There was premium sushi and Leblanc's specialty curry and coffee on the sides, making it a food extravaganza.

Yusuke held a neatly wrapped present in his hands, smiling in his direction. Futaba grinned, fiddling with her pepe theme wrapped box as she crouched on the couch next to her adoptive father. Makoto smiled, cradling a small package in her hands. Haru beamed, holding a polka dotted box. Ann gave him a peace sign and a smile, waving her present in the air. Rubbing his nose, Ryuji held up a newspaper wrapped gift.

Smiling nervously, Airi held a tri-layered cake in her hands as she stood in the middle of the room. She was wearing that flower printed chiffon dress that she liked, coupled with the hair barrette he gifted her on her birthday. Her wrists were covered in white ruffles, and her slim legs were enveloped in white thigh high. She looked like a present.

Akira blinked, relaxing his stance and putting the knife away. "What..?"
"Happy Birthday." Airi congratulated softly, holding the cake out to him.

Morgana darted out of the bag and looked around in shock. "It's his birthday today?!"

Futaba reached out and grabbed him by his fluff, playing with his two front legs even as he struggled. "Mona didn't know either?"

Akira looked around slowly, but it was if his brain refused to register the scene in front of him. "Huh...?"

Ryuji rolled his eyes. "C'mon, dude! It's your birthday!" Walking over to his leader, he slung an arm around his shoulders and dragged him closer to the gathering. "We worked super hard and almost died to get this ready for you!"

Grunting as he was almost choked, Akira blinked again, still stunned by what he was seeing. "Wait, but...I didn't tell anyone it was my birthday."

Sighing at his stupor, Sojiro let the noise maker fall. "I read your file, remember?" He rolled his eyes. "Now get over here. We're not gonna let all this food go to waste, right?"

Slowly nodding, Akira walked over and took a seat on a bench. Was he dreaming...?

Putting the cake down on the table, Airi took a seat next to him and smiled shyly. "Happy Birthday, Akira." She leaned up to peck him on the cheek. "Sorry for ignoring your texts earlier. We were all..." She winced when she remembered her house almost burned down. "...Trying to prepare for this."

Futaba nodded. "You said you wanted sushi, so I got express delivery for the best plate in Yongenjaya!" She gestured to the premium dish in front of her before taking a piece and holding it out to the feline in her arms. "Here, Mona! Treat time!"

Immediately forgetting that he was being manhandled like a toy, Morgana drooled at the sight, chomping the entire piece with one bite. "Meeooowwww...!"

Placing his present down in his lap, Yusuke smiled. "Shall we eat? I believe you must be quite famished from your exercise."

Ann laughed, crossing her legs on the chair. "Yeah! We saw those texts about wanting to eat with Airi, so we're sorry we're crashing in on your date night!"

Haru giggled, sitting next to her. "I hope that you like what we've done! It was such short notice that I rushed here from the meeting." She clapped her hands together excitedly. "Should we start with presents first?"

Makoto shook her head. "We have to eat before the food gets cold." She hid her teasing smile with a hand. "Though I'm sure he's hungry for something else too, given his previous habits."

Blushing from her insinuation, Airi awkwardly coughed and turned on the portable stove. "W-Well, let's get cooking then!"

Akira stared at them in a stupor, watching as they began taking the marinated meat and placing it on the grill. He watched as Yusuke debated with Futaba about which slice should go on first because it would ruin the aesthetic. He watched as Ann and Ryuji began to argue about whether or not the beef was tender enough, though they did so with smiles. He watched as Makoto, Haru, and Sojiro conversed about food and how fresh ingredients could make a world of difference. He
watched as Morgana purred happily even as he was being treated like a cat.

Turning his head slightly, he watched as Airi picked up a nicely cooked slice of beef and held it out to him with her chopsticks. "Birthday boy gets first bite!" She beamed with a smile full of love.

Automatically opening his mouth, he closed his lips around her utensils before pulling back, chewing absentmindedly. He didn't know whether it was the delicious flavors of the meat, or that it came from his girlfriend, or because everyone he cared deeply about was here, celebrating his birthday, but his vision blurred as tears collected in the corners of his eyes.

Sniffing, he brought his hands up to cover his face as he felt his emotions well up from the sight in front of him, and they became wet as he began crying in earnest.

Eyes widening from his response, Airi quickly put her chopsticks down and tried her best to console him. "Akira, what's wrong?!"

Everyone stopped what they were doing, turning to stare at him with wide eyes. They looked at each other at a loss at what to do. Why was he crying?

Taking off his glasses, he wiped his eyes with his sleeve before looking up at them through blurry eyes. His lips quivered without his control, and as his cheeks became stained with tears, he smiled radiantly at his friends- his family. He felt his heart well up at what they had done for him and he loved them all the more for it. They didn't know how much this meant to him. They were his light in the darkness. "...Thank you."

Makoto gasped at the sight of his tears, Haru joining her as she covered her mouth in shock. Ann and Ryuji were frozen still, captivated by his full blown smile. Futaba oohed quietly, hugging Morgana closer as even he was hypnotized. Yusuke raised his brows at the sheer emotion that radiated from his leader's expression. Sojiro smirked fondly, knowing that this was a big moment in his life.

The thieves blushed slightly, feeling his appreciation from their slapstick of a meal. Their leader was always a quiet but dependable guy, being there for each and every one of them to help them solve their issues. Though they relied on him a lot, they hoped that he knew he could come to them for any of his problems. Even when the only person he confided in 110% was Airi, they wanted him to know that they were here for him, too.

They were friends- family. They were the Phantom Thieves of Hearts.

A sizzle interrupted them and Ryuji's eyes widened. "Shit! The beef's burnin'!" He yelped, quickly taking the now overcooked beef off the grill. Everyone shook themselves out of their stupor and tried to save their meal, resuming the festivities.

Taking a napkin from the table, Airi turned his head toward her and gently dabbed the tears away. "No more crying, OK?" She said softly. "Today is your day."

Akira blinked, sending a new wave of tears trickling down his cheeks. He was most grateful for this person sitting next to him. She had been with him from the very beginning, the first one to be kind to him. The first person to love him. "...I love you." He choked out, voice rough from his impromptu crying. He couldn't say it enough. "I really really really do."

Airi blinked, not expecting to hear it out in the open like this, but a smile spread on her lips. "...I love you too." She whispered, cheeks stained from happiness.

Unable to help himself, he leaned down and let their lips meet, kissing her for all he was worth.
Wrapping an arm around her shoulders, he brought her closer, moving his dry but smooth lips in tandem with her soft ones. He couldn't- wouldn't stop.

She whimpered into their kiss, being able to feel the intensity of his emotions through this one act. His nose brushed against her cheek and one of his tears dripped down to her jaw, the liquid cool in comparison to her heated face. He needed to stop, or else she'd get too excited-!

Grinning at their makeout session, Ryuji whistled. "Woo! Get a room, you horn dogs!" He snickered, taking a piece of beef.

They all watched the lovey dovey couple with teasing smiles and smirks on their faces. "Honestly, you two." Makoto sighed exasperatedly, wrapping her meat in lettuce and spring onions. "I already caught you twice in the student council room. Do you guys ever stop?"

Letting his lips leave hers with a gasp, he turned to them with a dark but misty glare, fully conscious of the class president's soft panting as she tried to save her dignity by covering her face. "I'm in my room, thanks." A sly smirk grew on his face as he tugged his girlfriend into his side and she squeaked. "She's all wrapped up like a present, and as a good birthday boy, I have to unwrap and appreciate-"

"OK!" Sojiro interrupted, giving his charge a glare as he sat up on the couch. "Keep it in your pants. You have company over, and you're embarrassing the poor girl."

Listening to his guardian, Akira grinned sheepishly as he adjusted his legs. Caught. At least the table hid his excitement. "S-Sorry..." Giving Airi a peck on the forehead as an apology, he turned back to the table, more than ready to savor their efforts. "I call dibs on the snow crab rolls!"

They spent the night together with no shortage of smiles or laughs.

"Happy Birthday, Akira!"

Chapter End Notes

(Using hanakotoba/japanese flower language)
Red camellia - In love
Anemone - sincerity
White rose - devotion
"I'm in love with you, I really am yours."
Cactus - lust
"I want to fuck."
Just like yesterday, the four thieves were squashed together on the train heading to Shibuya. No matter what day it was, it was always crowded in the mornings. “Are we there yet?” Morgana whispered, wiggling in the small bag. “It’s hard to breathe in here…”

Akira shifted the feline in the direction of the air conditioning vents, grunting when he had to press himself closer to Yusuke. Frowning in worry, Airi reached out to unzip the bag just a little more. “Are you going to be OK, Morgana? It’s only going to get hotter…”

He sighed in resignation and rested his chin against the cold zipper. “I’ll have to be. Don’t worry, mom, I’ll be OK…”

She blinked and paused. “I...I kinda want to pinch myself, but I just realized you’ve been calling me mom for a while now, and not just when I’m scolding you or Ryuji.”

Freezing, his ears shot up straight in the air. “Uhh...Airi, er,” He stammered, a red hue behind his whiskers. “That is…”

Biting her lip to contain her glee, Airi reached out to gently pet him. “Don’t worry, Morgana, I don’t mind. I’m happy to be your mom.”

His eyes shined, purring at her ministrations. “O-OK, mom…”

She melted on the inside. He was just too cute!

“No for today’s train news.” The TVs broadcasted, the group looking up at them. “Today’s headlines are...” Calling Card at Madarame Exhibit!” The police are evaluating whether this is a true threat or a prank. “Apprentices strike back!” Former apprentices of Madarame have come forth to reclaim their artworks, receiving reimbursement from the top members of the art world. “Scam Outbreak in Shibuya!” Students are the primary victims. Organized crime is suspected here.”

“Wow, so all the apprentices got their art back?” Morgana mewed. “That’s great! But the scams are a little more worrying to hear. Mom, you already warned the school, right?”

She nodded. “Yeah. I told Makoto-senpai about this at the last meeting. There might be another meeting today though, so I’ll definitely let the classes know about this.”
Walking into the school building, the yongenjaya residents spied a couple of students crowding around the announcement board next to the school snack store.

“...What’s this? 'A request to the student body'..?" One of them asked, peering up at the new notice.

“It says they’re looking for information. I heard Principal Kobayakawa put it up.” A female student informed. “Please consult the student council president if you have any details.”

“So we can go to her for anything? Why the student council president though? What does she have to do with Principal Kobayakawa?”

“I mean, Niijima-senpai is his favorite. Maybe that’s why he asked her to do it.”

Furrowing her brow, Airi walked up to them. “Excuse me, I just want to take a look at the board.” She asked politely.

They moved back, recognizing her. “Oh sure, Kimisawa-senpai!”

Examining the notices, the new paper only wrote to “give information regarding the Phantom Thieves or any such related clues to the student council president.” But nothing about the scams.

Airi bit back a frown and smiled at the students. “Thanks, guys. You should hurry to class before you’re late.”

Bowing, they quickly went to their rooms, leaving the hallways bare of any other persons.

Walking back to Akira’s side, she scowled. “That fatass…”

He blinked, raising a brow at her cursing. “Is it about the Phantom Thieves?”

She nodded. “Yeah, but nothing about the scams even though I know Makoto-senpai informed him. I didn’t think the Principal would be this kind of a man, but…” She sighed heavily. “Guess it took a scandal to bring out this side of him…”

Morgana frowned. “Now we’ll have to watch out for that student president and the principal…”

Sharing a look, they headed to class. There was nothing they could do right now, and they hated it.

“It seems like most of society was surprised at what that artist did.” Hiruta-sensei remarked. He was a man who aspired to be considered graceful and aristocratic, what with his pin striped vest and a gold embroidered cravat, but seeing him teaching biology in a high school ruined part of the effect.

“He was someone who represented Japan in the art community. They probably trusted him on name alone.” He smirked, suavely flipping his bangs out of his hooded eyes. “Indeed, we’re easily manipulated by the names we see. However, this world is filled with fake names. For instance, this creature, which you know well.” He drew a diagram on the chalkboard. “It’s called the red king crab, but it has a form that a crab should not have.” His eyes slid to Akira. “Kurusu-kun, look at this picture.”
Sitting up, the transfer student did as told, scrutinizing the drawing through his glasses.

“What are king red crabs most biologically closed to?”

He blinked. “Hermit crabs.”

Hiruta-sensei chuckled, clapping his hands together. “Not bad. That’s correct. Crabs have five pairs of legs, but the red king crab only has four pairs. The directions the legs unfold is reversed too.” He drew a red king crab as well as a snow crab for comparison. “Typically they face forward, but a red king’s do not.”

“Wow, really?”

“Kurusu-kun is pretty smart…”

“Wow, you’re pretty smart to answer that!” Morgana admired from within the desk. “Crab hmm…”

Smirking, Akira rubbed the back of his neck. Airi sent him a thumbs up.

“Incidentally,” Hiruta-sensei continued. “The tomalley of a crab isn’t its brain, as some people say. It’s actually the crab’s liver and pancreas. As you can see, the world is full of deception.”

“I saw some kind of paste like that in the fridge at Leblanc…” Morgana whispered, tail whipping in amusement. “But it’s not often you see real crab meat. Hey, why don’t we get sushi for our next celebration?”


R: Our name did spread a bit thanks to Madarame…
R: But I bet people still wouldn’t care if we came out and said we’re the Phantom Thieves.
Ak: You’re right.
Y: I must agree.
Y: But what good would come of telling people our identities?
R: Maybe they’d at least start treating us with some respect.
Ai: You’re not wrong.
Y: Well, I can understand why you feel that way…
An: That’s just how things are now, but if we keep doing stuff like this, that will definitely change.
Ai: Yeah. We’ve only got two big successes under our name. We have to keep working.
Y: We simply need to devote ourselves to the cause. Our praise will come later.
An: What they said!
An: I’m sure some people out there will understand.
Ai: Plus, if you want praise, Yuuki-kun can shower you in it.
R: Ugh, no thanks.
R: I guess we just gotta act like modest heroes for now…
Airi packed her bag and headed toward the student council room. She wanted to ask Makoto-senpai about the notice. It didn’t make sense. She had said she was going to warn the students about the scams, but the only thing posted was about the Phantom Thieves.

Heading up the stairs, she went up to the door and slid it open. “-Idea why that post was put up?”

“No idea...I wasn’t ever informed.”

There were only two other members present, and they were deep in a conversation. “Good afternoon.” Airi greeted, placing her bag against the table. “Are you guys here about the notice, too?”

The male council member nodded. “Yeah. We weren’t ever told about this. Hopefully Nijima-senpai can clear things up.”

As soon as he said that, the door behind them slid open and said student council president walked in, clad in her summer uniform. Instead of the polo, she wore a white collared short sleeve button up with a B&J logo, the initials for the pillars of the temple of Solomon. Under her plaid skirt, she wore black leggings and black flats, which she had once explained was a good way to be able to jump into a self-defense stance if necessary.

“President…” The male council member began hesitantly. “What is the meaning of the posting?”

Makoto sighed, a pained expression on her face. “Principal Kobayakawa put that up without my-”

“We’ve already received some anonymous information.” The female council member added.

Airi’s eyes widened. What? About the Phantom Thieves?

“I heard some students are getting threatened. I’m so scared...please do something.” The female council member recited.

The cellist relaxed, but only a little. It was about the scams then.

Makoto gasped. “What..?!?”

The male council member pulled out a sheet of paper and read off it. “They have dirt on me, and they’re demanding money. I can’t go to the police...what should I do..? These must be about the scams in Shibuya…”

“So then there are victims at our school…” The female member fretted, biting her nails. “What should we do?”

“Well…” The male member hesitated. “This isn’t the responsibility of the student council. This is frightening for us too…”

Airi turned to the class president. “You told Principal Kobayakawa, right?” She furrowed her brow in worry. “We need the school to do something about this. Just warning the students isn’t enough.”

Makoto nervously swept some hair behind her ear. “Um, yes but...He said he needed some time to think about it. He’s out now but I will ask tomorrow. Please wait on this for the time being…”

“But..!” Airi began but stopped, noticing the stress on her superior’s face. “...All right.”

Makoto sighed heavily, posture slumping as if the weight of her responsibilities were crushing her. “My apologies for the confusion...Don’t worry,” She squared her shoulders, determination
replacing her grave frown. “I’ll do something about all of this.”

Nodding uncertainly, the other two members left school for the day, leaving the two alone.

Airi frowned, reaching out to gently place her hand on the other girl’s shoulder. “Makoto-senpai...Are you sure you’re OK?”

Taking a deep breath, Makoto gave her a small smile. “Yes...I’m fine. Thank you for your concern, but…” Her mouth tightened for a second. “This is my responsibility.”

Airi frowned morosely. “You can count on us too, you know. Just...let me know if you need any help.” Her phone buzzed and giving Makoto an apologetic look, she took it out.

Ak: **New target in Mementos.**
Ak: **Meet up at the hideout.**
R: **Gotcha!**
An: **OK!**
Y: **Understood.**
Ai: **On my way.**

Sighing, she placed it back in her pocket. “I have to go, but seriously, if you need any help, just let me know.” She smiled, reaching out to softly clasped her hands around the council president’s. “By the way, that instructional guide you lent me was very helpful. I’ve been doing the stretches in the morning and night and I already feel my core has improved!”

Blushing, Makoto glanced away shyly. “Y-You’re welcome, Kimisa- I mean, Airi-chan...I’m glad it could help.” She fidgeted, hesitantly pulling her hands back. “I’m sorry, but I have somewhere to be. I’ll...I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Smiling, Airi nodded before leaving the room, heading out of the school. She didn’t want the council president to expose them, but...she could still feel bad. There wasn’t any doubt in her mind that their principal was forcing her to investigate them with how often he was calling her into his office. Did he have a Palace too or was he always a terrible person?

Getting off the train at Shibuya, Akira sent a text to the others to meet up. They were going to tackle that S&M girl.

Walking over to the hideout, he stopped when he saw the now familiar blue shirt that was the Kosei summer uniform. Yusuke was already here, watching the passerby with keen eyes.

Raising a brow, he walked up to the other thief. “Hey.”

The artist glanced over at him, inclining his head as a greeting. “Ah, Akira. This station is always full of people. It serves as the perfect spot for people watching.” He went back to observing the pedestrians, watching as they power walked to wherever their destinations were. “After what happened with Madarame, I have come to realize the two-faced...” He paused, trying to find the words. “Complex nature of mankind. People are...difficult to handle. It makes for an interesting
theme. That is why I intend on people watching in this station.”

Akira nodded. “It would be a good way to understand…” Leaning against the railing, he joined the artist in his people watching. “Just looking at all these people...You never really realize they all have their own lives, their own thoughts, their point of view, how their day went…” He murmured quietly, his eyes trailing after an older woman in a business suit, a stern frown on her face as she marched toward the Ginza line. She reminded him of his mother.

“Yo!”

Ryuji sauntered up to them, grumbling as he ruffled his wet hair. “I forgot my umbrella...We’re goin’ into Mementos today, right?”

Morgana shuffled out of the bag and jumped out, balancing on the railing. “Indeed. We’re only waiting on Lady Ann and mom now.”

“Heeey!” Both girls walked up to them and leaned against the rails, making sure their wet umbrellas were placed in their respective plastic covers.

“Good, we’re all here.” Morgana purred. “Our intel is on a sadistic student. It sounds like she’s been treating a particular student as a slave against his will.” He frowned. “For example, she’ll give him degrading orders, or berate him in public…”

Airi grimaced. “Couldn’t she just go to an S&M club for that?”

Ann frowned disapprovingly. “So she’s acting like a dominatrix to a guy who doesn’t want that...That’s horrible.” She stared determinedly at them. “I think we’ll need to whip her heart instead, OK?”

Yusuke nodded, crossing his arms. “Very well. I will go along with this.”

Morgana’s eyes darted back and forth between them. “No objections, right? That’s a unanimous decision! All that’s left is to take down the target in Mementos!”

Akira nodded, taking his phone out of his pocket to access the app.

Their surroundings warped, everything turning red and purple around them. As soon as the ground solidified underneath their feet, they walked forward not as regular students, but as thieves. Fox blinked. “What’s this..?” He glanced around at their surroundings, narrowing his eyes at the tumor like veins growing on very surface of the Shibuya underground station. “This...is Mementos?”

Joker nodded. “Creepy, right?”

The artist grasped his chin thoughtfully as he scrutinized the hellscape.

“Wait,” Mona stopped, looking around with narrowed eyes. “Something doesn’t seem right.”

Skull raised a brow, walking to stand next to his leader. “Really? It seems the same to- Hold up.” He stared down at Joker’s phone as the Nav had a loading screen, downloading new data. “It looks like the Nav’s reacting to something…”

Buzzing, the app loaded, showing a new portion of the map. “A new area has been confirmed in the depths.” The app droned. “Updating guidance information.”
Elegant idly grasped her arm. “ Seems like we can go deeper now…”

Panther crossed her arms. “ It’s because we made Madarame confess, right?”

Mona nodded. “ Most likely… I think.”

Fox raised a brow. “ You seem rather uncertain. How far does this… Mementos run anyway?”


Skull sighed, leaning on the turnstiles. “ You’re always so vague when it comes to the important stuff.” He turned to Joker. “ It’s like he’s kinda flaky as our chief of operations. Don’t you want him to try harder too?”

Elegant frowned, kneeling to embrace the feline in her arms to shield him from the insults. “ Mona’s trying. He’s not all-knowing. I doubt anyone really knows everything about Mementos and the Metaverse in general. We should be thankful that he’s here to guide us with what he does know.”

Joker nodded in agreement. “ He’s doing his best.”

Beaming up at them with grateful tears, Mona snuggled into Elegant’s arms. “ You two are so much better than that moron over there!”

Biting her lip, Elegant held back a squeal as she rubbed the top of his head. ‘ So cute..! Is he cuter as a regular cat or this form? I can’t choose.’

Fox hummed, watching as the noblewoman and cat cuddled. “ Mementos and Palaces are related to each other, correct? Then all we must do is continue changing the hearts of evildoers to ascertain its full expanse. I don’t believe there is a need to quarrel over it.”

Rolling his eyes, Skull acquiesced. “ Fine…”

Shaking off the embrace, Mona looked up at their leader. “ We should investigate what kind of changed occurred. Since it’s raining today, it might affect Mementos differently than the pollen…”

Joker nodded and they set off for the target in their vehicle. While driving around the deep and dark tunnels, Fox peered outside the windows. “ I had not fathomed that this would be the public’s Palace. It’s so dark and… twisted.”

The bus rumbled. “ Yeah, but there’s no darkness my eyes can’t illuminate!” Mona bragged.

Driving the truck into the chains, they opened a small corridor, a treasure box at the end. “ Ah, a treasure chest!” Fox gasped, opening the door to snatch it up. “ Now this is what thievery is about..!”

Getting back into the car, they continued on their way, killing Shadows and taking Treasure where they could. While driving in one of the lower levels, Panther gasped, shooting up from her slouch. “ Oh no! I think I forgot to record my drama! Ugh,” She groaned, sitting back in her seat. “ Now I can’t relax.”

Skull snorted. “ Chill. Someone’ll be streamin’ it sooner or later.”

Elegant huffed in amusement as she turned at the corner, twitching as she felt slightly queasy. “ Is it that one with Risette in it? I forgot the name, I don’t really watch much TV besides the news…”
Panther leaned on the front seat, staring at her incredulously. “It’s so good! How have you not seen it?!”

The bus rumbled slightly. “Watching humans makes me think about a lot of things..”

Skull shrugged. “Some folks’re just people-watchers. Maybe it’s the same for you.”

Slamming the truck against another door, it revealed a station. Getting out of the bus, they traveled down the escalators, stopping as they saw it was an actual station. “Huh? Those are…” Panther gasped, looking to the right. “Those’re people…right?”

They turned their heads to the other side of the station, watching as “people” lined up at the platform. “Well,” Mona began quietly. “I’d say they’re most likely Shadows…”

Skull scrunched up his face. “What’re Shadows doin’ here?” He scratched his head. “It’s not like they’re gonna be catchin’ a train or-” Just as he said that, the familiar sound of the track rumbling cut him off, a Mementos train slowly pulling into the station. “I-It stopped..?” Skull breathed, watching with wide eyes.

The windows were such a blinding red that they couldn’t see inside, but once it began its journey again, the Shadows were gone, having boarded the tram.

Recoiling, Elegant took a step back, hiding behind Joker. She clasped a hand over her mouth as her throat swelled up and she clenched her eyes, trying to fight back the sensation. Just watching that made her want to throw up. She couldn’t tell why, though.

Glancing down at her worriedly, the leader wrapped an arm around her, rubbing her back comfortably with the other hand. “You feel sicker..?”

She nodded slightly, trying to take deep breaths.

“All- Elegant?” Fox called out in concern, his hands hovering near, unsure of what to do.

Taking another deep breath, she let her hands fall from her mouth. “I’m...I’m OK.”

“Damn…” Skull grimaced, about to pat her on the back but stopped, not wanting to make her sicker. “Just from that, huh? Where’s that train goin’?”

Staring up at Elegant with worry, Mona crossed his paws. “If I had to guess…I’d say into the deepest part of Mementos.”

“What?” Skull scrunched up his face in confusion. “This place seriously don’t make any sense…Also, what’s that on the platform?” He pointed in front of them.

Panther tilted her head, lightly grasping the noblewoman’s hand. “Isn’t it a waiting room? I didn’t expect there’d be one here too…Could we sit down so Elegant can have a breather?”

It had the typical plastic seats for public transportation, more than enough for all of them. The small area was enclosed with glass and plastic walls, usually used to shield passengers outside from rain or other irregular weather conditions.

Mona waddled up to it, examining the small room. “It looks like we’ll be able to use this to take a break.”

Nodding, Joker guided Elegant to it, gently setting her down on a chair. The others sat around, not
minding the small hiatus in their mission. Sitting next to her, Joker gently rubbed her back. “Are you sure you’re OK...? You don’t have to force yourself.”

Exhaling, Elegant gave him a weak smile. “I’m OK. I’m a little more prepared this time.”

Reaching into her small pouch, she took out a small bottle of essential oil, uncapping it. Taking off a long glove, she dabbed the liquid onto her bare finger before rubbing her nose and neck with it, sighing as it warmed up against her skin and combated her nausea. It was a good thing she bought a new one from the supermarket just for this. She didn’t want to be a burden on the team if her nausea kept triggering.

Furrowing his brow at the familiar smell, Joker leaned closer to her, inhaling the scent. “This is...your fragrance, isn’t it?”

She blinked, screwing the top back onto the bottle. “My fragrance?”

He nodded. “You smell like this, and your study too. What is it?”

She showed him the label on the bottle. “It’s peppermint oil. I use it more for stress and aching muscles, but it does smell sweet.”

He blinked at the new information and nodded. So that was her scent. “It’s really nice.”

Panther perked up. “Can I try? I’ve never had peppermint except as candy…” Elegant passed her the bottle and the dominatrix examined it, smelling the oil for herself.

“So like…” Skull leaned back in his seat, stretching his legs out. “What’s up with this place? Shadow’s ain’t gonna attack us here?”

Mona hummed. “It seems like this is some kind of safe zone separate from the other areas.”

Just as he said that, their phones buzzed, and Fox took his out. “It says we can travel here from the entrance.” He informed the others, staring at the map. “I’ve been wondering, is there a possibility that we will find our own Shadows within Mementos?”

Mona shook his head, standing on one of the seats. “That’s not possible. Our Shadows are always by our sides, remember?”

Panther oohed, handing the oil back to Elegant. “Right, our Personas…”

The feline nodded. “Acknowledging, facing, and becoming able to wield your own Shadow is what makes you a Persona-user.” He explained. “That’s why we can’t have Palaces. It’s also why our Shadows can’t exist in other people’s Palaces.”

Skull furrowed his brow. “Uh, but we saw Panther’s and Elegant’s Shadows over in Kamoshida’s Palace.”

Panther glared at him. “Hey, those things were NOT us!”

“That was just a cognition formed by Kamoshida’s mind.” Mona replied, plopping onto the chair. “It was nothing like their actual Shadows.”

Fox hummed, grasping his chin thoughtfully. “So wielding a Persona involves acknowledging one’s Shadow...Considering that fact, Joker’s ability to control multiple Personas is truly special.”

Mona beamed. “Right? That just proves my judgement of him was correct!”
Smirking at the compliments, Joker ran a hand through his hair. "I am pretty cool."

“Uhh…” Skull drawled, unimpressed with the feline’s boasting. “You were surprised when it happened too…”

Elegant tilted her head. “Would it be possible for a person to meet their own Shadow? We didn’t see ours when we gained our Personas, but we technically talked to them, right?”

Mona nodded. “It is possible but it’s not something that would happen for any regular person. It’s also not safe for a person to enter their own Palace for a prolonged period of time, otherwise they risk a mental shutdown.”

She nodded, the new information swimming in her head. Now that she wasn’t feeling as queasy as earlier with the train, she stood up and brushed off her embroidered coat. “Let’s keep going?”

Everyone nodded and they descended the escalators, now in Area 5 of Ayatsbus.
Chapter 102

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mona walked up to the tracks and transformed into the truck, ready for more exploring. Elegant was about to climb into the driver’s seat but a red gloved hand stopped her. “Hold on, Elegant.” Joker called out, placing the hand on her shoulder. “Maybe I should drive now.”

She furrowed her brow. “But, I’m fine…”

He frowned. “You might be fine now, but what about the lower levels? You’re getting progressively more nauseous the further we go in. I’m not risking both your health and the team’s.”

Elegant clenched her jaw. He was right. Just being down here, her stomach was already rolling and she could even taste acid at the back of her throat. If another train rolled up and she had another reaction, she could accidentally swerve the car and hurt Mona and everyone else. She wouldn’t forgive herself for that...

“All right…but,” She narrowed her eyes. “We’re going to have an impromptu driving test right now so I can judge your aptitude.”

He smirked and nodded, jumping into the driver’s seat. She got in on the passenger’s side, closing the door with a bang. “I’m counting on you to drive, Joker!” Mona stated, the bus rumbling underneath them. “This level is filled with Shadows as well. Be careful!”

Skull rolled his eyes, lacing his hands behind his head as he laid down in the back. “Well, yeah...Even I can see that. I mean, just look at the place.” He gestured to the dark and windy tunnels that were filled with the echoing roars of Shadows.

Stepping on the gas pedal, Joker drove through the tunnels, his swerving not as smooth as Elegant’s. She grimaced, holding onto the safety grips as they were jolted left and right. This wasn’t exactly helping her.

“You know…” Panther began, examining the interior of the bus. “This car has a bunch of funny parts.” She poked some of the features out of curiosity.

“Meow?!” The car jumped. “B-Be careful with that!”

Skull snorted, sitting up. “We should get this interior decked out. Maybe add a mini fridge?”

“But then my stomach would get cold!” Mona retorted.

Elegant scrunched up her face. They were in his stomach?! “...Joker.”

He glanced at her from the corner of his eyes for a second before focusing on the road, showing that he was listening.

“...Does this count as vore?” She whispered.

Choking, Joker coughed, almost crashing the van into the wall from disbelief. How did she know what that was?! He knew she had a bit of a risqué mind since she thought he was going to have a threesome with Mishima and Skull, but vore?
Making it to the end of Area 6, Joker drove straight through, slamming his foot on the breaks as soon as they made it into the station.

“Ah!” Panther yelped as she bumped against the doors. “Joker!”

“Sorry!” He called out, opening his door.

Grumbling, the others got out of the bus as well, it turning back into regular feline Mona. “Joker, please learn to drive more carefully.” Fox requested calmly, only slightly unsettled at nearly being launched through the window.

“Seriously.” Mona winced, massaging his face with his paws. “You’re driving me a lot harder than Elegant.”

The leader shrugged nonchalantly, heading down the escalators.

Descending into Area 7, it was another double sided platform, their target directly in front of them, engulfed in an aura of black distortion. Elegant took a deep breath, trying not to push her diaphragm. At this point, she didn’t know if she was going to vomit or not.


Skull recoiled at the perverse and brutal grin that occupied the girl’s face. “She really seems like a sadist...”

Elegant furrowed her brow at the teenager. “She made someone her slave without his consent, right?” She frowned disapprovingly. “That’s not how it works.”

Fox shook his head at the flawed logic. “In a way, she’s denying his existence. I certainly wouldn’t want to be a victim of that.”

Ann glared, straightening her whip. “Guess it’s time for her to have a taste of her own medicine. Let’s go.”

They ran up in front of the Shadow and her head shot up, glowing yellow eyes focused on them. “So you’re the pigs who wrote that calling card online?” She asked inhumanly, her dual toned voice a familiar sound in this world. “Why do I deserve this, hm?”

Skull tched at the question, glaring at her. “It’s ‘cause you made some guy your slave! That’s all kinds of wrong right there.”

She sneered, her lips contorting her facial muscles. “That’s what he wants! He worships me more than any god, you know.”

Panther scrunched up her face. “Uhh...I don’t even know where to begin to explain how you’re wrong.”

Elegant rolled her eyes. “That’s not worship, that’s fear. You’re no better than a cruel dictator.”

“I beat him and I hurt him, and he sees it as a sign of our love and friendship!” The Shadow laughed cruelly. “He’s so happy!”

Fox hooded his eyes. “You are so delusional.” He remarked coldly.
Shimizu crossed her arms. “I’m pretty, and my grades are good! It’s my right to order people around!”

Joker resisted the urge to roll his eyes. “With that logic, Elegant here would be higher ranked than you.”

The Shadow sneered, the action ruining any sort of good looks she boasted about. “No one is better than me! I’m the only one who’s worthy of being worshiped! I’ll start by giving orders to you pigs.” She hunched her shoulders, fingers flexed into claws. “Lick my shoes, peasants!”

Hugging herself, she was swallowed by the Metaverse sludge and with a rumble, erupted into a Yaksini, brandishing two swords in front of her, her purple skin and black hair fitting right in the atmosphere. “I’ll never give up M-moto! He belongs to me!” She screeched, jerking her head around, her horned mask jutting through the oppressive air. “Being my slave is what makes him happy!”

Grating her swords together, she sent a Oni-Kagura at them, lightly damaging the group. Clenching his eyes, Fox let loose a low growl as he was enraged.

“Oh no, Fox is enraged!” Mona shouted, directing the group from the back along with Elegant. “Calm down!”

Without waiting for his teammates, the samurai rushed forward and attacked belligerently with his sword, not caring about technique or finesse. The Yaksini suffered with several bleeding wounds, but retaliated as well with its own swords and sliced at his arms before sending a roundhouse kick.

Fox was launched back with a snarl, and Elegant quickly smacked him awake. "Snap out of it, Fox!" She scolded, snapping her fingers for a healing spell after.

Blinking his eyes, now a clear hue instead of the clouded yellow it used to be, he unsteadily stood up on his feet. "My apologies..."

Skull and Panther stepped him after with the former slamming his bat onto the Shadow, stunning it in place. The latter followed up with quick lashes of her whip, the sharp end leaving black lines all over the Shadow.

They made quick work of the Yaksini, and within a few moments she was back to her previous self, her monstrous visage melting away. “No, no, no...No!” Shimizu screamed, looking as if she was about to cry. “I don’t want to lose him. He’s mine. He’s mine, isn’t he?”

Joker sighed and shook his head. “He doesn’t belong to anyone. Keep this up, and he’ll hate you.”

She sniffled, shoulders slumping in defeat. “I could never stand that...”

Panther rested her hands on her hips, whip coiled in one hand. “Why did you start treating him like that?” She asked curiously.

Shimizu sighed. “He just kept going along with it, so I misunderstood and thought I could do anything I wanted...Actually, I...” She hesitated. “I wanted to be more than friends with him.”

The dominatrix gasped, staring at her in surprise. “More than friends? You mean like as a boyfriend?!”

The Shadow nodded glumly. “Yes. I had a crush on him, but then I got possessive. Those feelings went out of control...”
Panther smiled pityingly. “Be careful you don’t make things worse for yourself than they already are…”

Sighing, Elegant shook her head and stepped forward in front of the Shadow. “Shimizu-san, please talk to him. You know now that you were wrong, and you treated him very badly.” She spoke sternly, but softened her tone. “If you explain this to him, he might forgive you. Even if he doesn’t, you have to respect his wishes too.”

The cleansed Shadow nodded, giving them a shy smile as she was enveloped in blue light, leaving behind a bud of Treasure as well as ¥12,000.

Mona jumped in glee. “Ah, the Treasure has shown itself!”

Snatching it out of the air, Joker looked down at the Whip Sword and wordlessly handed it to Panther.

Now that the Shadow was gone and the request fulfilled, the group of thieves walked up to the seal entrance on the platform. Reaching out, Joker brushed his fingertips against the carved surface and with a rumble, the barrier receded to show escalators descending into the abyss.

“Whoa, we did it!” Skull grinned, pumping a fist.

Panther beamed. “This is because more people believe in us now, right?”

Mona purred in delight. “That must be it. Now, let’s get in there!”

Fox tilted his head, observing the darkness with a keen eye. “Is there any point to continue exploring? We had fulfilled the request, had we not?”

Elegant grasped her chin thoughtfully. “I guess we can keep going so if we find any more rest areas, it’ll register in the Nav. Next time we have a target that’s deeper down, we’d cut down on travel time.”

Descending the escalators, Joker’s phone buzzed. “Now in the Path of Chemdah, Area 1.”

They blinked, observing the yellow lighting as opposed to the previous red and blue. “D-Doesn’t this look different from how it was before?” Panther asked uncertainly.

Mona nodded, eyeing the Shadow that meandered in front of the tunnel. “Looks like it’ll be a new area from here on. I’m starting to understand how this place works…”

Elegant grimaced, the yellow atmosphere triggering a headache. At least the nausea didn’t increase. “Has anyone noticed that it’s getting more and more disorganized? There’s more flying debris in the wind now, and the tiles are cracking.”

Fox nodded. “Yes. It seems the further we go, the more cracks are shown in its facade. Quite a marvel to find a subway system down here.”

Skull glanced at him in disbelief. “Uh, earth to Yusuke! It’s always been like that!”

After a while of exploring the Path of Chemdah and hitting the end several floors down, they walked up to another one of the carved doors. Placing a hand on the surface, Joker waited for the familiar rumbling, but nothing.
“Hm?” Fox blinked. “Is it not opening?”

Mona slumped, disappointed. “I guess we’ll need to get more of the public to accept us…”

Skull groaned, lacing his hands behind his head. “So that means we’re still not so popular, huh..?”

Panther gave him an amused glance. “Oh...Is that a surprise?”

Fox sighed, grimacing slightly in disappointment. “Yes, perhaps somewhat…”

Skull scrunched up his face. “Dude, she was askin’ me!”

Trying to focus over her nausea, Elegant placed a comforting hand on her pseudo brother’s shoulder. “We’ll just have to...keep working hard…”

Giving her a worried frown, Joker decided to call it quits and transported them back to the entrance. They were done for the day.

As always, the blue glowing gates of his Velvet Room shined in the corner, Justine guarding it with a bored gaze. He had gained a Matador earlier, so...

He walked up to her, resting his hands in his pockets as he nodded a greeting.

Her one golden eye slid up to look at him. “Shall we go?”

He nodded and walked through the ominous door into the abyss.

He blinked, feeling the shackles weighing his wrists down, the dirty prison uniform barely covering him from the cold draft. If he could believe the unnerving man who sat in front of him, this was a room that was influenced by his mind. Chained down by his own perceptions and by the world around him.

His fingers twitched, wanting to clench his fists but resisted. A prisoner like him was never kept too long. He only needed to find a way to escape, to break free of his own chains.

He eyed the twins in front of him. They were one way he could get out of here faster. He stepped forward to the gates, legs tensing to drag the heavy chain behind him.

Caroline glanced back at him. “What is it, Inmate? Need to check on your penal labor?”

He nodded, summoning forth the Persona they had requested last time.

Taking it, Justine examined it in her hand and nodded. “This is a Matador with the skill Magaru...I have verified it. That completes your current assignment.”

Sighing in relief, he took a seat on the cold concrete ground. Honestly, even though these two were insufferable, they were kind of cute. He idly wondered if this was what having little sisters were like. If little sisters were powerful metaphysical beings who could invade his mind and change his cognition and probably weren’t human…

Caroline hmphed, slightly impressed as she crossed her arms. “You’re better than I thought, Inmate. I was thinking you’d just give up straight away.”

Justine smiled slightly. “It is to be expected of the human our master saw potential in.”

Caroline nodded. “You’re dedicated, I’ll give you that. Just keep it up, all right?”
He nodded, smiling slightly. They really were very cute when they weren’t abusing him.

Justine nodded approvingly, a small smile on her face. “That is a fine attitude to have.”

Caroline quirked her lips. “Talk’s cheap, though. You’re gonna have to put your money where your mouth is.” She turned to her twin, idly tapping her baton against her shoulder. “I’ve gotta say, Justine, it’s an accomplishment that he hasn’t thrown in the towel yet.”

Justine blinked, giving her sister a questioning look. “How so?”

The rougher girl grinned. “That list you wrote.” She gestured to the clipboard held under the calmer twin’s arm. “It’s not only keeping him on his toes, but helping him improve too.”

Justine furrowed her brow. “Hm..? I am not the one who wrote it. I had always assumed it was you…”

Taken aback, Caroline stared at her incredulously. “What?! I don’t know anything about that thing.”

Holding up the clipboard, the calmer twin flipped through the sheets, frowning softly. “…I suppose now that I consider it, that list is far too precise for you to have written it.”

Scrubbing up her face, Caroline stomped her foot. “Quiet!” She hissed. “You didn’t need to say that!” She paused, calming down as she thought it through. “But wait...Who wrote it then? It wasn’t our master, was it?”

Justine shook her head. “No. I have not heard him mention anything of the sort…” She looked down at her shoes, face troubled. “How long have we had this list..?”

Akira blinked as he listened in on their conversation, seemingly forgotten. His tasks weren’t written by anyone in this room? Then who? According to them, it was tailored specifically for him, meaning it was to help him improve. So this mysterious person wanted to help him. Maybe he should speak up... “Is something wrong?”

Realizing he was still here, Caroline glared sharply at him. “Sh-Shut up! Don’t read too far into this! Just keep quiet and focus on finishing your tasks, Inmate!”

Justine turned to her twin. “Caroline, should we consult with our master about this?”

The rougher twin glanced at the grinning man who sat as still as a statue, pin pricked pupils watching everything and nothing. She hesitated, a slight hint of fear in her eyes before shaking her head. “All our master told us to do was to oversee the rehabilitation, and it’s our duty to follow orders. We shouldn’t waste his time on something this pointless.”

Staring at her for a moment, Justine acquiesced, adjusting her blue cap. “…Indeed. It does not matter who thought of the list.”

Turning to Akira, Caroline glowered, though not as harshly as before as her mind was still occupied with the thought of who had written the list. “Now quit prying, Inmate! Got that?!”

“You might think this is a matter of personal preference, but I don’t think so. I think it might be a matter of what’s best for him. And if you’re wondering, I agree with you. It’s just more for his own good.”

He nodded, feeling like he could understand the twins just a little more. Just by hearing their
conversation and that nervous glance Caroline sent toward their “master,” it seemed even they weren’t all powerful.

“As promised, I have granted you an ability that will prove greatly beneficial.” Justine informed. “You may now place a Persona into Lockdown and train it to learn new skills.”

Caroline crossed her arms. “While you’re lazily wasting away, your Persona’s gonna grow all on its own.” She smirked. “Talk about hospitality! Anyway, time for your next task! According to the list…it’s, uh…” She hesitated, turning to whisper to her sister. “What is it, Justine?”

The calmer twin checked her list. “The next task is…A Flauros with Tarukaja. Speak to us again once you have obtained it.” She paused before continuing. “One more thing. The next privilege we provide for you will unlock great power. Therefore, we will need you to fulfill two more tasks before we can hand it over to you.”

Caroline chuckled callously. “The world’s not so easy, is it?!”

He sighed. He hadn’t heard of that Shadow yet, which meant he won’t be able to fulfill it anytime soon.

Getting up from the floor, he inclined his head respectfully after personalizing his Persona list. “I’d like to go back then.”

Grunting, Caroline smacked her baton against the metal bars, the sound resonating through his ears and into his brain.

He blinked, back in the entrance of Mementos. Hopefully he wasn’t gone for too long this time.

“Joker..! Joker!”

Hearing the urgency in Panther’s voice, he quickly turned around, eyes widening as Elegant had collapsed on her knees, holding her hands near her chest. “Elegant!”

Dashing to the group who had surrounded the noblewoman, he quickly knelt down in front of her as she clenched her eyes in pain. “Elegant,” He called out urgently, lightly tapping her cheek. “Are you OK? C’mon…”

Gritting her teeth, she nodded jerkily as her nails bit into the palms of her hands, feeling like her insides were being churned. “I’m...I’m OK…” She coughed, covering her mouth. The difference in Chemdah Area 7 and this entrance hall happened so fast that she couldn’t adjust. It was like something was straining inside her.

Sighing as the pressure began to ease, she leaned against her leader’s chest, closing her eyes from exhaustion. “S-Sorry…”

Furrowing his brow, Fox knelt next to her. “Perhaps...you should refrain from joining us next time.” He worded carefully.

Her eyes flew open and stared up at him in shock. “What..?”

Biting her lip, Panther reluctantly nodded in agreement. “He’s right. None of us feel anything like what you feel when we’re here. You got so bad earlier that you were knocked down..!”

Skull rubbed the back of his head uncomfortably. “Listen to ‘em...Leave the targets in Mementos to us.” He gave her a thumbs up. “We can handle it! You’re fine in regular Palaces, so you can join
us in those!”

Lips tightening, Elegant looked down dejectedly, feeling hurt at being told to stay behind. She really was being a burden. However, she wasn’t going to back down without a fight. “But...I mean, I’m fine now. It was just a shock to me when we switched from Chemdah Area 7 to here.”

Mona crossed his paws, a worried frown occupying his mouth. “Why is it only you who’s feeling this...? You seem OK now, but the further we go down, the worse you get.”

She shook her head. “I’m fine. I wasn’t too bad at the end of Ayatsbus...Maybe I’m building up an immunity.”

Fox crossed his arms, grasping his chin thoughtfully. “If you are, then perhaps we should expose you to the lower levels. At a slower rate, of course.” He quickly corrected, noticing Joker glaring at him for his suggestion. “I cannot picture the team without her with us.”

Panther hummed speculatively. “True...the only time you were really bad was when that train took those Shadows further down. You’re not driving now, either…”

Elegant looked up at them hopefully. “So it’s OK, right? I’m not going to slow us down.”

Pursing his lips, Joker sighed. “It’s not about you slowing us down. We’re just worried for you.” Encompassing her cheek with his palm, he looked down at her firmly. “You can keep going with us next time, but the second you faint or throw up, we’re leaving even if we didn’t get our target. Got it?”

She smiled happily and nodded, promising to try harder next time. Even if she did get sicker, she wasn’t going to get in the way. The most important thing was to steal those Treasures.

Getting back home after a long day, Yusuke went to take a bath while Airi headed to the kitchen to begin dinner. They spent another evening together, slowly becoming more familiar with the other person.

Now in the living room with a hot cup of tea, she turned on the TV, Yusuke looking up as the news played. “Complaints about the authenticity of artwork are flooding in from buyers after the Madarame debacle. It seems this scandal will continue to cause confusion in the art world for quite some time.”

Blowing on the hot liquid, she hesitantly took a sip. “You’d think they would believe his confession since it came out of his own mouth…”

The artist pursed his lips, nourishing his own cup. “It does seem peculiar. If one buys art, they should have an eye for what is real and what isn’t.”

She smiled in amusement, finishing off her tea in one go. “Right?” She placed her cup on the table before grabbing her phone, checking her calendar. “...Yusuke?”
His eyes slid to her. “Yes?”

She bit her lip. “How...would you feel about going tomorrow? To see your mother...”

He stared down at his cup, his hands tightening against the searing porcelain. “...That is acceptable.” He answered quietly. “Shall we go after school?”

She nodded. “I’ll let Nakanohara-san and the others know.” She typed into her phone, sending the text message over to the teller, Mina, and Yukimi and receiving a confirmation back. Doing the same to the Phantom Thieves group chat, everyone agreed immediately.

She stood up and grabbed her empty cup. “I’m going to bed now. Good night, Yusuke.”

“Good night, Nee-san.”

Washing the cup, she went upstairs, closing her door and locking it in one consecutive process. She covered her mouth as she coughed, trying to keep quiet in case the sound escaped downstairs.

She’d been keeping them in since they left the Metaverse, disguising them as laughs or giggles just in case. She didn’t want Yusuke to see her like this, or else he’d tell Akira, and then she’d be permanently banned from Mementos.

Sliding down onto the floor in the dark room, she continued to cough, feeling as if every force of breath was someone punching her as her head pounded in protest, exasperating her earlier headache.

After a few moments of painful coughing, they finally subsided and she sighed in exhaustion, taking her hand away from her mouth. It was all wet and warm from her saliva now, she’d have to wash it off.

Slowly getting off the floor, she went into the bathroom and turned the lights on, about to wash her hands at the sink.

Looking down, her eyes widened and her heart stopped.

Taking a shaky breath, she bit her lip and turned on the faucet, washing off any evidence from her palm down the drain. She couldn’t tell anyone about this. She wouldn’t ever hear the end of it if the others found out.

Especially Akira.

Chapter End Notes

Vore is um...Short for "voraphilia" or "vorarephilia": a fetish in which one fantasizes about being eaten alive or eating another creature alive (sometimes known as phagophilia).

Don’t go down that path in the internet (THIS IS NOT MY FETISH LOL I SAW THIS MENTIONED IN ANOTHER P5 SHORTFIC)

twins - rank 3
Chapter 103

Chapter Notes

Thank you for 19.1k hits and 576 kudos!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

---6/8, EARLY MORNING, AOYAMA-ITCHOME

“Hey, that calling card sent to the Madarame exhibit.” Watanabe of class 2-D whispered as they walked toward school. “Do you think…”

Tanaka nodded. “Yeah, I think it’s just like the one sent to Kamoshida. People online are saying the Phantom Thieves are behind this. There’s already a Phan-site with a bunch of requests on it.”

Watanabe giggled. “I can’t believe there are real-life superheroes.” She clasped her hands together dreamily. “If it’s happened twice, it’s probably going to happen again. I can’t wait to see who’s next.”

Tanaka smiled. “Same! Seriously, I’d support them. They were the reason why Kamoshida was arrested…” She sighed, looking down at her hands, calloused from intense volleyball practices. “I owe them so much.”

Airi smiled happily from behind them, sharing the same look with Akira and Morgana. Here was real proof that what they were doing were helping people.

“So,” Ushimaru-sensei squinted his eyes at the class. “You have your social studies trip tomorrow...It’s a good chance to think about your future. Be sure you’re paying attention.” He glared at the bored students. “You’d better not make a ruckus, am I clear? It will reflect poorly on our school.”

He walked to the other side of the board near the windows, moving while lecturing. “There’s a group going to a television studio this year, correct? Kimisawa, I’ve got a question for you.”

Airi blinked, straightening her back as she prepared for the answer.

“With the advent of the color TV, something else started appearing in color. Do you know what it is?”

She furrowed her brow. She read a study about this last week when she was studying up their Personas on the internet. It was so interesting that she ended up reading the entire article on it. “Dreams.”
He nodded. “Exactly. Before, most people’s dreams were in black and white. But research shows that once color broadcasts became the norm, dreams started being mostly in color. What’s fascinating is that people see the world in color, regardless of TV’s existence. It’s strange that our dreams had been in black and white until TV’s inception.”

“Whoa, I never knew that…”

“Senpai is so smart!”

Airi furrowed her brow and raised her hand. “You said ‘most people’s were in black and white.’ Doesn’t that mean that some people dreamed in color anyway?”

Ushimaru-sensei raised a brow. “You caught that, huh? Expected it. Yes, some people had experienced their dreams in color before TV, but majority had dreamed in black and white.” He shrugged, adjusting his suspenders. “It’s not something that had ever been explained by science or superstition.” He huffed. “In the future, if 3D televisions become normal and let us sense flavor, smell, and heat...Then dreams might become indistinguishable from reality.”

Airi frowned and looked down at her notes. Dreams becoming indistinguishable from reality? That sounded scary. What if those people who already dreamed in color were special? If they, out of the millions of people who said they dreamed in black and white, were the only ones to see the whole picture as they slept...Did that mean they were able to see everything with their own eyes while everyone else had fogged up lenses? What distinguished them?

The lunch bell rang and the social studies teacher left the room, unable to stand being in their presence for any longer. “I’m going to go buy a drink from the courtyard. Be right back!” Ann stated, getting up from her desk and leaving the room.

Taking out two bento boxes from her bag, Airi handed one over to Akira.

“Thanks.” He smiled, taking it and opening up, raising a brow as he saw it was a bunch of onigiri with blue seaweed, made to look like a certain snowy Persona of his. “Is this a new thing? Making Shadow inspired food?”

Airi grinned, holding up her own Morgana inspired rice balls, the leftover blue seaweed used to make his big blue eyes. “I had some extra time today since I woke up so early. Yusuke has his own fox inspired ones too.”

She didn’t want to admit that she couldn’t really sleep. Her head buzzed like a hangover all night and when she did fall asleep, she just woke up with a gasp, flashes of Mementos running through her fever-like dream as well as a deep echoing chuckle. It wasn’t as if she was scared of the public’s Palace, but it unsettled something inside of her. What was it, though?

Footsteps stomped up to them and they looked up as Ann stormed into the room, a thunderous expression occupying her face. She plopped down into her seat with a huff, crossing her arms angrily.

Airi blinked. “What’s wrong?”

The model glanced at her sharply. “…I just overheard some girls saying that the principal knew what Kamoshida was doing.” She scowled. “And apparently, Niijima-senpai knew too. She didn’t do anything about it, and now she’s acting like the principal’s errand dog…”

Akira furrowed his brow. “He knew about it? But why’d he let it go on for so long…”
Morgana peeked his head out of the desk. “Don’t forget, Kamoshida was a world famous athlete. It’s possible he let Kamoshida run loose with his “activities,” He bristled. “To garner more popularity for the school. Mom, is he that kind of person?”

Airi nodded, frowning deeply. “There’s no question about it. What with how he basically covered up Shiho-chan’s thing and how his priority now is the Phantom Thieves instead of the students…” She took a bite of her lunch. “To be honest, I thought he would have a Palace.”

Ann looked at her in surprise. “You did?”

Airi nodded. “Yeah. I checked though, he doesn’t. Which means he’s not a good person who was warped, he knows what he's doing is wrong.” She sighed. “About Makoto-senpai though, I can definitely say she didn’t know about it. She’s as troubled about it as me when we talked about it a few weeks ago…”

She looked down at her half finished bento, giving the rest to Morgana to secretly munch on. She didn’t really feel hungry while talking about this. “…She assured me she’s going to try to convince the principal to focus on the scamming problem, though.” She didn’t know whether or not Makoto-senpai was going to be able to handle this. She should be getting ready for university, not being made into an errand girl. Maybe they could ask her sister for help…?

Airi didn’t know much about her, other than the fact that she’s a public prosecutor at the age of twenty-five. It was rumored that she went to this school as well eight years ago, and that Makoto was enrolled here by her.

She tightened her lips. But even someone as prodigal as the older Niijima wouldn’t be able to solve this scam situation so easily. Was there anything she herself could do to help? If it really was the mafia, Makoto would be walking on a very thin line...

While in the middle of one of Usamu-sensei’s lecture on imaginary numbers, three phones buzzed.

R: So, what kinda person would be a bigger target than Madarame?
An: Hmm…
An: I wonder…
An: I guess it’d have to be someone who’s the talk of the town?
Y: That’s quite a vague prerequisite…
Y: Don’t we have any more specific ideas?
Ai: Are there any celebrities in a scandal right now? Politician?
Ak: Crooked politicians are common.
Y: Ah, yes. That is an interesting line of thought.
Y: Either way, we’ll need a lead before we begin anything.
An: We’ll just have to look for that as we go…
R: If only there was a big target just lying around for us…
Ai: Wish it was the principal.

Covering her mouth as she yawned, Airi slumped over her desk as the bell rang and the school
slowly emptied out.

She was so tired, from yesterday and all of last night’s fitful sleep. At least she wasn’t coughing anymore. She could go for some coffee right about now, maybe at the Diner so she’d be able to meet up with the other apprentices.

“You OK?” Akira blinked, looking over at her as he packed his bag.

Morgana discreetly jumped in as well. “Are you still tired from yesterday, mom?” He inquired with a whisper.

She smiled and shook her head. “I’m fine, I just need a little coffee. We have to visit the cemetery later…”

Ann grinned, turning around in her seat. “Then, we should go to the Diner! I’ve been craving their parfait so badly.”

Standing up and shouldering his bag, Akira held out his hand to the cellist. “Let’s go?”

Blinking, she hesitantly accepted it with a smile. He was being so gentlemanly lately. She hoped it wasn't because of yesterday's scare in Mementos.

Shouldering their bags, they left the school and headed over to Shibuya.

Ann stretched her arms up, smiling happily at the bright and sunny day as they walked down Central Street. “Ahh! The summer is so nice! I can’t wait for tomorrow’s trip to the studio.” She turned back to grin at the three Yongenjaya residents. “You think maybe Risette’ll be there?”

Morgana flicked an ear as he leaned on Akira’s shoulder. “Who is this “Risette,” Lady Ann? Is she a celebrity?” He asked curiously.

She nodded giddily. “Yeah! She debuted as an idol at fourteen, but she took a break for a year before coming back. She’s a model, a singer, and an actress.” She sighed dreamily. “I love the drama that she’s in right now, “Heart Strings.””

“There are certainly a lot of people…”

Furrowing his brow in agitation as he recognized the quiet voice, Akira turned around with a flat frown to see the student council president following them, the same manga covering her face.

Airi turned as well and paused, scrunching up her face as she saw her superior. She was going to go this far to follow him?

Ann opened her mouth, then closed it again as she stared at Makoto in disbelief and slight anger.

Unaware that she was already caught, Makoto took a few steps forward, still covering her face with the manga. “I need to make sure I don’t lose sight of-Oh!” She bumped into the transfer student, bouncing off his chest. “S-Sorry!” She smiled politely, a bead of sweat rolling down her forehead at her mistake. “I didn’t see you there. Don’t mind me, I was simply talking to myself.”

Airi slowly blinked as she tried to hold back a laugh. She was so bad at lying. “Makoto-senpai, can I talk to you for a second?”

The council president tensed in surprise. “O-Oh, sure…”

Wrapping an arm around her shoulders, Airi led her a little away next to the karaoke bar. It wasn’t
open yet so there weren’t many people in front of it, making it the perfect place to talk on this
crowded street. “So, Makoto-senpai…” She began quietly, fiddling with her suspenders. “What did
the principal say about the scams? Are we doing anything?”

Letting the magazine fall from her face, Makoto sighed heavily. “He...He said that it might have
something to do with the Phantom Thieves.” She grimaced. “There...really isn’t much the school
can do aside from warning the student body, which I had done.” She locked eyes with the rose
haired girl. “Airi-chan, please, if there’s anything you can tell me about the Phantom Thieves…”
She pleaded, biting her lip with desperation. “There has to be something.”

Airi hesitated, stuck between a boulder and a wall in this situation. Was there anything she could
say to help this? “W-Well...I only know that they sent a calling card to that artist, Madarame. He
confessed a few days ago. Reading that article about what he’s done makes me think...that maybe
the Phantom Thieves are good.”

Resisting the urge to grind her teeth in frustration, Makoto sighed and nodded. “I already knew
that, but thank you. I…” Her eyes slid to the shady men dressed in casual suits, hanging around
near the rental store. “I have some errands to run. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Airi nodded and watched as the student council president began her quest to eavesdrop on the
gangsters. Akira and Ann walked up to her, the model twirling her ponytail. “What was that
about?”

Airi sighed, gesturing to the Diner. They walked up the stairs and got a booth, sitting down in the
quiet establishment. “Welcome, may I take your or- Oh! Airi!” They looked up as Yukimi walked
over to them, smiling happily at the class representative. “Airi! I have sooo much to tell you!”

Airi smiled up at the waitress, thankful for the distraction. “Hi, Yukimi-chan. How are you? Did
you go take them back yet?”

She nodded giddily. “I did! And I got reimbursement too!” She beamed as brightly as the sun, most
of the darkness that were present in her eyes having cleared up. “I can finally go back to my dream
again and it’s all thanks to you!” She glanced over at Akira fearfully before avoiding his gaze,
ducking her head. “..A-And Kurusu too...I guess…”

Akira winced. Right. The last time he was here, he snapped at her. “Er, sorry, Kamiya-san. I...was
having an off day.” He gave her a minuscule smile. “I’m really sorry if I scared you.”

Glancing up at him, she pursed her lips before nodding. “OK...I’m only forgiving you because you
brought me Airi as a present.”

Airi sweatdropped, smiling sheepishly as the phantom thief leader immediately dropped his smile,
glowering at their waitress. “Uh...I think I’ll have a coffee and a chicken sandwich.”

Akira scanned the menu. “I’ll take a coffee and a nostalgic steak.”

Eyes darting between their waitress and her friends, Ann hesitantly smiled. “Uh, I’ll have the star
parfait, thanks.”

Yukimi nodded and with a sunny smile at Airi, went to put their orders in the kitchen.

As soon as she left, Ann leaned forward. “OK, how do you guys know her so well? I don’t think
she goes to our school…”

Sneaking his head out from under the table, Morgana meowed quietly. “She’s one of Madarame’s
former apprentices." He informed her. "We found her with Yusuke over a week ago when we recognized her name."

She furrowed her brow. "Really? She’s one of them?" She glanced out of the booth at Yukimi who was waiting another table. "She’s so young, though. At least compared to Nakanohara-san..."

Airi nodded, leaning her elbows against the table as she rested her chin against her palm. "Yeah. She’s one of Yusuke’s "sisters," well...one that he remembers anyway. She’s been our waitress every time we’ve been here."

Ann raised her brows at the new knowledge. "Huh...I never noticed. It's a small world."

"Here you are!" Yukimi came back with their food, balancing the tray expertly. Placing the orders in front of each respective student, she beamed. "I hope you enjoy!" She went back to the other tables, practically skipping along the way.

Airi smiled warmly at the sight. She was so much livelier than she was a little over a week ago. She was glad to see this change in the older girl.

“So Airi,” Ann began after taking a picture of her dessert. “What was up with you and Niijima-senpai?”

Rolling her eyes, Airi took a bite into her sandwich. “I asked her if the Principal was going to do anything, and she said no.” She frowned disapprovingly. “He’s not assigning any teachers or adults. He’s really making us deal with all this.”

The model stared at her incredulously. “…Are you serious?” She hissed. “What an ass! How do you just not do your job. Ugh…” She clenched her fists before relaxing. “But...she’s still doing it, right? Couldn’t she just decline? It just seems like she's sucking up to him.”

Taking a sip of her coffee, Airi sighed. “It’s not that easy. He could affect her university applications. Plus, we already got some anonymous requests from scammed students. We have to help out somehow...” Checking the time on her phone, she bit back a curse and quickly finished her food. “Shit, we should hurry up if we don’t want to be late meeting Nakanohara-san and Yusuke.” She stood up to go to the bathroom to change into more appropriate clothes.

“Do you guys need anyth- hey, where’d Airi go?” Yukimi walked up to their table, looking around for the class president. “Did she leave already..?” She pouted with disappointment.

Akira smirked, taking out his wallet. “Yeah, sorry.”

She gave him the stink eye. “You’re not sorry at all, asshole.” She grinned when he glowered at her. “Just kidding. You guys want anything else? I’m getting off soon so I can walk with you guys.”

They both shook their heads and finished their food, paying their bill. They couldn't put this off.

Leaving the Diner with Yukimi a couple minutes later, they walked down the streets in silence.
Having changed out of their uniforms, they wore their most neutral colored clothes for the occasion.

Airi had stopped by her job to pick out some flowers for them all, and she held a large bouquet of white chrysanthemums. Akira had volunteered to hold the bag of supplies since it included everything essential, while Ann held a bag of food bought from the convenience store. Though the streets were loud and people walked by without a glance, the mood in the group was too somber for the vibrant Shibuya life to penetrate.

They turned the corner in the quiet neighborhood of Aoyama and stopped, seeing Yusuke was already there at the entrance of the cemetery, his own bouquet of red carnations carefully cradled in his hands. He stared down at them with a muted emotion in his eyes, lightly stroking the soft petals.

“Yusuke?” Airi called out as they walked up to him.

He looked up at them and inclined his head as a greeting. “Good afternoon.” He turned toward the waitress. “Yukimi-nee.”

Yukimi smiled slightly before it dropped. “Hi Yusuke…”

“Hey!” Ryuji ran up to them before stopping and rested his hands on his knees as he panted. Even though his outfit was messy, he at least changed into a white button up and black slacks. “I uh…” He swallowed as he straightened up with a breath. “I brought some oranges that my neighbor brought back from Ehime.” He held out up the bag of fruit, rubbing the back of his head awkwardly.

Yusuke raised his brows, impressed at his consideration. “…Thank you, Ryuji.” He responded after a stunned moment.

They walked up the steps into the sacred garden, first entering the office registry. Natsuhiko, Daichi, Toushiro, and Mina were already waiting there, dressed in simple black suits. They seemed to be embroiled in a heated conversation since their brows were furrowed as their lips moved rapidly, debating something they couldn’t hear.

Airi blinked at the sight. She guessed since they hadn’t seen each other in years, they had a lot to catch up on.

Noticing the group of teenagers enter the office, they got up from their seats. “Hey…” Natsuhiko greeted quietly, idly adjusting his glasses. “I already asked where the resting sites are. Ayasakawa-senpai doesn’t…” His jaw tightened. “He doesn’t have a grave, but his ashes are held in one of the columbarium walls…I suppose Madarame had enough of a heart back then since he paid for Kitagawa-san to have her own marker.” He gestured outside through the open doors. “She’s near the back where the lake is.”

Yusuke looked down at his bouquet at the information. “Madarame had cared enough…” He frowned wistfully before sighing. “Shall we go then? Do we have any incense?”

Akira held up his bag. “Right here.”

Daichi glanced at them before walking through the doors, not waiting for them to catch up. Giving them a small smile, Mina followed after him.

They stopped at the rentals, cleansing their hands with sacred water before filling a bucket. Ryuji offered to carry it since he had the arm strength, and they walked up to the marble wall.
Every space available was taken up with a bronze plaque, signifying the deceased’s name, date of birth, and date of passing. Most of them were shining crisply in the afternoon sun, cleaned on a regular basis along with offerings of flowers.

Daichi stepped up and pointed to a dull plaque, dirt and rust accumulating from years of neglect. “That’s his.” Crouching down to grab the scrub, he wet it in water before commencing the cleaning. It took several washes before the metal shined, the engraving of "Ayasakawa Sousuke" stark against the plaque.

Taking a deep breath, Natsuhiko took a step forward, accepting a few chrysanthemums from Airi, and tucked the stems in the cracks of the wall. “Ayasakawa-senpai…” He bit his lip as he tried to hold in the tears. “I’m so sorry…I could’ve done something for you. I could’ve spoke out, or…or something. I guess I was too embroiled in my own suffering to notice yours.” He heaved a sigh, his shoulders slumping. “It…It hurt, to have been the one to find your body. At least you went peacefully…Your art is finally yours again. I made sure of that.”

Mina stepped up next to him, biting her lip as her eyes moistened. “Sousuke-kun...You should’ve come to us. We were all sick of his treatment, but we decided that living was still worth the suffering.” She swallowed the urge to break down. “Why did you give up..?”

Toushiro wrapped an arm around his fellow first apprentice. “Sousuke was…” He sighed heavily. “Sousuke was always a sensitive soul. It’s how he had so many good artworks. But havin’ a sensitive soul in that house was a weakness...and he knew it.”

Stepping up, Akira held out a few sticks of incense to them.

Taking it from the student, Natsuhiko lit them and placed them into the incense holder. Clapping his hands twice, he bowed his head and prayed. The others followed his example, a moment of silence for a man who couldn’t be saved. They couldn’t exactly offer food to such a small space, but they did what they could.

Natsuhiko mentioned that yakisoba was his favorite, and Ann perked up. Rummaging through her bag, she took out a small plastic container of convenience store noodles. “Sorry, it’s all we could get on such short notice…” She smiled sheepishly.

Toushiro shook his head. “This is perfect. This was the one he always bought with the little allowance we got…”

Leaving the adults and Yukimi to their own praying, the thieves grabbed the water bucket and walked down the concrete path, heading deeper into the cemetery. The way was lined with cherry blossom trees, the flowers having faded months ago and now were filled with only healthy green leaves.

“Nakanohara-san said Kitagawa-san’s marker was somewhere back here, right?” Ann asked, looking around the rows and rows of graves.

Morgana leaned against Akira’s shoulder. “Should I try to find it?” He offered, his tail waving behind him eagerly. "He said it’s near the back…”

Yusuke inclined his head as he adjusted his grip on the bouquet. “Please.”

Jumping to the ground, the feline darted between the rows, his sharp eyes scanning each name before dismissing them and disappearing within the stone monuments.

The teenagers stopped on the path to wait for him to come back. “Is there anyone else we gotta
visit?” Ryuji asked as he leaned against a tree.

Airi shook her head. “Not today. It’s just them.”

Akira blinked. “Not today? Oh…” She meant her own parents.

She gave him a small smile, seeing the realization in his eyes. “That’s for another time...Today is about Yusuke.”

A black blur jumped in front of them and Morgana shook his fur. “I found it. She’s on a hill. Follow me.” He padded over to the north, looking back at them to make sure they followed.

Walking after him, they passed the small lake and arrived at a richer row of stone markers. These were larger, made of a higher quality stone, and were carved in more intricate designs. Stopping at the one that read, “Kitagawa Keiko,” they paused, seeing the pristine white stone and the recently wilted flowers.

“What..?” Airi furrowed her brow before walking up, wiping her finger on the stone. It came away mostly clean, only the barest hint of dirt on it. “Did someone clean it recently?”

Ryuji squinted his eyes at the cracks that connected the marker to the ground, noting how spotless it was. “Yeah, it must’ve been maintained regularly ‘cause there isn’t any dirt in the creases or nothing. Someone’s been comin’ and cleaning this.”

Ann bit her lip. “No one else would know where this was, right? He paid for her marker, so…”

Yusuke stared at the marker, the information registering in his mind. “Did...Madarame do this?” He whispered, feeling lost in what he should feel toward his former Sensei. His father figure’s Shadow had confessed he let his mother die to steal “Sayuri,” but he must’ve knew her before she gave birth to him. Were they friends? She trusted him to house her, even as she fell ill. Sensei…

Frowning softly, Airi placed a hand on his shoulder. “Yusuke? Should we start?”

Startled out of his thoughts, he nodded after a moment. “Yes.”

Clearing the remains of the old flowers, he picked up the ladle from the bucket and cleansed the marker of any accumulating dirt and dust. It didn't need to be scrubbed since it was already spotless. Putting the ladle down, he hesitantly picked up his bouquet of red carnations and knelt down in front of the grave.

The others moved back to give him some space and privacy. He appreciated that. “Mom…” Yusuke whispered shyly. “I'm sorry it took me so long to see you again. Truth be told, the thought had never occurred to me while I lived in the atelier.” He ducked his head forlornly. “Forgive me...I never asked how you died. All I cared about was that Madarame had painted “Sayuri.” Oh,” He paused. “I suppose you never referred to it as “Sayuri,” did you? I don’t even know your other works…”

He lowered his head in shame. “I’m sorry, mom...Though I don’t remember you as well as I desire to, I still love you. You gave me the chance to live, to bloom into an artist. Like mother, like son…” He closed his eyes. He hoped she could hear his words.

Placing the bouquet into the flower slots, he lit some incense and secured them in front of her name. Clapping his hands twice, he prayed. For her peaceful rest in the afterworld, for her eventual reincarnation. For her to watch over him as he continued his journey as an artist.
Letting his arms fall to his sides, he slowly exhaled, opening his eyes. Straightening his back, he turned to his fellow thieves and gave them a small but grateful smile. “Thank you.”

Akira smiled. “No problem.”

Seeing as the artist was done with his own prayers, they moved closer to place their small bouquets down, too. Clapping their hands twice, they prayed for their friend’s mother.

Taking the cheap plastic tarp from the supply bag, Ryuji unfolded it and placed it on the ground in front of the stone monument. “Food time!” He grinned. “I’m sure mama Kitagawa’s gotta be hungry for some good ole’ grub!”

Morgana rolled his eyes at his enthusiasm, but his swinging tail let them know he was joking. “Not sure if that wording is correct, but let’s! We should celebrate her life when she was here!”

Yusuke smiled, taking a seat and peeling one of the Ehime oranges. The others took a seat as well, making sure to take off their shoes. “I’m unsure if it was a lie, but Madarame had mentioned one time that my mother spent three days on a portrait, only to accidentally pick up the wrong brush. It ended up a disaster and instead of despairing, she instead began painting the walls to release her frustration.”

Unscrewing the thermos, he poured himself some tea, still hot like when it had boiled. “They’re gone now, but it must’ve inspired her to begin anew as she had gone on to paint something else, most likely “Sayuri.””

Airi grinned at the tale as she offered her manju buns to the altar before munching on one. “Even if it’s not true, it sounds like a great story. Is there anything you remember about her..?”

Yusuke grasped his chin thoughtfully before nodding. “My memories during that age are rather hazy, but I seem to recall being in her arms.” A small smile grew on his lips. “I was very young then, three years old I think, and she was letting me paint on her canvas...I presume that is what began my love for art.”

Ann beamed at the story as she ate her mochi. “That sounds adorable!”

Akira smiled slightly. “She sounds like an amazing mom.” Nothing like his own. He idly wondered if she even remembered he existed. She always tried extra hard to ignore him when he was in the house.

“I guersch our moms are the besht.” Ryuji spoke while munching on his onigiri. He swallowed his mouthful before continuing. “Well, mine and Yusuke’s at least. I…” He furrowed his brow as he realized something. “I dunno much about Ann’s, or Airi’s, or Akira’s…”

Morgana looked up at him, pausing from his orange. “You’re not going to ask about mine?”

Ryuji scoffed. “Your mom’s right here!” He gestured over at the class president who beamed at that.

“I guess I’ll start?” Airi offered as she cradled her paper cup of tea. “My mom was a cellist. She played in orchestras around Japan and that’s how my dad met her. She…” She peered down at her cup, watching as the tea bits floated inside. “She always encouraged me, no matter what. Even when she scolded me, she’d be fighting back a smile saying I was too cute to yell at. I learned how to play from her. Her cello is the thing I treasure the most…”

Ann bit her lip at her recollection and reached out to grab her hand. “Airi…She sounds amazing.”
Airi smiled softly at that. “Thanks. I think she was. I don’t really know what my dad did, he had some sort of government job along with Sojiro-san, but he always made time for us when work let him off. They loved each other a lot…”

Ryuji gave her a grin. “I’m sure they’re still lovin’ each other on the other side. Sounds like they had that kind of relationship where it never got old.”

Akira nodded in agreement. “Like in Harry Potter, ‘Death is but the next great adventure.’” He quoted. "I’m sure they’re still together, wherever they are, and they still love you.”

Airi beamed, feeling her chest warm up at the thought. “Thanks, Harry Potter.” She laughed as he deadpanned, adjusting his not round glasses. “All right, enough about me. What about you, Ann? I think I only met your mom once…”

Said model grimaced at the memory. “Yeah, in front of middle school, right? She was home for once and said she’d pick me up, but she was so busy on her phone that she ended up leaving the day after.” She shrugged as she grabbed another mochi. “I don’t know, she’s just always busy. I don’t get to see her often, maybe five times a year? I really only have my caretaker at our house.”

She smiled weakly at her food. “But I know she does love me. She always texts me asking if I’m eating OK, or about my grades while she’s off in Milan or Italy getting ready for shows. It just…” She sighed as her shoulders slumped. “It gets kind of lonely being by myself. I’m free to do whatever I want since they encourage me to spread my wings and all, but…baby birds always have their parents right behind them when they first take flight.”

Yusuke looked at her sympathetically. “Once the bird leaves the nest, it must become its own adult. Braving the dangers of the world by itself until life begins anew. However…” He hesitated. “I can’t quite call their actions parenting. Not that I bear any correct knowledge on it.”

Morgana looked at her sadly. “Lady Ann…”

His jaw tightening, Ryuji slung his arm around her shoulders comfortingly. “C’mon, even if they’re never here, we have our own mom, right?” He jerked his head over at Airi who deadpanned, but her lips twitched into a smile. “When’s she comin’ back?”

“Uhh…” Taking out her phone, Ann checked her messages, scrolling through the dates. “In…two months. Hopefully nothing comes up, because then she’d be gone for even longer.” She sighed, resting her head against his shoulder. “I just wish they’d be home more often. We’d move around so much in America and Europe, I almost gave up on making friends...”

She pursed her lips and straightened her shoulders. “You’re right, though. As long as I know they love and still care about me, then it’s OK. Besides, I’m pretty busy myself now with the Phantom Thieves!” She smiled optimistically. “I’ll show them how much I’ve grown when they get back!”

Ryuji pumped his fist as he tightened his arm around her shoulders, almost choking her. “Hell yeah! That’s the spirit! We’re a family, too, so we gotta look out for each other!”

Pushing him off with a gasp, Ann grumbled as she redid her hair, even as a smile occupied her lips. Everyone nodded in agreement. They were the Phantom Thieves, but more than that, they were friends who had each other’s backs.

Frowning a bit at how close the two blonds were, Morgana tore his eyes away and looked up at Akira. “And what about your mother?”
The smile fell from his face and he glanced away. “Uh…” He rubbed the back of his neck. “Nothing like any of yours…”

Remembering that he mentioned a bad relationship with his parents, Airi gently placed her hand on his arm. “You don’t have to share.”

Pursing his lips, Akira shook his head. “No, might as well. My parents...were good parents, I think.” He began hesitantly. "I remember we used to go out to the park to fly kites and watch Studio Ghibli movies once a month. My mom would kiss my cuts when I’d fall, and made me hot milk tea when I’d have nightmares.”

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Ann blinked. “That’s sounds pretty good so far. Did...something change?” She asked awkwardly.

He grimaced as he remembered the gradual downfall. “As a kid, you don’t know when your parents are lying. I never noticed my mom was faking it. Maybe…” He stared down at his hands, his eyes tracing all the lines on his palms. “Maybe she loved me when I was younger, but it got worse and worse until I started school. That’s when she...gave up. Like she ran out of affection.”

Yusuke furrowed his brow. “What do you mean by that?...”

Akira slowly exhaled. “She stopped showing so much affection. First, the trips to the park stopped, then she’d get annoyed when I would talk to her for too long...Then she stopped touching me. Both her and my father, like I was diseased…”

A disquiet smile curled on his lips as he remembered the lonely and quiet nights, the silence during dinner almost suffocating. His parents seemed to not be affected by it, but he only became more and more reserved as a result. The town wasn’t small, but everyone could see his parents treat him like a pariah, and in the end, he was left alone without anyone. What friends he could make were just classmates who he worked on projects with. No one ever reached out to him.

“Before my arrest, the last time I talked to them was three months before. We haven’t made physical contact in almost…” He counted it in his head, grimacing at the number. “Five years? Maybe more…”

Sharing a look of horror with everyone, Airi reached out with her arms and slowly embraced his arm. “I’m so sorry…” She frowned morosely. “That...That sounds terrible.” Hearing about his mother sounded almost like long term postpartum depression. It started off small but left unchecked could spiral into hate. His father though, was a different story…

He leaned against her, accepting the warm touch. “It’s OK..." He shrugged as nonchalantly as he could, trying his best to make it seem like it didn't affect him. "I kinda accepted it a few years ago…”

Scowling, Ryuji furiously rubbed his head. “No, that’s not OK! That’s fuckin’ messed up!” He exhaled sharply. “…Why’s it always you who gotta deal with this shit?”

Morgana padded up and smack him with a paw. “Be quiet! We’re in a cemetery, remember? Be a little more respectful.”

Lifting his arms up, Ryuji sputtered, trying to argue before groaning. “I know! I just...man, hearin’ how your parents treat you makes me so mad!” He gritted his teeth.

Ann nodded in agreement. “That sounds terrible! Why did they change like that?” She furrowed her brow as a thought came to her. “You don’t think...they have Palaces, do they?”
Akira blinked. “No. They don’t have distorted desires like that. They just don’t like me anymore…” He shrugged. Who wanted to admit that they hoped their own parents registered on the MetaNav? He wanted to find a reason, but...he wouldn’t find out anytime soon if one existed. “Thank you, though.” He smiled shyly. “No one’s cared like this, so…” He ducked his head with embarrassment, hiding his face from them with the glare of his glasses.

Yusuke inclined his head. “You are one of us. There should be no doubt in your mind that we would be vexed at hearing this.” He took a deep breath. “You offered to listen to my troubles, but I hope you realize you can do the same with any of us.”

Head snapping up, Akira stared at them with wide eyes, watching as Ryuji, Ann, and Airi all nodded in agreement. Biting his lip, he brought up a hand to hide his face as he felt his eyes well up. They really were his friends. Rapidly blinking his eyes to clear the mist, he beamed a heartfelt smile. “Thanks.” He would do anything to keep them.

They blushed at the honest and sincere expression on his face. He was always quieter than them, letting them speak about their own problems and worries. It was time they did the same for him.

“No!"

They looked up and saw Yukimi waving at them from the bottom of the hill, the other apprentices with her. “We’re leaving now, it’s getting late and we still have work tomorrow!”

Yusuke looked up at the sky, noting the dimmer light and the orange rays cast over the clouds. “I hadn’t even noticed the time…” Standing up, he waved back to his other fellow apprentices and they left as a group.

He turned to the marker, noting that the incense had finished burning long ago. He clapped his hands twice, sending another prayer. The others got up and did the same before cleaning up their mess.

“We should make sure we didn’t leave any trash around.” Morgana reminded as he jumped back inside the bag.

Airi glanced over at him, remembering that he hadn’t joined in with supporting Akira, but let it be. There were still a lot of things that they didn’t know about the feline thief and even though he called her mom, he still kept a lot of things to himself.

Ryuji lifted the bucket again, and after doing another round to check for any food or wrappers, they left the hill, walking back to the office registry. They returned the bucket and threw away their trash. Walking back to Shibuya, they chatted quietly even as the noise continued to increase.

Yusuke stopped, eyeing the pedestrians walking by and turned to Airi. “Nee-san, I won’t be going home just yet. There’s something I have to do.”

She blinked quizzically but nodded. “OK. I should go grab a shift anyway. I’ll see you later?”

He nodded and walked off, disappearing in the mass of people.

Akira shouldered his bag as he held the leftovers of their party. “You’re not coming back with me?” He asked, feeling slightly disappointed.

She shook her head. “Sorry, but I have to make up for all those flowers I took.” She smiled sheepishly before walking to the underground mall, waving bye to her fellow thieves.
Leaving work, Airi took the train back home as usual. The subway was pretty quiet today, with most of the passengers being teenagers.

She eyed some of them, noting their haggard expressions. They wore regular clothes, but she could tell by their bags that they were students, the school emblems scratched out. Two of them were from Shujin, and she furrowed her brow in worry. Were those scams happening right now in front of her? Were they stuck?

“This is Yongenjaya. I repeat, this is Yongenjaya. The time is now 10:34PM, the next stop is…”

As the train crawled to a stop, the doors slid open and she walked out, leaving the station. The night was still cool enough that she wasn’t sweating, but she was glad she had brought a change of clothes. The neutral clothes from earlier were at least airy enough that she wasn’t dying from the heat. She was already dreading how much warmer it was going to be in the upcoming weeks.

Her phone buzzed and she took it out.

R: You know how we’re going to that TV station tomorrow, yeah?
R: I’m thinking we might find our next target there.
An: Oh, that’s right!
An: You always hear about how celebrities are involved in all sorts of shady business.
Ak: You’re absolutely right.
R: With that much money, they’ve prolly got their fingers in all sorts of dirty business.
Y: Hm…
Y: That phrasing has quite the immoral ring to it…
R: Dude, you always react to the weirdest stuff…
Ai: Shouldn’t we have more of a reason than just “they’re evil”?
Ai: I’m pretty sure the entertainment industry as a whole can be considered shady and dirty.
Y: I agree. We should not act rashly.
R: I guess…
R: Who should we be targeting then?
An: We get to observe a live recording of a show, right?
An: Maybe they’ll mention some scandals and we can go from there.
R: Ooh, maybe we’re gonna be on TV!
Ai: Aren’t we just in the crowd? I don’t think they’ll show us.
Y: Hm. Try not to pull fanciful stunts to garner attention, OK?

She snorted, covering her mouth. She had a feeling that was directed toward Ryuji. He was getting better, though. Maybe being friends with Akira had started mellowing him out.

Putting her phone back in her pocket, she began walking in the direction of her home. The streets were empty at this time, the only establishments open being bars. She glanced up at the street lights that were growing dimmer by the day. Maybe she could e-mail city hall about this so they can fix it. Then again, she doubted they would do anything anytime soon…
The tiny hairs on her neck raised and she furrowed her brow, swerving her head to look around. What was that?

Her eyes observed the empty streets, trying to find where that feeling was coming from. It was if she was being watched again...

Biting her lip, she walked a little faster, taking a detour. This was a little more dangerous but there was no way she was leading some potential stranger to her house. She tried to listen to any foot steps but the blood rushing in her ears blocked any sort of subtle sounds, her breathing the only thing she could hear.

Quickening her pace, she turned the corner again, trying to dodge between houses. ‘Whoever is following me, stop…!’ She gripped the strap of her bag tightly, the faux leather digging into the palm of her hand. Swallowing nervously, she covered her mouth as she coughed, her throat coming up dry. She shouldn’t make too much sound or else they might…

Trying not to breathe too loudly as she began to tremble, she broke out into a sprint straight to her house. Please please please, make it..!

Her eyes brightened as she caught the familiar vines that climbed up the side of her house and she hurried, almost tripping and twisting her ankle. She winced but ignored the pain as much as she could, stopping in front of her door.

She shoved her hand into her bag, trying to find her keys. “Please please please…” She muttered to herself, trying to find those small slabs of metal.

The familiar sound of men’s shoes click clacked behind her on the otherwise empty street and her heart almost stopped. They had caught up with her.

Beginning to panic, she blindly rummaged through her bag. The presence came closer and closer, and a hand reached out from behind her. She clenched her eyes for the inevitable.

A hand clamped on her shoulder and she let out a shriek, taking out the first sharp item in her bag- a protractor- and pointing it at the person.

“Nee-san?!”

Her eyes flew open at the familiar voice calling her sister. “…Yusuke?” She breathed out shakily, shoulders slumping with relief as she took in the dark purple button up and blue hair, framing the artist’s effeminate face.

He frowned, hesitantly reaching out. “…Are you all right?”

Taking a deep breath, she nodded jerkily. “Y-Yeah… I’m fine.” So it was him stalking her. Again. She might just laugh until she cried. “You scared me…”

He idly brushed some hair out of his eyes. “My apologies. I had not meant to.” He glanced down at her bag, her books and supplies almost spilling out from her frenzied search. “Did you forget the keys?”

Now that she was calmer, she delved into the items in her bag and sighed, not finding it. “I guess so. I could’ve sworn I had it…”

A small smile appeared on his face and he took out his own newly minted copy, the one she had given him this morning. “Shall I do the honors?”
Smiling at his shy enthusiasm, she nodded, moving out of the way so he could open the door. He seemed so happy to be living with her. Maybe she should turn the study into a bedroom again if he was staying permanently.

Closing the door behind them, they turned on the lights, illuminating the small house. “Thanks, Yusuke.” She sighed in relief as she plopped down on the couch. “It’s a good thing you followed me home or else I’d be stuck outside.”

Taking a seat, he furrowed his brow. “...What do you mean? I had just arrived on the street when I saw you at the door.”

She stilled. What? It wasn’t him? Then who...

Well, whoever it was, they didn’t get her, and as long as Yusuke and Akira were here, she was never alone in the neighborhood. It was fine, right? Whoever had followed her would get tired and leave...right?

Chapter End Notes

(whoops forgot to explain the flower meanings and traditions)
Using Hanakotoba/Japanese flower language
white chrysanthemums - truth / funeral flowers
red carnations - love, typically used for mother's day.

You wash your hands with blessed water before praying in earnest. Japanese people usually clean the grave markers with the same water to keep negative emotions and spirits away.
You usually bring fruits and the deceased's favorite food. You offer it first to the grave marker, and then you eat it to show you're thinking of them.
Why was he doing this again? Akira had asked himself when he accepted Mishima’s offer to hang out. Oh, right. Because he made a deal and he should actually get to know his "number one fan" better. He nodded, resting his hands in his jeans as the other student blabbed on about the Phan-site while they stood outside the bookstore on Central Street.

“Info has started pouring into the Phan-site too. I’m gonna be a busy bee!” Mishima grinned, checking the forum on his phone. “As your strategic image management rep, I thought I should come up with more ways to help you. So…” He trailed off with a giddy smile. “We’re meeting with some Phan girls today.”

Tensing at the announcement, Akira turned to look at him in surprise. What..?

“All thieves are supposed to have some special ladies, right?” Mishima grinned while narrowing his eyes at him.

Oh. So that’s what this was. Letting out a huff of amusement, Akira wiped his face of all emotion. “Great idea, but...I’m already taken.” He announced flatly.

Eyes flying open, Mishima stared at him in shock. “What..? Did I lose already?!” He shouted in dismay before his brain caught up with him and he stopped. “Wait, no...I would’ve heard if that was true.” Crossing his arms, he pouted. “You liar. You’ve gotta steal a girl’s heart if you want to be called a phantom thief, and I haven’t seen any proof of that. Let’s do this!”

Giving him a dirty look, Akira sighed and leaned against the wall next to the vending machines. Seemed like he was stuck with this. It’s not like he hated his classmate. On the contrary, he was a nice guy, and he looked out for their group. The problem was his apparent crush on their class president and how he sucked up to them.

Mishima leaned next to him. “So basically, I met some girls on the Phan-site, and we thought it’d be fun to do an in-person meet-up. Oh,” He perked up. “That reminds me, they think we’re just part of the phandom. I made up this whole story about how we stumbled on the Phan-site one day, so let’s stick to that. Don’t spill the beans, OK?”

Scrunching up his face, Akira nodded. “So we’re...part of the Phandom?” That sounded so dumb coming out of his mouth.

Mishima nodded excitedly. “That’s what users of the Phan-site call themselves! But it's "PH" instead of an "F." It’s really caught on as the forum’s gotten more popular.” He scratched his head sheepishly. “Either way, you should be excited about this! Mingling with your loyal supporters is a noble cause indeed! Plus, remember how I said I’d help publicize the Phantom Thieves?” He eagerly bounced in place. “This is just the beginning!”

Akira glanced away, nodding awkwardly. He was really excited for this…

“Though to be honest,” Mishima continued uncomfortably. “I’ve never actually met someone from
online in person…” He ducked his head. “I wonder if I’ll be able to do it right…”

Pursing his lips, Akira patted his back sympathetically. “I’m sure you’ll do fine.” Then again, who knows if these girls were even real girls.

The forum administrator perked up. “You’re right! I did lots of research. I know all about footing the bill and buying desserts for the girl. Apparently if things go well,” His face heated up and he gulped nervously. “You might even take her home…”

Sweatdropping, Akira gave him an odd look. “…Do you want that? And what time did they say they were coming?” Oh. Bad choice of words right there.

Not noticing the double entendre, Mishima checked his phone for messages, furrowing his brow. “Huh? It’s way past our meeting time…” Biting his lip, he decided to dial the number, bringing the phone up to his ear. “…Um, hello? It’s Mishima, the guy you met on the Phan-site…” He blabbed nervously. “About our meet-up…”

Akira watched as his classmate went from nervous, to confused, to dejected all in the span of ten seconds.

“OK…” Mishima answered glumly. “Yeah…maybe next time.” Hanging up, he placed his phone back in his pockets. “S-So…both of them apparently got sick?” He informed awkwardly. “They’re just gonna stay home.” He laughed sheepishly before sighing, slumping his shoulders in defeat. “It seemed like they were really into the idea on the forum…” Clenching his jaw, he forced a smile on his face and laughed. “O-Oh well…My bad!” He smiled shyly, a bit of hurt in his eyes. “I was so busy with all the new forum posts, I didn’t have time to really vet them too much.”

Furrowing his brow, Akira stared sympathetically. He didn’t deserve that. “It’s OK, man. It’s not your fault.”

He nodded, crossing his arms. “This was just a learning experience!” He sighed again before perking up. “But all this aside, I have some really good info ready for you guys! I won’t let you down…” He clenched his fists, locking eyes with the thief determinedly. “I’ll prove just how useful I can be to the Phantom Thieves!”

With a small smile, Akira nodded, glad to see his classmate bounce back. ‘He seems extra motivated now…’

Mishima slumped. “It wasn’t supposed to turn out like this, though…I bet those girls would never have flaked on me if they knew I’m friends with the real live Phantom Thieves. Then one of them would get interested in you and you’d back off or something…” He heaved a sigh. “Being a guardian of justice isn’t so easy, huh..?”

Akira deadpanned and shook his head. As if anything he’d do would make him uninterested...

Dispirited from the earlier rejection, Mishima straightened up from the wall and waved. “Well, I’m going home. We have that social studies trip tomorrow, too.”

Nodding, he waved bye as the Phan boy left before heading home himself. At least the experience was enlightening in a way, but he knew tomorrow was going to be a big day.

----6/9, THURSDAY, MORNING, SHIBUYA

“…And that’s why we recruit sponsors to help make TV shows.” The PR representative beamed,
her heavy foundation cracking under the smile.

The group of Shujin Academy students were in one of the studios used to film a TV talk show. They had left school shortly after first period and entered probably one of the richest buildings in the city. There were cables all over the floor as the crew worked to get the show ready for airtime while the students awkwardly stood there, half listening to the company’s PR person.

“I’m sure you know about commercial breaks?” The woman continued blithely, as if reciting off a script. “Well, those are actually sponsor-related product placements. To sum things up, ratings are vitally important for a station’s production funding, and…” She continued on and on.

Crossing his arms, Ryuji let out a thoughtful noise. Akira sighed, resting his hands in his pockets. He might fall asleep at this rate. “Everyone knows that…”

Airi coughed quietly, covering her mouth as she smiled. She agreed. They thought they were going to learn some more interesting things, but all they’ve heard so far were basically dumbed down explanations.

“Chill, man.” Ryuji whispered, paying attention to the PR woman.

“For example, soap-opera reruns are shown in the day, whereas alluring newswomen are broadcast at night.” She explained cheerfully. “Thus, the scheduling department is where we decide what time we broadcast which program. I suppose you could say it’s the place where the schedule is determined.”

Airi sweatdropped. She just repeated the previous sentence but in a different way. They’re not THAT dumb...

Ann twirled a ponytail in boredom. “Could this get any more obvious..?” She grumbled.

“So sleepy…” Akira slowly blinked, trying to stay awake even as he started to sag against his class representative’s shoulder.

Sweatdropping at his sleepiness, Airi pushed him upright and subtly pinched his arm. “Stay awake, OK?” She whispered.

Ann sweatdropped at the sight. “Wow...He’s not even listening to what I said…”

Not noticing her audience losing interest, the PR representative kept going. “So, the best parts are taken from the footage in order to cut down the program to the desired length. The place where this filmed footage is edited would be the editing room.” She explained slowly and clearly.

Fed up with the mundane explanations, Morgana popped out of the bag, stepping on Akira’s shoulder. “Hey,” He whispered un-enthusiastically. “How much longer does this go?”

Ryuji let out a small whimper and hung his head. “I swear, I’m not gonna last…”

Checking the time on her phone, Airi leaned in closer to Morgana. “Should be done in a few more minutes. Hang in there, guys-” She was cut off as a man in a business suit rudely walked in between them, pushing them out of the way.

Ann reached out and caught her while Akira stumbled a bit before righting himself, furrowing his brow in irritation at being treated like a turnstile. “Hrgh..?!” Mona yelped as he was spun too, hiding more of himself in the bag as he peeked at the man.
“What’s going on?” The man, a famous newscaster if Airi remembered, complained loudly to the PR representative. “I can’t stand all this noise.”

Ryuji glared, taking a few steps closer. “Hey, assho—”

“My apologies!” The PR woman bowed quickly, deferring to the man. “I’ll have them leave right away.” Slapping a smile on her face, she ushered the students into the audience seats. “Now then, it’s time for a bit of hands-on experience.”

The famous newscaster walked back in the same direction he came from toward the dressing rooms, not giving them a glance or even acknowledging he had shoved them.

Ryuji watched him leave with a dark scowl. “Dammit...Who does that jerk think he is?” He hissed.

“Hey there. You two wanna be on TV?”

An assistant director walked up to Ann and Airi, smirking as he eyed them up and down.

They glanced at each other awkwardly. “Huh?” Ann furrowed her brow in confusion. "Are you talking to us?"

“You’ve got slammin’ bods, after all.” He grinned, snickering with a perverse glint in his eyes. “Plus, pink hair? That shade of blonde? One of a kind. You guys natural?"

Trying to keep the disgust off her face, Airi smiled politely. “We’re students on a school trip, sir.”

He shrugged, unfazed. “Just gimme a call if you’re interested. I’d greatly welcome a message from you two, day or night. Especially you.” He winked at Ann while holding out a business card. "Call me anytime."

Ann cringed, slowly moving away. “Uhhh, yeah…” She answered with great reluctance.

Ryuji snubbed his nose at the A.D. “Greatly welcome, my ass.” He muttered angrily while trying to set the guy on fire with the force of his glare. “It’s obvious what he’s after. Do these rotten adults care about anything other than looks?!!”

Akira narrowed his eyes, agreeing with the ex-runner. Did the guy have no shame, coming up to two teenagers while working and trying to flirt with them? Their friends, no less.

“I’ll yank their stupid hearts out, dammit!” Ryuji hissed quietly, baring his teeth. “It’s always gotta be sexual harassment with Ann…These bastards don’t think about anythin’ but their dicks!”

Morgana glared at him sharply. “Will you quiet down?!” He hissed. “You’re supposed to be acting like good students today!”

Glancing in their direction, Kawakami walked up to them, still wearing her pale yellow blazer. “I understand you’re bored, but please don’t cause any trouble, OK?” She warned them quietly.

Akira grimaced. “Sensei, he’s…”

“I know.” She answered sharply, glancing concernedly at the two girls before focusing on the transfer student again. “But as long as nothing happens, I can’t do anything about it.”

“Well then, uhhh…” The A.D drewled, swirling his head slowly to look at the crowd as he got back to work. “Let’s have you see what it’s like to be an AC. Oh, that stands for “assistant
camera.” He explained unenthusiastically. “When we’re moving cameras, we need people who’ll get the cables from getting tangled up…”

He glanced around the students before focusing on Ryuji. “The blond will do. He seems like he’s got energy to spare anyway.” His eyes slid to Akira. “Guy next to him, you can come too if you’re feeling lonely.” He mocked, clapping his hands in a hurried manner. “C’mon, hurry up and grab the cables!”

Ryuji furiously ruffled his short hair. “Dammit...This sucks!”

Akira nodded in agreement. This did suck, but the two stepped up and grabbed the cables, grunting at the extra weight that coiled over their shoulders. “Urghhh, what a pain in the ass!” Ryuji gritted. “This is totally killing my vibe…”

They fought valiantly against the long cables, wrapping them around their arms and hoisting them away from the cameras and making sure they didn’t tangle. They were forced to do this until lunch where the Shujin group had a small break in the building’s cafeteria, none of the personnel other than the PR representative approaching them.

Finishing their meager lunch which consisted of salmon, rice, and miso soup, the three male thieves slowly walked through the hallways after going to the bathroom.

Stopping in the middle of the empty hallway, Ryuji let out a loud groan. “I’m so pissed off!” He gritted his teeth as he exploded. “Aren’t we supposed to be guests? Why the hell do we hafta be doin’ manual labor!? This is bullshit! Goin’ to the bathroom didn’t even make me feel better!”

Akira sighed. “I know. Even when you pooped it all out.”

Blushing, Ryuji glanced away awkwardly, scratching his cheek. “Well you didn’t hafta mention that…” He muttered sheepishly.

“Quiet down, will you?”

Ann and Airi appeared from around the corner, giving them warning looks. “I get how you feel though...” Ann sighed. “That sucks for all of us.”

Airi nodded in agreement. “I wasn’t expecting to be treated like that here.” She grimaced. “Hopefully that guy stays away from us…”

Ryuji slumped. “Seriously. We gotta do more of this tomorrow too..?”

Huffing in amusement, Morgana leaned against Akira’s shoulder. “No flaking out, Ryuji.”

He kicked the ground. “I know, I know. I gotta be a “good boy,” right?” He sighed. “Bein’ phantom thieves ain’t easy…”

“Shhh!” Airi shushed him. “We don’t know if there are any cameras here.” She glanced around the hallway, noting the bare walls and ceilings. “But yeah, please try not to lose your cool. We don’t need any more attention for the school.”

He nodded, crossing his arms petulantly.

“Well, we get to go home right after.” Ann reminded them. “We don’t come to this part of Tokyo often, so why don’t we relax and check out the streets beforehand? We could do some shopping!”
Airi shrugged. “It’s just Suidobashi...Oh, but we can bring Akira on a tour?” She turned to look at him. “Have you been in this area yet?”

Akira shook his head. “No, but I’m up for it.”

Morgana perked up. “Ooh! I know a place!” He meowed excitedly. “I wanna go to that huge pancake-looking place we passed on the way here!” He drooled. “It looked delicious! What was that?”

Ryuji perked up. “Ohh...You mean Dome Town? The round part is a baseball stadium and along the outside they’ve got an amusement park.”

Ann nodded. “It’s right in the middle of a business area, but they have some pretty hardcore rides there too.”

Airi blinked. “Really? I’ve never been, so…”

The two blonds look at her in shock. “Never?!” Ryuji yelped. “Then we gotta go! You can’t call yourself a Tokyo native if you’ve never been!”

Morgana nodded. “All right...Let’s go!” He puffed up. “I’ll show you just how courageous I am!”

Akira sweatdropped. “You’re not allowed to bring bags onto the rides, though…”

Ann snorted. “Going on a scary ride doesn’t really prove any kind of courage.”

Ryuji crossed his arms. “Not like cats can get on anyways.”

Morgana listened intently, believing their words. “Really?”

Ryuji grinned teasingly. “Really. You might be able to sneak in if you stay in the bag, but most don’t allow ‘em, plus you’d totally puke if you did that.”

Morgana looked mortified at the information and Airi reached up to pet him. “It’s OK. I hear it’s not worth it because you have to wait so long…”

Rolling his shoulder, Ryuji grinned. “But uh...Let’s just go to Dome Town!” He insisted excitedly. “I’m really feelin’ it now!”

Ann beamed at the thought. “Me too! My stomach’s ready for roller coasters!”

Scared now, Morgana retreated further into the bag. “Uhhh...I think I’ll pass on the puke rides…”

Airi tapped her chin. “Could we take him on a carousel? I think I’ve been on one of those before, and it should be fine…”

Footsteps echoed dully on the carpet behind them and a brown haired student walked into view, observing them curiously with dark red eyes with his briefcase at his side. “Excuse me, I couldn’t help but notice your uniforms.” He called out politely. “Are you students of Shujin Academy?”

Tensing at the intruder, the group turned to look at him, noting the unfamiliar school uniform and his professional attire. “Yeah, whaddya want?” Ryuji asked brusquely.

The stranger took a few steps closer. “I happened to be passing by, so it seemed polite to greet you. We’ll be filming together, after all.” He blinked before greeting them with a smile. “Ah, where are my manners? My name is Akechi Goro.”
Airi furrowed her brow as she stared at the newcomer. Akechi Goro?

“Filming?” Ryuji’s brows flew up. “What, you a celebrity?”

Chuckling, Akechi shook his head. “Only to the extent of appearing on TV a couple of times.”

Ann perked up and she gasped in realization. “Oh..!”

Checking his phone, Akechi frowned apologetically. “My apologies, I truly was just passing by. I must be going. There’s a briefing for tomorrow’s recording that I have to attend.” He smiled. “So, you’re going to go have cake now? I missed lunch today, so I’m quite hungry myself…”

They looked at each other in confusion. Out of the corner of his eye, Akira noticed that Airi hadn’t moved since the newcomer had walked in, her eyes never leaving him.

“Huh? Cake..?” Ryuji frowned. “What’re you talkin’ about?”

A black gloved hand flew to his chin as Akechi widened his eyes. “Oh, am I mistaken? I thought I heard something about delicious pancakes…” Collecting himself, he smiled again. “No matter. Welp, see you tomorrow.” He waved, pivoting on his heel and leaving down the hall.

Gray eyes sharpened. Oh..?

Ryuji watched as he left. “That guy’s gotta be some kinda start-up entertainer or something.” He snickered. “He’s never gonna get popular with that kinda hair, though.”

Ann shook her head incredulously. “You don’t get it…”

He shrugged. “Eh, it’s fine. We’ll see him again tomorrow anyways. C’mon! Let’s go to Dome Town!”

They walked down the hall, heading for the exit. Akira glanced at Airi who hadn’t said a thing since that Akechi guy showed up, and gently nudged her. “Whats up?” He whispered.

Blinking back to focus, Airi frowned and shook her head. “Nothing...I think.” Was she imagining things? Or was he familiar for some reason? She couldn’t quite put her finger on it, but he rubbed her the wrong way.

Morgana whimpered and curled up inside the bag. “H-Hey, can we skip the vomit machines and get cake instead?”

Putting it out of her mind for now, Airi smiled up at him. “Don’t worry, Morgana, we can skip the rides together.”

Akira raised a brow. “Not a fan of rollercoasters?”

She shrugged. “I’ve never been on one before. You guys can go have fun while Morgana and I try the food.”

He shook his head. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to just leave you two. Plus,” His eyes slid to the two other thieves in front of them, their conversation beginning to slide into an argument. “We’re going for cake, remember?”

She grinned. “Yeah, true!”
Taking the train to Suidobashi, they got out at the station right outside of Dome Town and paid for their admission fee at the gates.

Both Yongenjaya residents looked around curiously, this being the first time they were here. It had a ton of rides including a ferris wheel, and a multitude of merchandise stores and food stalls lined up inside the park. The baseball stadium rumbled to their left as fans cheered, currently in the middle of a game. All in all, it was a busy theme park, packed with people both young and old, with kids tugging at their parents’ hands.

They explored the park together as a group with Ann and Ryuji leading them, going on rides like spinning teacups and eating their stomach’s worth of sugary sweets that was bound to kill them.

Airi blanched and slowly backed away as both Ryuji and Ann ran toward the biggest rollercoaster in the park. That looked really high up in the air...Was it safe?

Noticing her begin to lag behind, Akira turned around and held out his hand. “C’mon.” He smiled gently. “I’ll be with you, right?”

Staring at it, she hesitantly held on and took a deep breath as they got on the line. She could do this. They did scarier things in the Metaverse. She went on runs as a ten year old that induced more adrenaline than this. This was going to be fine, right?

-10 minutes later-

‘Not fine!’ She screamed in her head as the attendant strapped them into the cars and the ride jerked, beginning its climb to the top of the curve.

She gripped the safety bar tightly, her knuckles white from the force she was exerting. This was not fine, this was not fine at all. Why did she let him convince her to do this?!

Morgana whimpered inside Akira’s bag, having been able to sneak on with him. “Why..?” He looked up all teary eyed at his handler.

Akira sweatdropped, feeling completely calm in this situation as he placed his glasses inside the bag. He didn’t want to lose them. “Guys, don’t worry.” He reassured. "It'll be over in a minute."

Airi turned her teary eyes in his direction as well and he swore his heart stopped from double the cuteness. “That’s a minute too long!” She whimpered.

“Woo!” Ryuji whooped from the front of the coaster train, arms straight up in the air.

Ann cheered beside him, the two of them blocking the view of the front. “Here comes the drop..!”

All the blood drained from Airi’s face and she blanched, leaning as close to Akira as possible. “No no no no no…” She chanted as the train began to slowed to a stop, hitting the very top of the structure.

For a moment, everything was peaceful. The wind was nice, blowing the sweat from their foreheads away from their eyes, and the view was breathtaking as they could see the entire park from their vantage point, and even beyond at all the buildings of Tokyo. The sun was just
beginning to set, the pale orange rays lighting the city on fire.

A smile appeared on her face at the sight. This was nice.

Then everything went to hell as the train dropped, descending at ten times the speed with a thundering rumble. Everyone on the ride screamed, both in fear and delight.

Airi screamed at volumes she didn’t think she could produce. ”Aaaahhh!!” Over her voice, she could hear Morgana screaming alongside her, hiding in the bag and Akira was suspiciously silent.

Gaining the courage to move just a little, she glanced up at his face which was open in the most breathtaking smile she had ever seen from him, the wind blowing back his messy hair.

She stared entranced, not noticing when they went through a whole loop, even hanging upside down at some point, because she was too preoccupied with that smile. The screams and the fear faded away except for him, her heart sped up with a different emotion. For once, he held nothing back. He looked so happy and free...

She couldn’t remember the rest of the ride, but all too soon, the train slows into a stop as they made it back into the station. She slowly exhaled, not feeling very scared from the experience. Guess it wasn’t too bad as long as she had someone with her, but...

She looked down at Morgana and sweatdropped when the feline fell limp against the zipper, his ghost leaving his body. Guess it was too much for him.

Akira smiled, replacing his glasses and ruffling his hair back in its usual style. “Wasn’t so bad, right?” He teased.

Airi pursed her lips as the train parked in place, the safety rails lifting up and freeing them. “It wasn’t as bad as I thought…”

They got out of the ride and walked away, their legs shaking just a little from being on solid ground again. Ryuji groaned, shouldering his bag. “I feel like I’m gonna puke…” He brought up a hand to his stomach, scrunching up his face when he felt it rumble. “For real, my stomach’s churnin’…”

Regaining his soul, Morgana preened at his rumpled appearance. “This is why I spoke against it.” He voiced haughtily, as if he wasn’t begging to be on the ground just a few minutes ago.

The ex-runner glared weakly at him. “Dude...It’s not fair…” He burped, blanching at the sour taste at the back of his throat. “Usin’ your cathood as an excuse and hidin’ in the bag...only at times like this…”

Ann grinned, still feeling the glee from the adrenaline rush. “That was awesome! I didn’t expect to hear Airi screaming like a little girl.” She teased, elbowing her fellow female thief in the side.

Airi pouted and lightly pushed her away. “Excuse you, it was my first time, OK…”

She snickered. “Anyway, are you guys feeling hungry?” She clapped her hands together. “How about some pancakes?”

Morgana shook his head. “Let’s go home.” He looked up at the orange sky. ”It looks like it’s getting late, and we have another full day ahead of us tomorrow.”

Akira nodded. “Right. We’re going back to the studio tomorrow…”
Ann sighed in disappointment. “OK, let’s go home then…”

Taking the train, they made it back to Shibuya before separating to their own train lines, Airi, Akira, and Morgana riding the train back to Yongenjaya.

As they stepped out into the desolate streets, Airi immediately felt uncomfortable, thinking about what had happened last night. Hopefully they left...

They walked through the backstreets, hitting Cafe Leblanc first. They went past it without stopping, Akira staring ahead as he walked her back to her house. She bit her lip, grateful to him for this, even if she wasn’t going to tell him. It only happened once, right?

Making it back to her front door, she smiled warmly. “Thanks for walking me back. You didn’t have to.”

He snorted softly, resting his hands in his pockets. “I want to.” He repeated their words. “Besides, it’s late. I’m sure Yusuke wouldn’t appreciate finding out that his sister wasn’t safe getting home.”

She huffed in amusement. “I don’t know about that, but thanks anyway.”

He smiled and waved, heading back to the cafe now that he knew she was safe at home.

Exhaling softly, Airi reached into her bag to grab her new keys. She couldn’t find her original ones, but luckily she had some extras from when she made Yusuke’s copy.

Grabbing the keys, she inserted it into the lock but froze as the door slowly opened on its own, already unlocked.

She furrowed her brow. Did Yusuke forget to lock the door when he came back?

Slowly taking a step inside, she noticed all the lights were off, and his shoes weren’t in the foyer, meaning he wasn’t back yet. But she locked the door in the morning. Maybe she forgot…

Biting her lip, she tried to shoo away her paranoia and took off her shoes after closing and locking the door behind her. She turned on the lights and walked upstairs, heading to the bathroom for a bath.

After a nice and relaxing soak, she towel dried her hair and headed to her bedroom, sitting down on her bed while she checked her phone for any messages or e-mails. The bills were due soon again, and she had to double check if Yusuke’s added expenses were going to strain their household. She didn't want to kick him out, in fact she wanted him to stay here in a comfortable and welcoming environment, but the sad truth was that they were both high school students with only their part time jobs and the Metaverse funding them. She could barely afford to keep the house as is.

A glint caught her eye and she looked up, noticing something shining on her drawer.

Getting up, she slowly walked over to it, paling when she realized it was her original pair of keys. What? Why were they here? She never brings her keys up to the second floor.

She picked them up and something small and white fell out of the pile, hitting the floor. She picked it up, noticing it was a piece of paper. Her hand tightened against her keys, the metal biting into her palm. Did someone come into her house…?

Shoulders tense, she straightened out the piece of paper and stared down at it. It was a document of what had happened at the institution. It detailed how the priest had tried to commit pedophilia,
murdering one child before dying from blood loss. Her own name was plastered all over the paragraphs, but in bold letters on top, it read “CONFIDENTIAL.”

Who put this here? She knew she never had this. In fact, she had been trying to find information for years. How did this connect with where her keys went? Who was following her yesterday..?

“I’m home!”

Hearing Yusuke’s voice from downstairs, she gripped the small piece of paper and crumpled it, throwing it into her drawer. Whatever this was, she’ll figure it out as soon as possible. She wasn’t going to let the others know. They’d only worry. Everything will be fine.

“Welcome home, Yusuke! How was school?”

“It was fine. I had began a piece once classes ended, but it had not resulted in much…”

Chapter End Notes

Mishima - rank 3

ANNOUNCEMENT: Well, the time has come. I start classes tomorrow, which means I can't invest as much time like I used to to write this :( I'm not stopping! I've come too far to stop now, but it does mean I have to slow down updates until winter break. As of now, my update dates will be Sunday - Wednesday - and maybe Friday. So two-three times a week. This will allow me to continue writing bit by bit in my free time without taxing myself. Sorry guys!
Chapter 105

Chapter Notes

I had to actually resist the urge to post chapters the last two days omg how do i adapt
Thank you for 19.6k hits, 588 kudos, and 42 bookmarks!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

----6/10, FRIDAY, AFTERNOON, TV STUDIO

“Akechi-san’s coming on!” The Veteran A.D shouted from behind the camera.

The Shujin Academy group were in the studio once again, this time being part of the audience for the show. The thieves sat together in one row, leaning back in their seats just as the talk show was about to start. Thankfully, there wasn’t any sexual harassment or manual labor today.

Airi bit her lip, fighting back a yawn. She couldn’t sleep again. Every noise she heard in the middle of the night had sent her heart racing, thinking that person had come into her house. Yusuke had slept soundly downstairs, not hearing her shuffle around in bed.

She was so tired that her dark circles were back underneath her eyes. Good thing she invested in a good concealer. Hopefully her friends wouldn’t notice, though Morgana’s occasional glances at her face as his nose twitched implied he might have smelled it.

The audience erupted into quiet chatter as the new Detective Prince walked onto the set, joining the male and female show hosts. They took a seat on the dark orange couches, the rainbow colored decor of the set casting multiple colors on them.

Ryuji watched with wide eyes. “Ain’t that the guy from yesterday..?” He whispered to Ann, who nodded.

“Cutting back from commercial!” The A.D. announced. “Seven, six, five seconds til start, four, three…”

He signaled the start of the broadcast and the cute announcer smiled at the camera. “And now, onto the “Hottest Meet-and-Greet” segment of our show...After his last appearance was so well-received, we decided to bring back this fine gentleman today.” She beamed. “It’s the high school detective, Akechi Goro!”

Some of the audience, mostly girls, cheered loudly at the name, clapping their hands excitedly. Airi could only stare at the detective’s face. He was this popular? She only ever watched the news on TV and had never heard of him until yesterday. Why was he so familiar...

“Hello there.” Akechi beamed toward the audience and toward the hosts, waving a black gloved hand.

The male host grinned. “Thank you for taking the time to join us today, Akechi-kun. Your popularity is stunning.”
The student detective held a gloved hand to his chest. “Even I’ve found it to be quite a surprise. It is a bit embarrassing though…”

The female host nodded. “Moving along, we’ve been told there’s a case on your mind right now. Care to share, detective?”

He perked up. “Ah, yes. That would be the scandal involving the master artist Madarame.”

The male host laughed. “There it is! All of this phantom thief excitement has caught your attention too, Akechi-kun! Allow me to be blunt for just a second. What do you think of these justice-oriented Phantom Thieves?”

Akechi smiled. “If they truly are heroes of justice, I sincerely hope they exist.”

“Ohhh, so you don’t deny the possibility that they’re real?”

Akechi scratched his cheek innocuously. “I may not seem like it, but I sometimes wish that Santa Claus actually existed.” He smiled sheepishly. “Although if he did, I’d have to arrest him for breaking and entering.”

The audience laughed. Crossing his legs, Ryuji leaned back in his seat with a frown, the other thieves watching contemplatively.

“But,” Akechi continued, the smile dropping from his face. “Hypothetically speaking, if these Phantom Thieves are real... I believe they should be tried in a court of law.”

Tensing up at the statement, they paid more attention to the talk.

“That’s quite the statement.” The male host remarked. “Are they committing crimes? Some people even say that the Thieves are actually helping their victims abandon their evil ways.”

Sitting up in his seat, Akechi crossed his arms, grasping his chin thoughtfully. “What the artist Madarame did truly was an unforgivable crime. The amount of victims that have come forth since his confession can only support that statement. However, they’re taking the law into their own hands by judging him. It is far from justice.” His face hardened. “More importantly, you should never forcefully change a person’s heart.”

Airi furrowed her brow at his argument. Sure, what they were doing was a little “unlawful” and certainly underhanded in a way, but there were plenty of cases that went unnoticed by the police. Kamoshida for instance, was a case that would’ve gone unnoticed by “justice” because no one around him wanted to report him. The justice system was flawed and couldn’t catch everything.

Her own case was another point against the law because she tried to research her institution to track down Rui’s remains, but she couldn’t get any details from the incident. As if it had never happened. The institution and church never existed either, according to the internet. Until that document appeared in her house.

There were just too many people forgotten in the cracks of society for her to actually agree with him.

The male host nodded. “You have a point. These people are calling themselves the Phantom Thieves, after all.” He smiled. “Amazing as always, Akechi-kun! I could listen to you for days! You have the most radiant charisma!”

The audience began to murmur to themselves as Akechi beamed. “I have to say though, I would be
embarrassed if it turns out these Phantom Thieves don’t exist. If that were the case, I’d summarize it into a report as a school project.”

The audience laughed with delight at his answer.

The female host smiled. “Now then, let’s try asking some students the same age as Akechi-kun about the Phantom Thieves! First, please press your button now if you think the Phantom Thieves exist!”

Ryuji sat up in his seat. “Of course they do!” He whispered, pressing his button. The other three thieves pressed theirs as well, tense in their seats.

The screen on the set counted all of the votes, showing 30%. “About 30% or so?” The male host read on the TV. “What are your thoughts, Akechi-kun?”

The student detective raised his brows. “I’m a bit surprised. That’s higher than I was expecting. I’d love to hear some more detailed opinions on the Phantom Thieves’ actions.”

The female host stood up from her seat on the set and walked over to the audience, mic in hand. Her eyes surveyed the students before landing on Akira.

He blinked, straightening up in his seat as the camera swerved to him. Oh no.

The others watched avidly. “All right,” The female host began. “Let’s try asking this student here. Hypothetically speaking, what are your thoughts on these Phantom Thieves, if they were real?”

She placed the microphone near his face, awaiting his answer.

Akira hesitated, glancing over at his teammates and then at the student detective. “...They do more than the cops.” He answered after a moment.

Akechi broke out into laughter at the answer, and some of the audience members joined in. “This completely goes against the opinion you had about them being tried by law, Akechi-kun.” The male host stated theatrically.

Akechi nodded in agreement, dark red eyes sharpening as he kept a polite smile on his face, unknowingly staring directly at the Phantom Thieves’ leader. “Indeed. It’s rather intriguing to hear such a strong acknowledgement. In that case, there’s one more question I’d like to ask...If someone close to you, for example your friend next to you,” He gestured toward Airi who tensed. “If her heart suddenly changed...wouldn’t you think it was the work of the Phantom Thieves?”

Gray eyes sharpened at the question. They were playing this game then. “They only target criminals, right? But what would you think?” Akira countered politely.

Akechi nodded. “I see...how can you be so sure? Though, it’s rather interesting to see you’ve turned the question back to me.” He crossed his legs. “I’ll let you know my opinion then. Whether the Thieves’ actions are good or not, I feel there is a more important issue at hand.”

The female host sat back down on the set and the male host tilted his head curiously. “Hm? What do you mean?”

“The matter of how they change people’s hearts.” He replied, grasping his chin speculatively. “If they honestly possess that ability...It could be used for more than extracting confessions. It could be that what seem to be ordinary crimes are actually being perpetrated by these methods…”

The male host nodded in agreement. “You know, you’re absolutely right.”
Akechi looked up at him. “Oh, please don’t misunderstand. This is all purely hypothetical...It is only if people who can use such a power truly exist. Either way though, this cannot be ignored.” He sat up in his seat. “The existence of the Phantom Thieves would be nothing but a threat to our everyday lives. To be honest, I’m already working alongside the police to help sort out this matter.”

The audience oohed at the statement, chatting excitedly with their neighbors. The Phantom Thieves shared a frown.

“Oh, that’s all the time we have today, folks!” The female host chirped. “Please give another round of applause to our guest, Akechi Goro! See you next time!”

“And cut!” The A.D. announced, stopping the broadcast. The hosts immediately left the set, and the staff slowly ushered the students out, needing to clean up and review the final footage.

Getting up from their seats, Ann stopped and looked down introspectively. “It kinda seemed like what he was saying might be right...”

Ryuji rubbed his nose as he scowled. “He made it sound like we’re the baddies. I don’t like it.”

Airi sighed, idly grasping her arm. “I get where he’s coming from. We aren’t under any sort of authority so we’re an unknown, but honestly? Saying to rely on the justice system? I can’t completely agree with that.”

Akira nodded in agreement. “Right. There’s a lot of things the police can’t do that we can. Like Kamoshida.”

Ann bit her lip at the mention of police. “That stuff about the police...Do you think it’s for real?”

Morgana leaned his head on Akira’s shoulder. “He can say whatever he wants.” He replied firmly. “The justice of it all is something we can decide for ourselves.”

Everyone nodded in agreement. They knew what they were doing was right. It didn’t matter if other people couldn’t understand as long as they helped people.

“Oh sorry,” Ryuji fidgeted, turning on his heel. “I gotta go take a leak. Can you guys wait here? I’ll be right back.” He dashed away toward the restroom.

Ann rolled her eyes. “Oh my god...I’m gonna keep going, OK? Airi?”

The class president shook her head. “I’ll wait here, too. Wait for us at the lobby?” The model nodded and waved, leaving the set along with all the other students.

Airi sighed and gripped the straps of her bag. “This is just too much...”

Akira patted her shoulder sympathetically. “It’s all right. We’ll work like always.”

She looked up at him and smiled softly. That wasn’t what she referred to, but she appreciated his need to always reassure her.

“Yeah mom,” Morgana piped up with a sly grin. “We’re not going to let anyone stop us!”

She grinned. “You’re right. Thank you.”

“Oh, it’s you..!”
They turned around, seeing Akechi walk up to them. “I’m glad I found you.” He stated, focusing only on Akira. “I wanted to thank you in person. To paraphrase Hegel, advancement cannot occur without both thesis and antithesis…”

Akira scrunched up his face in confusion while Airi raised her brows. “I don’t think Hegel intended for that to be used on such a small scale…” She countered politely.

Furrowing his brow, the student detective turned to her, having not realized she was there. “Oh, my apologies. Well, I’m sure Hegel hadn’t intended for his work to become what is now commonly known as Marxism, but in a way, it is an advancement as well.”

She pursed her lips and reluctantly conceded. “True. He never said advancement was good.”

Akira faked a cough. He hadn’t understood anything they just said except for Marxism. Did this turn philosophical?

Akechi blinked. “Oh, my apologies. What I originally intended was that our discussion earlier was quite meaningful. Few people around me are so willing to speak their minds as freely as you did, and now this young lady as well.” He gestured to Airi who stared at him. “Adults are only interested in using the young, while they simply do as the adults say.” He crossed his arms. “I feel like our discussion could prove quite fruitful. Would you mind talking with me again?”

Akira inclined his head. “Fine by me.” It’d give him an excuse to figure this guy out. “I’m Kurusu Akira and this is Kimisawa Airi.”

Akechi beamed. “A pleasure. It makes me glad to hear that you’ll hear me out. The students from Shujin are truly quite interesting. I look forward to seeing you again. Well then…” He inclined his head before pivoting his heel, walking away with a swing of his arms.

Airi stared after him, watching as he left the set, an uncomfortable feeling churning in her stomach. Why did she seem to dislike him so much..? Did she know him?

Now that the detective had left, Morgana popped out of the bag again, narrowing his eyes. “…Talk about a problematic guy to get involved with. There’s probably a lot we can learn from him though.”

Akira nodded. “If he slips up, we can find out how much the police knows about us…” ‘Seems he’s taken a liking to me, though...Was that a deal?’

Blinking at the shimmer of blue light, Airi turned around, trying to find it. What was that? This was the second time she’d seen it, and it was always in the presence of Akira.

Thundering footsteps ran up, passing the detective, and Ryuji stopped in front of them. “Sorry for takin’ so long!” He panted then paused, swerving his head from the direction he came from. “...Wait, was that Akechi?” He scowled. “I can’t stand that high and mighty attitude..! Just breathin’ the same air as him makes me sick. C’mon, let’s go.”

Taking one last look at where the student detective left to, Akira narrowed his eyes and followed his friends out of the building.
They entered Leblanc together, the bell at the door ringing at their arrival. Airi sent over a text to Yusuke about where she was and asked him to join them, but he declined, saying he was at home, working on paintings.

She sighed. She hadn’t seem him paint anything as of yet. Any time he started on the canvas, he grew frustrated and left it half finished. She wondered if he was OK…

Morgana sighed from inside the bag. “What a boring field trip. We didn’t even find any worthwhile targets.”

Akira shook his head. “No, but we did get something out of it.”

Their phones rang.

R: That Akechi bastard...thinking about what he said is just pissing me off again!
An: He clearly tried to discredit everything we’re doing.
R: And he just had to say it on live TV too!
Y: Don’t be so sour.
Y: There are, without a doubt, people we have saved.
Y: Those people could not have been saved if not for the heroics of the Phantom Thieves.
Y: I am living proof of that.
R: Awww, what a nice thing to say!
An: Still...Was what Akechi-kun said actually wrong?
An: I feel like he had a point.
Ai: No. I get what Akechi-san's saying but there’s so much more we can do.
Ai: The police would never have found out about Kamoshida or Madarame.
Ai: Yusuke, Yukimi-chan, and everyone else would still be suffering right now if we hadn’t done anything.
Ai: Ann and all the people on the volleyball team would still be suffering too.
Ai: We did the right thing, even if others might see it as the wrong action.
Y: Agreed. We are phantom thieves, Ann.
Y: I doubt everyone would forgive us for what we did to Madarame.
Y: Yet, I still decided that it was a necessary act.
R: Both of them are right. We weren’t gonna do shit to Kamoshida through any kinda normal methods.
An: Well...What do you think, Akira? Are we being selfish?
Ak: We’re helping people.
An: I guess I can’t really think of any other way…
Y: Hm. I believe our best path forward is sticking to our justice, not that of the law.
Y: Shouldn’t that be enough?
Y: And with the unanimous decision rule in place, I doubt we’ll lose our way.
An: ...Yeah, you’re right.
An: Sorry for bringing that up.
An: And don’t worry, I’m not thinking of quitting the Phantom Thieves or anything.
Ai: It’s OK to question things. It’s how we’ll stick to what we think is right.
R: Hell yeah. Just you watch, Akechi.
R: Someday you’re totally gonna see who was right!
An: OK, let’s stop talking about this for now.
“That detective Akechi seems to have a lot of influence on the media.” Morgana theorized. “It’d be dangerous to get too close to him, but he may actually prove useful in some situations.”

Akira nodded but paused as his phone rang again.

Letting him focus on his conversations, Airi moved to the bar, taking a seat at the counter. “Good evening, Sojiro-san.” She smiled, hugging her bag on her lap.

“Hey yourself.” The barista raised a brow, already brewing a cup for her. “Haven’t seen you around lately. Did he apologize?”

She blinked before covering her mouth as she laughed. “Yeah, he did. I didn’t realize he thought of our friendship like that.”

He scoffed, placing a nice steaming coffee in front of her as well as a sandwich. “He’s not too smart, but at least he’s not dumb enough to completely ruin things.”

Picking it up by the handle, she lightly blew on the hot liquid before taking a sip. “He’s plenty smart. I think…” She glanced over at Akira who was still engrossed in his phone, thumbs flashing all over the keyboard. “I think he puts himself below others. He told me he didn’t want to distract me because he’s not worth it, but…” Her fingers tightened their grip on the porcelain. “I will always make time for him.”

Staring at her for a moment, Sojiro huffed and began wiping down the counter. “Well, that’s your decision. I already warned him of the consequences.”

She blinked. “Consequences?”

He looked up at her, his weathered face pulled into frown. “Listen. No matter what happens with him, you’re always welcome here. He’s goin’ to be gone by March, but you live in this neighborhood. Your parents, your old man especially, would never forgive me if I kick you out of here. Just know you can come to me if somethin’ happens, all right? I…” He smoothed out his slicked back hair. “I never got to help you when you were younger, so.”

Biting her lip, Airi covered her face with her hands as she felt her eyes moisten. She never knew what Sojiro was thinking, or what he did outside of the cafe. The only thing she knew was that he and her dad used to be co-workers. To hear him say that she’d always be welcomed here, even though his only tie with her was through her deceased parent…it soothed her.

There were only two adults she could trust in this world, and he was one of them. “…Thank you, Sojiro-san.” She sniffed, wiping her eyes of any tears.

He heaved a sigh. “You may as well just call me uncle at this point.”

She pursed her lip, trying not to smile. “OK...Sojiro-ojisan.”

He pulled a face. “Ugh...I’ll never forgive you if you stretch that suffix out.” He eyed her for a moment, zooming into her face. “...Are you havin’ trouble sleeping again?”

She blinked and looked down at her hand, seeing she had accidentally wiped off some of her concealer. Shit. “Uh...Just a little. I’m OK, though.”

He narrowed his eyes. “If you say so…”

A hand appeared in front of her face, a thumb gently wiping another stray tear away. “Crying?”
Akira frowned as he leaned against the counter next to her, letting his fingers rest on her cheek. Blushing shyly, she shook her head. “It’s a good thing this time.”

Watching their close interaction with a raised eyebrow, Sojiro glanced over at his ward, focusing on the feline in his bag. “You still carrying the cat around in your bag? I’m surprised you don’t get stiff shoulders…”

Morgana pouted, tail waving in the air behind him. “I’m not that heavy…” He blinked at the answering meow. “It’s as if he understood or something...huh.” He turned back to the cabinets, missing the look of panic then relief that passed on the teenagers’ faces.

Draining the rest of the coffee, Airi stood up from her seat. “I’m going to go home now. We still have school tomorrow.”

Akira nodded, leaving his bag at the cafe. “I’ll walk you.”

Exiting the cafe, they walked through the mostly desolate streets together, the only person they saw were drunk adults outside of the bar. Walking past, Airi bit her lip, moving closer to her leader. She hadn’t felt anyone following her again but it’s better to be safe than sorry, right? And who else would be safer than Akira?...

Arriving at the front door, he waved as he left back to the cafe, disappearing behind the corner. Opening the door, which was locked this time, she locked it behind her and took off her shoes. “I’m home!”

A door upstairs opened and Yusuke’s voice echoed from the stairs. “Welcome home!”

She smiled at that. It was nice to have someone to welcome her home/

He watched as the rose haired girl walked into her house, closing the door behind her. Did she understand the clue he gave her? A small smile grew on his tired face. He couldn’t wait to reunite them…

Chapter End Notes

Ojisan - uncle  
Ojiisan- grandpa  
Akechi - rank 1
“Did you catch any of that student detective on TV yesterday?” a woman whispered on the morning train ride, her makeup caking her face.

“Ah,” her friend sighed loudly, catching the attention of some other passengers. “On that talk show? It was simply dreadful. How can anyone seriously suggest supernatural beings are stealing people’s hearts? That...child,” she sneered. “Is a phony. There’s simply no way that the Phantom Thieves exist.”

The heavily made-up woman sighed. “Unfortunately, my precious children all think they’re real—and what’s worse, they think that detective is amazing...Children are far too impressionable to see such vulgar content on TV.”

Morgana grumbled inside his bag. “Looks like people still don’t think we’re real…”

Yusuke exhaled softly. “That is of no surprise. It is difficult to believe what they cannot see…”

Airi pursed her lips. “Guess we’ll work extra hard to prove we’re doing what’s right.” She voiced optimistically.

Akira huffed, checking his phone. “Well...we’re at 18%.”

Blinking, they peered down at the screen. It was opened to the Phan-site, the question asking “Are the Phantom Thieves just?” “Did Yuuki-kun change it?” Airi asked curiously.

Yusuke hummed. “18%? That is rather high, considering how new we are…”

“This is Aoyama-Itchome. I repeat, this is Aoyama-Itchome. The time is now 7:16AM, the next stop is…”

Waving bye to Yusuke, Akira and Airi got off the train and walked out of the station, heading to school. There were a bunch of other students on their way as well, and chatter filled the streets about yesterday’s field trips.

“I can’t believe we were on TV yesterday- with Akechi-kun! It was like a dream come true.” A girl sighed dreamily. “I can’t believe a high schooler moonlights as a detective. He’s just like the Detective Prince. He’s smart AND handsome. He’s almost TOO perfect!”

“We had front row seats. I could practically reach out and touch Akechi-kun! I was so nervous! He was really working that uniform without looking arrogant. He’s a natural at public speaking. I hear he’s an orphan who grew up poor. It’s part of what makes him so amazing!”

Airi stopped, staring wide eyed at the two girls who continued walking to school, gossiping about the student detective. Furrowing his brow, Akira turned back to look at her. “Airi?” She didn’t hear him, too busy turning the words over in her head. An orphan? Who grew up poor?

“Shut up!” Go-kun yelled, tears threatening to roll down his chubby cheeks, his big dark red eyes
filled with anger and hate. “Mom’ll come back for me. She has to!” He gripped the book in his hands, almost tearing it apart from the force. “She has to…”

Airi scoffed, holding an ice pack to the bruise on her face. His melodrama was getting annoying. Didn’t he know that this was where the unwanted kids were put? “Your mom’s dead, Go-kun. All of our parents are gone. She’s not coming back.”

Just like hers. Just like all of theirs. Even that new kid, Rui, wasn’t as bad as Go-kun. All he ever did was throw tantrums in front of the other kids while acting like an innocent angel in front of the caretakers.

No one really liked him, though. His shouting and violent behavior always gave her a headache and a new injury, so she tried to avoid him as much as possible.

However, today they were both assigned to the same part of the library and he wouldn’t shut up. With no way to avoid him in this case, she said the only thing that came to mind.

Balling his tiny hands into fists, he lashed out, punching her in the face. Landing on the floor, she coughed, holding a hand to her face as blood oozed out of her mouth. Ow. It felt really numb for some reason...

She looked down, seeing two tiny white chips in a pond of red, and explored her mouth with her tongue, feeling a gap. He knocked her two front teeth out.

“She didn’t wake up, but she’ll come back…and father too…whoever he is…God said as long as I’m patient…”

She raised a hand up to her mouth, still able to feel the phantom pain of having her baby teeth knocked out. Akechi Goro was Go-kun? She furrowed her brow. There was no way. Right?

“Airi?”

She blinked, looking up at Akira who was frowning worriedly. Oh, right. She just stopped out of nowhere in the street. “Sorry…” She tried to smile, but she knew he didn’t believe her when he frowned.

Moving her legs, she began walking again, him joining her side as they caught up to the two gossipers.

“-Heard his dad’s the head of some big financial conglomerate. I will say, I love that he hates the media. Makes me believe that he doesn’t do this for the fame. People say he’s so good that he’s made enemies in the police force…Oh, yeah- apparently yesterday’s interview was so popular they’re going to air it again tonight.”

Airi frowned at the gossip. His father? If she remembered correctly, Go-kun was taken out of the institution right before the incident and placed within foster care. The church had received a large donation right after which had the matrons cracking a smile on their stone cold faces.

This was going to bother her for the rest of the day…
“I’ve been seeing a lot of shows on TV lately about these Phantom Thieves of Hearts.” Usami-sensei spoke, crossing her arms as she adjusted her blocky glasses. “Why someone would steal something like a heart, which can’t be turned into money, is beyond me.”

She waved her hand flippantly. “If I were a phantom thief, I wouldn’t go after “hearts” or works of art- I’d go after gold. The value of gold has been high since ancient times, and there has never been a more stable resource.” She eyed the class, stopping at Akira. “Now then, Kurusu-kun.”

Blinking out of his daydream, he sat up in his seat.

“Can you imagine how much gold has been excavated by humanity over the course of history?”

“Uhh…” He furrowed his brow. “Three Olympic sized pools?”

She clapped. “Correct.” She said, pleased. "Surprisingly little, don’t you think? That rarity is what drives its value.”

“Whoa, he actually knew that?”

“Maybe I should ask if I can borrow his notes…”

He glanced down at his notebook which was filled with doodles of his team as chibis and sloppy handwriting. Jokes on them, he didn’t take good notes.

Airi gave him a thumbs up for answering that correctly.

“Incidentally,” Usami-sensei continued. “They say that 16% of the world’s gold is in Japan. Was your first thought the Tokugawa Clan’s buried gold? It’s actually in discarded home electronics. In other words, a junkyard is much more valuable than someone’s heart.”

“Hmph!” Morgana snorted quietly. “You can’t measure the value of a Treasure with money!”

Akira nodded in agreement. The only worth Usami-sensei’s thinking about was material wealth. Being able to help someone, and knowing that they were grateful for it? That was priceless.

Getting a text from Ryuji to meet him in the courtyard, Akira shouldered his bag and left the class, walking down the stairs. He thought he was pretty accustomed to Tokyo life now. He went to school everyday, he hung out at cool places with friends, and he had part time jobs. Oh, and he was the leader of the Phantom Thieves that steal hearts of evil people. Definitely a Tokyo thing.

Opening the door to the courtyard, he spotted a head of blond at the vending machines and headed over there. Ryuji was pacing back and forth in the small alcove, no other students getting near.

Akira nodded in greeting. “What’s up?”
Pursing his lips, Ryuji slammed his hand against a vending machine. “...Man, that detective from yesterday really pissed me off!” He growled. “We’re some kinda threat? Let’s see him do it, then!” He clenched his fists. “If someone else could help ‘em, we wouldn’t be doin’ stuff as the Phantom Thieves to start with!”

“Shhh!!!”

Airi quickly walked up to them, giving the ex-runner a warning look. “Don’t go shouting that out at school.” She advised quietly. "We’re going to get caught."

A hand reached out to pinch his ear and Ryuji winced. “Ow.”

Ann took her hand back, a container of calbee chips in her other hand. “You’re being way too loud.” She scolded, talking with chips in her mouth as she leaned against the table.

Ryuji pouted and rubbed his tender ear. “Who cares? Everybody’s talkin about this stuff anyways. It’d just be more suspicious if we were whisperin’. ” He glanced over at Ann who kept on eating her snack, trying to stay angry but failing as his hunger got the better of him. “Hey, you really just gonna keep eatin’ and eatin’ and eatin’ those things all by yourself?! ” He squawked, stomping a foot as he made grabby motions with his hands. “Gimme some!”

Airi rolled her eyes. “And what do you say when you want something?” She raised her brows expectantly.

He pouted. “Gimme some...please.”

Unable to help it, she burst into laughter, trying without success to muffle the sound with her hand. “Good son.”

Ann smirked, placing a chip into her mouth. “Nice try, but I just ate the last one. Sorry.” She said unapologetically.

Akira snorted. “Poor Ryuji.” He snickered, patting his dejected friend on the back.

Sneaking his head out of the bag, Morgana looked on in disappointment. “You guys are too laid back.” He scolded. ”The police are getting involved now, you know."

Immediately, the mood dampened with the reality of their situation. “So you think it’s true..?” Ann asked hesitantly, her smile morphing into a worried frown. “We’ll be OK if we keep doing this...right?”

Airi idly grasped her arm. “We should be. They can’t gather any concrete evidence on us, but…” She pursed her lips. “We should try to be more quiet. We can look like a close group of friends, but the instant anyone overhears us, it’s game over.”

Ryuji nodded in agreement. “Right. There’s no way they’d catch us. Plus, we can’t let the cops scare us outta bein’ phantom thieves.”

“But...” Ann bit her lip. “What about that weird guy from Madarame’s Palace..? Isn’t there a lot we don’t know?”

A flash blinded them for a second and they quickly turned their heads. Lowering the phone, Makoto stared coldly at them.

Airi’s eyes widened and she paled. Oh no.
“The hell?” Ryuji yelped, blinking his eyes rapidly to clear away the white spots in his vision.

The student council president smirked coolly. “You four seem to be having so much fun. I’m a little jealous.” She voiced, her eyes never leaving similar red ones.

Airi looked away, not wanting to meet her gaze. Frowning slightly, Akira took a step forward, blocking the brunette’s sight of the class president.

Ryuji glared. “Are you snoopin’ on us again? We said before, we don’t know nothin’.”

Makoto regarded him for a moment. “Why do you think I’m here to question you?” She laced her hands in front of her. “Could it be that you’re hiding something? My ears are always open to the troubles of my peers, you know.”

Gritting her teeth, Ann shook her head. “You’re really that hungry for a good letter of recommendation?…” She scoffed. “Of course you are. Why would I think otherwise.”

Airi stepped out from behind Akira, alarmed. "Ann!" She hissed.

Ignoring her, Ann continued. “Nobody would take on your annoying job if they weren’t.”

Makoto narrowed her eyes at the remark. “What’s that supposed to mean..?”

Clenching her fists, Ann took a couple of steps closer, towering over her by a couple inches. “...You’re student council president, right? Wouldn’t you have known about Kamoshida?” She pressed. “Airi noticed, and she’s only a class representative...Isn’t it your job to look out for us? Or were you too self absorbed to notice your ‘dumber’ peers suffering?”

Grimacing in pain at the memory, Makoto shook her head. “Of course not! He honestly was a good teacher until that day…There was no way anyone could’ve predicted that.”

Ann sneered. “Oh, but you always take the teacher’s side. That’s what a good council president does, right?”

“Ann.” Airi warned, latching a hand on the model’s arm. She was getting too angry and it was uncomfortable to hear Ann praise her while simultaneously insulting her superior. “Stop.”

Incensed at the digs, Makoto glared fiercely. “Then...how about you? What did you do for your friend? You were much closer to her than I was, so how did you help, hm?” She asked mockingly. “I have to look after the whole student body, but you only cared about her. Did you try to help her?”

Ann flinched at the accusation and looked away. “There wasn’t any way to help! By myself…” She bit her lip, hard enough to break the skin with her teeth. “I couldn’t do anything for her! I know that, OK?!”

Exhaling sharply, Airi took a step between them. This was getting out of hand. “Both of you, stop!”

Taking a deep breath to calm herself, Makoto looked away. “There’s no need to shout…”

Lips pulled into a frown, Ryuji stepped closer to Ann, covering her from the council president’s view. “If those Phantom Thieves are out there helpin’ people...I’d root for ‘em, no questions asked.” His eyes sharpened as he rested his thumbs in his pockets. “They’ve gotta be more dependable than some people I know.”
Airi snapped her head in his direction. “Ryuji!” She hissed.

"They do produce results." Akira added dispassionately, frowning at the upperclassman. She had no right to bring up Shiho so callously in front of Ann like that.

Lips trembling from the stinging remarks, Makoto turned away so they couldn’t see her face. “...Just make sure you show up to your classes, all right?” She said quietly, shoulders slumped in defeat.

Airi furrowed her brow in worry. “Makoto-senpai…” She tried to reach out to her but stopped as the student council president walked away dejectedly.

“You know what I asked earlier about whether we’ll be OK if we keep this up? I take it back.” Ann glowered. “I’d be ashamed to let it end now…”

“Hell yeah.” Ryuji replied firmly, rolling his shoulder. “It’s about time we find our next target too.”

Akira furrowed his brow at their actions. “Um, guys..?”

They turned to him quizzically, and he pointed in front of him.

Clenching her fists, Airi turned to them with a disappointed frown. “You two went too far.” She scolded. “You didn’t need to say those things to her.”

“But it’s true!” Ann argued. “She didn’t know anything, or did anything about Kamoshida! It was you who actually warned me about Shiho.” She looked down at her feet. “...If only I listened.” She whispered despondently.

Sighing, Airi brought her into a close hug, wrapping her arms around the taller girl. Again, she was mentioning the suicide attempt as if she had actually saved Shiho. Was she...hero-worshiping her? “No one could’ve expected all that, and it already happened. We can’t change the past, but we can change the future.” She explained softly. “I already told you guys that the Principal was putting all responsibility about the Phantom Thieves and the scams on her, right?”

Ryuji sputtered. “For real?! He’s forcin’ her to do this?”

Airi nodded grimly. “She’s in a tough spot right now. If none of the staff did anything about it, you can’t expect a council president trying to study for entrance exams to be able to affect things either. We have a lot less power than you think.” She took a seat on the bench, her shoulders slumping in exhaustion. “I know she’s been snooping around and we’re all getting annoyed by it, but she can’t go against the Principal like that so easily. Her entire future is in his fat grubby hands…”

Clenching his fists, Ryuji shoved them into his pockets. “Dammit, now you’re makin’ me feel bad…” He muttered, kicking the ground with the top of his converses.

Akira took a seat next to her. “So what should we do about her then?”

Airi bit her lip. “I don’t know. I feel bad for lying to her about us, but it’s not like she can know...The most we can do is be more careful.” She whispered. “Whether she does or doesn’t find out about us, she’s still stuck…”

Lifting her arms, Ann opened her mouth before pausing. With a tch, she let them fall. “Fine. So she’s got it bad at school, but look at us. Akira’s on probation, you’ve lost your parents, Ryuji’s had a hard family life, and I was forced into a relationship I didn’t want and almost lost my best
friend, because we couldn't count on any adults around us...” She ranted. “She’s not the only one suffering yet she's just trying to be another adult about it.”

Airi nodded. “True, but you weren’t being fair either. I’m going to look for her later to clear this up.”

Morgana leaned his chin against Akira’s shoulder. “So the student council president has her fair share of troubles too...We should solve this situation without involving her any further.”

Akira nodded in agreement. “She’s a bit annoying but she doesn’t deserve that. Guess I’ll apologize next time she stalks me.”

Ann snorted. “What is with that, anyway? She’s only stalking you.”

He shrugged. “Not sure, but it’s weird to see that manga she’s always holding as soon as I leave the bathroom.”

Airi scrunched up her face. “OK, that’s...that’s weird.”

The school bell rang throughout the courtyard, signalling that lunch break was over and they got up to go back to class.

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Sat at her desk even when the last bell rang, Airi searched on her phone for “Akechi Goro.” She had to confirm whether or not he was really Go-kun from her memories. If he was, then...how did he turn from a bipolar menace to a famous student detective? Who had adopted him..?

She frowned as the webpage loaded in, the information only describing his current situation and nothing about his past, saying that they had to respect his privacy as a child. It didn’t list his lineage either.

She sighed, letting her arms fall onto the desk. What was her life anymore? Was her past coming back to haunt her like some bad teen novel?

“Airi?”

Perking up, she looked over at Akira who called out to her. “Yeah?”

He raised a brow at her expression. “...Is everything OK? You’ve been kind of weird since the trip.” His eyes narrowed. “Is it about Akechi?”

She bit her lip. How did he always know? Oh right, because they were best friends. “...Yeah. I don’t really like him.”

Morgana peeked out of the desk, jumping into the bag. “Is it because of his remarks about the Phantom Thieves? We shouldn’t let him bring us down.”

She fiddled with the braid on her forehead. “No, I mean yes, but not just that...” She paused. “He reminds me of someone I know...”
Akira blinked. “Someone you know? From the orphanage?”

She nodded silently, staring straight at the blank chalkboard. “I’m not entirely sure if he’s who I think he is, but he does seem familiar.”

Her phone buzzed.

Y: Shall we meet in Shibuya to discuss our current plan of action?
Y: I’m finished with my classes.
Ai: Sure. Meet at the square?
Y: Understood.

“Well, let’s go then.” She sighed, getting up from her seat and shouldering her bag. Leaving the room together, they walked down the hall, heading down the stairs.

Landing on the first floor, Airi stopped when she noticed a certain brunette at the snack shop, and walked up to her. “Makoto-senpai?” She called out softly.

Tensing, the student council president turned around and gave her a weak smile. “Oh, Ki-Airi-chan. Going home now?”

She nodded, turning around to eye Akira. He gave her a confused look but nodded as her eyes darted to the school entrance, and he left without her.

Turning back, she reached out and grasped the upperclassman’s hand and guided her to a secluded corner, stopping in a spot where there were no other students. “Makoto-senpai, are you OK?” She asked quietly. “I’m really sorry about earlier. Ryuji and Ann never think before they speak…”

Closing her eyes, Makoto heaved a sigh and she showed the stress in her posture, forehead lined with exhaustion. “It’s...all right. They were correct. I should’ve noticed. I should’ve done something...I wish I could’ve, too.” She whispered. “I’ve been treating my duties like they’re constant and unchanging, but that’s not true at all. You have always been better at this job than me, and you don’t even have the same authority.”

Airi hesitated. “Well...I don’t know about that.”

Makoto huffed quietly, clearly not agreeing with her. “People call you Senpai even when they’re of the same grade. My grade doesn’t, but they all say good things about you, especially after that study group you organized.” She smiled bitterly. “They don’t say it to me, but I hear them gossip about how you should take over as student council president.”

Airi’s eyes widened. What? Her as student council president? She frowned. “Maybe next year when you’ve graduated, but I think you’re doing a great job. You care so much about the other students that you spend hours at school even when everyone’s left. You’re hardworking and you abide by the rules.” She gave her an encouraging smile. “I think you’re doing the best as you can.”

Staring at her for a moment, Makoto blushed heavily, the blood in her cheeks matching her eyes. “Th-Thank you...” She stuttered, nervously shifting some hair behind her ear. “But I know I’m not doing well enough. There’s just so much I have to do to make up for it to be like my fath-...” She stopped and corrected herself. ”My sister..."

Airi smiled softly. “Well, you can always ask me to help out, too. I’d like to think we’re friends...?”
Her eyes widened. “Friends..?” Makoto whispered. “W-Well...of course.” She gave her a small smile. “However, I shouldn’t hold you up any longer. Have a good day, Airi-chan.”

Nodding hesitantly, Airi waved as she left the school.

“Um!” Perking up, she turned back to see Makoto shyly twiddling with her hands. “...Thank you.”

Airi beamed. “You’re always welcome.”

Heading down the steps, she paused when she noticed a certain phantom thief leader leaning against the side of the gate, browsing on his phone. She walked up to him. “You didn’t have to wait for me.”

Perking up at her arrival, he put his mobile away, straightening up from his slouch. “I wanted to.” He jerked his head toward the station. “Let’s go?”

She smiled and nodded. She idly wondered if they would continue to say those words to each other. He was leaving in March, right?

Was that enough time..?

Chapter End Notes

I actually started that lemon series early and I kind of want to post the first chapter LOL

I was going to post it as private and then invite a few people to read it, but I don't think AO3 has that feature? Let me know if I can! If more than enough people are interested, I might just post it publicly now instead of waiting for them to get together in this fic.

EDIT: it's up for the world to see as "My Heart Is A Furnace." ENJOY THOSE SINS.
Chapter 107

Thank you so much for 600+ kudos and 20.1k hits!!! Holy shit guys!

ANNOUNCEMENT: -cough- The lemon series is up...as "My Heart Is A Furnace" (°ʖ°) If you wanna give that a read- wiggles eyebrows-

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-SHIBUYA-

“Comments are coming in at an alarming rate.” Yusuke stated, showing the forum on his phone while he held a wrapped package in the other hand. “However, negative ones seem to be more prominent.” He moved the phone back in his view, reading off a post. “‘A criminal group with unknown goals that does whatever it wants in the name of justice.’ Huh…”

Ryuji sighed and leaned back against the unused tram in the middle of the station square. “It’s prolly ‘cause of Akechi...TV’s got some crazy sway.”

Yusuke shook his head. “He’s free to deny our actions, but being cursed by his influence is another thing entirely.”

Ann groaned. “Just when we were starting to get people to believe in us too…”

Airi idly grasped her arm. “Well, we can convince more people if we took another big target…” She mused.

Akira leaned against the tram. “We have any ideas? Ryuji?”

The ex-runner fidgeted with his leg. “I ain’t got a thing yet...Dammit, this is real irritatin’…” He eyed the package in the artist’s hand. “By the way, what’s with that package? You buy somethin’?”

Yusuke nodded. “I’m prepared to ask Takamaki-san- Ann, to model for me again.” He held out the small package, wrapped in expensive gift paper. “I’ve even prepared an insurance. I hope it’s to your liking.”

Airi eyed it, suspicious. How much did he spend on that..?

Ann backed away in shock. “WHAT?!” She held her hands in front of her. “There’s no way that’s going to happen again, even if you bribe me.”

Taken aback, Yusuke stared at her with wide eyes. “Impossible…”

Groaning, Ryuji slid a hand against his face. “You’re the impossible one!” He glared through his fingers. "Why'd you think you could just bribe her?"

Yusuke furrowed his brow and looked down at his gift. “But I spent everything I had on these delectable Japanese sweets…”
Holding her hands over her face, Airi refused to scream. He spent everything he had on them?! How was he going to help with the bills then?

Ann gaped at him. “That’s not the issue here!”

Akira sweatdropped and held up his hands. “Calm down, guys. Yusuke, you can’t bribe Ann to model for you…Just ask nicely next time.”

“Well,” Morgana began, waving his tail back and forth. “Perhaps we should put these sweets to good use. Since we successfully stole Madarame’s heart, I propose we celebrate!”

Airi grasped her chin. “Celebrate…? Oh!” She clapped her hands together. “I can finally use that spa coupon that Ann gave me on my birthday! Let’s go to the onsen!”

Ryuji scrunched up his face as he hunched his back. “Now of all times? Shouldn’t we be tryin’ to turn our reputation around?”

Yusuke crossed his arms. “I doubt we’d find a suitable target so soon to appease the negative comments…The internet is fickle that way.”

Ann perked up. “Oh! We can do a spa trip and celebratory dinner! We still have to welcome Yusuke to the group, right?”

Ryuji ooh’ed. “You’re right! We can make it a welcome party!”

The model cheered and threw a fist into the air. “All right! Then it’s decided!” She pointed toward the station. “Let’s go now!” She linked arms with Airi and tugged her down the stairs, ignoring her yelps. Ryuji and Yusuke made to follow them, and they chatted genially about what they could do about their reputation.

Exhaling, Akira followed his friends down to the subway toward the Meguro line. A hot springs, huh? Was this a mixed bath…?

---MUSASHI KOYAMA ONSEN

“And here are your towels, I hope you enjoy your bath!” The receptionist chirped, handing them complimentary bags full of toiletries over the counter.

“Thank you!” Airi smiled, the entire team taking theirs as well, and they walked to the separate locker rooms.

This onsen was on the more traditional side, with beautifully polished wooden floors and eggshell white wallpaper. Vending machines lined the sides with chilled vinegar, milk, and snacks. It was right after the popular hour so there wasn’t as many people as there would’ve been, but the establishment was still filled with both regulars and newcomers. Everywhere they looked, they could see men, women, and even children enjoying a nice relaxing time on the benches, some even playing Shogi and Go.

“So we’ll meet up at the communal room?” Ryuji asked when they stopped in front of the locker room entrances, slinging his bag over his shoulder.

Ann nodded. “Yep! But before that, we’re going to have a nice long soak.” She stretched her arms in the air in content. “Ahh, I can smell the sulfur from here…”

Akira waved to them, making sure Morgana was able to dodge into the new bag without any of the
other onsen goers seeing. “See you guys then.”

Entering the ladies room, Airi found her locker in the rows and rows of storage. Holding her rental bracelet to the electronic reader, it opened up and she put in her bag as well as her clothes, and took her complimentary onsen PJs with her. There were a lot of people since it was a Saturday, and it was packed with other women and young girls.

Both her and Ann left the locker room bare naked along with other just as bare women and headed deeper into the large building, washing themselves off at the female shower room. Airi sighed as she dumped a bucket of hot water over her head before taking an italy towel and scrubbing dead skin and dirt off. She really needed this. The last couple of weeks, scratch that, last couple of months had been so tiring.

“Oh yeah…” Ann sighed contently as she shampooed her hair, the bubbles frothing up in her thick wavy strands. “I’ve missed this. You know, Finland doesn’t even come close to this kind of hot spring culture?”

Airi turned to her curiously. “Really? I hear they do really good saunas…”

Ann nodded, bringing up a bucket of water to wash off the suds. “Yeah, the sauna scene is big, but I kind of prefer the Japanese way…” She bit her lip and looked into the steamy mirror in front of her, taking in her foreign features in a room full of homogeneous people. “Sometimes, I don’t know what I should like. If I like Finnish saunas more, I feel like I don’t give enough credit to Japanese hot springs, and it just goes over and over like that…” She sighed and bowed her head, letting her wet hair cling to her face and her shoulders. "What am I..."

Airi frowned, concerned over her friend's change in mood. “Well, what qualifies you as Finnish or Japanese? The only thing that really says it is your passport and your heritage, right?”

Ann sighed. “Yeah...It just gets tiring sometimes. People come up and start speaking English to me because they think I’m a foreign tourist like them, and other Japanese people try to speak English even when I’m speaking perfect Japanese. My first class with Chouno-sensei was her complaining to me in English about how much nicer L.A. is…” She slouched in her seat, bringing up her legs. “Sometimes, I wish I could just be one or the other.” She quietly mused.

Smiling wistfully at the confession, Airi reached out and hugged her into her side, not minding the nudity. They were all girls here. “But then you wouldn’t be Takamaki Ann. Wouldn’t you regret that?”

Thinking on it for a bit, Ann nodded slightly. “Yeah, I would...If I didn’t look like this, I would never have been friends with Shiho...or you, or Ryuji, Yusuke, Akira, and Morgana.” She gave her friend a small but grateful grin before dumping a bucket of steaming hot water on both of them, crying out with laughter when Airi screamed in surprise.

“You ass!” Airi laughed incredulously, wiping the water out of her eyes.

Standing up, the model held out a hand. “Let’s go to the hot spring now! I'm feeling totally refreshed and ready!”

Rolling her eyes, Airi accepted the invitation and got up, bringing their towels with them. Most of the other women crowded inside the black water springs which is said to help moisturize skin and heal aches.

Instead, the two female phantom thieves headed toward the locally sourced water, sinking in with a
relaxed sigh. There wasn’t anyone on their side of the pool, mostly because it was closest to the men’s side, but the tall barrier that reached into the open air was made of concrete so there was no way anyone could peep. “I needed this so bad…” Airi moaned, feeling her muscles relax from the natural minerals.

“Same…” Ann replied drowsily, closing her eyes as she leaned her head against the edge. “You know, I never noticed how curvy you are. Now that we're here with other women, I realize your figure is pretty close to mine. You think we're the same bra size?”

Airi scrunched up her face, looking down at her figure. “Thanks? Not sure how to take that.”

Ann snickered. “It’s a good thing! There’s no way the dress I bought for you three years ago would still fit these big girls.” She gestured to the cellist’s bust. “Maybe we could swap clothes. I’ve always wanted those nice skirts you wear, though I don't think they're my style.”

The cellist blinked, peering down at the model’s body. “Maybe. Your legs are longer than mine though, so they might be too short on you.”

Ann brought one leg out of the water, sticking it straight up in the cool air. “Yeah, it’s a hassle to buy pants with legs like these, so I just wear shorts and skirts all the time.” Letting it fall back into the hot waters, she slid into the bottom of the pool, submerging her entire body for a couple moments. Reemerging with a gasp, she ran a hand through her long hair, parting it away from her face. “Anyway, I wanted to ask for a while now...What did happen with you and Akira?” She asked slowly.

Airi glanced over at her. “What do you mean..?”

“You know...that whole week when you guys weren’t talking to each other. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you so miserable.”

Airi deflated at the reminder. “Oh...right.” Scooting a little more into the pool, she let her chin dip into the water, letting the heat relax her for this conversation. “Well...Remember our conversation with Matsumoto-chan? He overheard some of it and...I guess he took it the wrong way.”

Ann stared. “...How?!” She asked incredulously. “There was only one way the conversation went and it was in his favor! He's totally into you, so why would he be upset?”

Airi smiled sheepishly. “He heard me saying I’m too busy for romance, so…” She trailed off.

Ann rolled her eyes and crossed her arms. “Of course...Typical J-Drama stuff right there. Honestly if he kept listening, I bet you two would be together by now.”

The cellist blushed furiously and splashed the other girl. “Ann!” She whined. Why did she have to say it so bluntly? They were just friends!

Covering her face from the onslaught of droplets, Ann laughed. “What? It’s true!!”

“Well, what about you and Ryuji?” Airi countered.

Ann blinked, clueless. “What about us?”

“You know...you two have been getting a lot closer these days.”

“Yeah, we’re teammates and friends. So?”
“...Don’t you think it's weird how he defended you against Yusuke painting you nude?”

The model furrowed her brow and glanced away. “Yeah, but...friends protect each other, right?”

Airi raised a brow. “And that time when you grabbed his jacket to yell in his face about how he was strong and how we were there for him? And earlier when you guys were yelling at Makoto-senpai, he stepped in front of you to protect you.”

Her shoulders tensed at the accusations. “S-So?” Ann muttered, a hint of red in her cheeks.

“So…” Airi drawled, raising a brow teasingly. “Do I get any grandchildren?” She joked.

“WHAT?!”

“Shh!” An older lady shushed them from her side of the pool, giving them a disapproving frown before ignoring them.

Smiling sheepishly to themselves, they huddled closer and away from the rest of the visitors. They should probably be quieter.

“-Think about Ann? As a “girl,” I mean.”

They perked up, hearing the familiar voice. Looking up at the barrier that separated the two gendered hot springs, they could hear the guys talking loud enough that their voices carried over at the top, echoing slightly in the open air springs.

Glancing at each other, they decided to listen closely. Who knew what they would talk about.

“She’s a great teammate and friend.” Akira replied earnestly.

“That’s not what I meant...Like, what do you think about her looks? ‘Cause for me, her looks totally make up for her overbearing personality.”

Ann gritted her teeth at hearing that. “Ryuji…”

Airi sweatdropped at where this conversation was headed. Bro gossip already, huh.

“I’ll be sure to share what you’ve said with Ann.” Yusuke stated calmly.

“Please don’t. Seriously…”

“Too late.” Ann growled and she lifted a fist out of the water, about to get out to pummel him.

Airi pulled her back. “They don’t know we’re listening, remember?” She chided.

“She’s beautiful, yeah...” Akira agreed.

Biting her lip, Airi felt a pang in her heart at that confession. She wasn’t surprised that he found the model attractive, a lot of people did. Even Yusuke, and though he’s not sexually attracted to her, he is artistically. It still kind of hurt, though. She couldn’t compare in terms of beauty.

“Airi’s pretty hot, too. When those two hang out, every guy’s pantin’ after ‘em.”

Akira sighed. “Yeah…”

“They are aesthetically pleasing, but are other men really so incapable of controlling themselves
around beautiful women?”

“Yeah, like that guy from the trip. Fuckin’ asshole couldn’t keep his eyes off ‘em.”

“Had something happened?” Yusuke inquired, sounding curious.

“There was this assistant director who asked them if they wanted to be on TV,” Akira explained patiently, though there was a twinge of irritation in his voice. “But we could see he only cared about their looks.”

“He kept lickin’ his lips like a jackass. Ugh,” Ryuji groaned. “If I see him again, I’m gonna punch him in the face.”

“No violence, remember?”

“You wanna too. I saw you. Your eyes do this thing whenever somethin’ goes near Airi.”

“My...eyes?”

“Yeah, like usually they’re gray? But when you get angry or jealous, they get darker and start lookin’ a little red.”

“I have noticed it as well. It’s indeed a strange phenomenon.”

“Oh...I never noticed. Wait, jealous?”

“Yeah, jealous. Don’t think I haven’t noticed you lookin’ like you were gonna commit murder. You guys aren’t together yet, right?”

“I- that’s...” Akira coughed awkwardly. “I’m not telling you.”

Airi blushed at that, her earlier feeling of rejection fading away and being replace with embarrassment. He was pretty protective of her. Did he really like her like that? There was no way, right? Akira was just a really nice guy. Yeah, that was it. Why would he like her when there was someone as gorgeous as Ann?

“C’moooon.” Ryuji whined. “I’ve got ¥3000 against Ann!”

Akira sputtered. “¥3000?! Wait, is that me getting with Airi or not getting with her...?”

“Gettin’ with, of course. We both know it’s definitely gonna happen. I said by July and she said this month. Sooo, if you could do a bro a favor...”

Airi turned to glare at Ann who looked away innocently. When did they make that bet?

She sat deeper into the pool, letting the heated waters hide the blood rushing to her cheeks. Everyone around them wanted them to be a couple. To be completely honest, she could see it herself. They were both really close considering the fact that they met only two months ago. He was very handsome as well, but...She couldn’t say why she hesitated to take that next step.

Maybe because he hasn’t said anything about actually getting together, even after that misunderstanding? Or maybe it was because she had never been in a relationship before and had no idea what couples do besides do the do? It wasn't like she had never given it thought, just...it wasn't ever as important. Until now.

“Do you harbor romantic feelings for Nee-san, Akira?”
“I…”

“No shit he does! You haven’t been here since the beginnin’, but they’ve been glued together since they met.”

“I see. I suppose they are rather close, much closer to each other than with you or Ann. Should I start calling you ‘Nii-san’ then?”

“N-No thanks…”

“…Hey, Yusuke. What kinda regime do you do?”

“Regime?”

“Yeah, like liftin’, or runnin’. Y’know, exercise? ‘Cause you’re pretty toned for a guy who just sits and paints all day.”

“I don’t do any sort of exercise aside from the school’s mandatory track courses. Otherwise, I gained strength from years of painting.”

“Whoa. You can get arms like that just from paintin’?”

“Indeed. When you hold a brush for hours upon hours, you become accustomed to the strain. Canvases also become rather cumbersome when you have to exchange for a fresh one. I usually work with large canvases as well.”

“Wow…How is painting so far at Airi’s?” Akira asked. “Have you gotten used to it yet?”

Yusuke sighed. “No…I have yet to paint anything substantial. It is not due to the environment anymore, it is due to my lack of inspiration…”

“That sucks, man. Is that why you were gonna bribe Ann to model for you?”

“Yes! I had hoped that since we’re friends now, she would agree.” Yusuke sighed. “What should I do with those expensive delectable sweets?”

“I’ll eat ‘em.”

Akira sighed. “Save it for the party? We can have them as dessert. You tried your best, I guess…”

“I feel kinda bad…” Ann pouted. “But no way am I modeling again. He’s just going to ask me to go nude and I’m not going nude for anybody.”

Airi stifled her laugh. “I’m sure a certain someone would ask for a copy.” She hinted with a wiggle of her brows.

The model glared at her. “And when Yusuke asks you to go nude?” She hissed. “I’m sure Akira would buy it in a heartbeat.”

Airi blushed in return at the quip and hid deeper in the water. Would he..?

Water splashed on the other side and they could hear Ryuji inhale sharply. Glancing at each other, they listened intently once again, their curiosity overtaking any sort of modesty they had.

“Dude, how are you so long?”
"I beg your pardon?"

"Y’know what I’m talkin’ about!"

"R-Ryuji, maybe you shouldn’t be bothering him over that…"

"Nuh-uh! I’m not lettin’ you distract me from this! This is important!"

"I still don’t understand what you’re referring to…"

"Your dick, bro!"

Both Ann and Airi blushed furiously at where this conversation was headed. They covered their faces with their hands as the guys’ voices carried throughout the bathing area.

Through her fingers, Airi noticed a couple of older ladies squinting their eyes toward the men’s side, while the elderlies quietly laughed to themselves over what they could hear. She clenched her eyes shut as she felt second hand embarrassment creep up over her shoulders. “Could they stop…”

Ann groaned. “Ryuji, why…”

“I believe I am of average length and girth for a male my age.”

Akira coughed awkwardly. “You are. Ryuji’s just being weird…”

“I’m not! C’mon, we’re friends and teammates. We’re bros! We can talk ‘bout this.”

“I don’t remember ever saying this was a team thing…”

“Shut up, leader. I can’t let artist boy here show me up!”

Water splashed when he stood up, drops dripping into the pool. A silence overcame the entire bathing area with everyone listening in on the conversation.

“Er…"

“It is a penis. What of it?”

“…You guys are assholes. Get up, Akira.”

“What? Why?”

“Yusuke showed us, I showed you. It ain’t fair if you back out.”

“I didn’t ask for this competition…”

“Too bad! Get up!”

Akira sighed and water sloshed, droplets hitting the buoyant surface. The girls held their breath, wondering what they were going to say.

Airi bit her lip, holding a hand over the lower half of her face as she felt something warm drip from her nose. This was so perverted of them to listen in on this, but...dammit, she was curious! He was quite handsome already, and she knew he was strong since he was their leader. Was he also “strong” in another sense...?

“Whoa.”
“Indeed. Akira, you truly have the ideal male form. Perhaps you could model for me as well.”

“Uh...thanks?”

“Guess there’s another reason why you’re our leader...Must build ‘em differently out in the country.”

Her vision swam and Airi began to sway in the water. This was too much for her. The heat from the hot springs and from that titillating conversation inflamed her imagination and she felt lightheaded. She didn't want to envision her friend like this, naked with beautifully lean muscles and a large... “Ann…” She breathed. “I can’t…”

“Shh…” Ann shushed her, eyes still glued to the partition, not noticing the cellist's swirly eyes. “What are they going to say next?”

“I feel sorry for Airi when you guys bang. You're gonna kill her.”

“What?!”

“What?!” Airi squeaked, her face as red and hot as lava. She couldn’t take it anymore...!

With a sigh, her eyes rolled back and she fainted against the model, a bit of blood trailing from her nose.

Staggering underneath the unexpected weight, Ann shook her. “Airi? Airi?! Wake up!” She panicked quietly, half hysterical from the ridiculous situation. “I can’t do this without you!”

‘Sorry, Ann…’ Airi thought deliriously as her head bobbed back and forth from being shaken. ‘I can’t hold on any longer…’

Airi cleared her throat awkwardly as she took a seat on the locker room bench, wiping the last of the blood from her nose. That was not the proudest moment of her life, fainting in the hot springs from some sizzling gossip. She had woken up with a gasp when cold water splashed on her face, chilling her to the bone. Ann had stood above her with an empty bucket, having dumped the contents all over her unconscious body.

They were now sat in the women’s locker room in the onsen’s complimentary lounge sets. “So,” Ann rested her hands on her hips as she stood in front of her. “You good now? Or are we going to have to get more cold water?” She smirked teasingly.

Airi pouted. “I’m fine. Thanks for your concern, Ms. someone-who’s-supposed-to-be-my-friend.”

Ann snickered. “I’m just joking. It was pretty... hot in there.” She jokingly fanned herself. “We have to meet up with them now, you know.”

Airi sighed and reluctantly stood up from the seat. “Might as well…” She muttered. “I don’t know if I can face them ever again…”

They walked back out of the locker rooms but instead of the hot springs, headed toward the
communal relaxation room. There weren’t a lot of people at this hour so it was mostly empty with the exception of a few elderly women huddling in one corner.

The guys were already there, spread out on multiple couches while they browsed their phones. They were dressed in the men’s lounge set, looking to the world as if they were about to fall asleep.

Hunching her shoulders, Airi avoided their gazes and sat down, facing away from them. Akira looked up from his phone and was about to greet her but paused when he saw how red she was. “Airi?”

She tensed, her cheeks already heating up. “Y-Yes?” She almost squeaked.

He furrowed his brow, leaning a little to try to see her face. “Are you OK?”

She nodded rapidly, still not looking in his direction. “Just fine!” Don’t think about dicks. Don’t think about his dick.

Poking his head out of the towel bag, Morgana gave her an odd look. “Are you sure, mom? You’re acting a little weird…”

Clearing her throat, Ann stood next to her. “So!” She clapped her hands together as she smiled nervously. “How about a bedrock sauna? It'd be a nice way to end the spa day!”

They shrugged, slowly getting up from their seats and shouldering their bags. They already paid extra at the lobby for it, they might as well.

Walking over to a vacant bedrock room, they held their bracelets up at the reader, the door opening for them a moment later with a beep. Quickly moving into the empty tiled room, the door closed behind them and encased them inside the relaxing and humid atmosphere.

Sitting down on the flat surface, Airi quickly laid out on the heated tiles, moaning in appreciation as the temperature sank into her muscles. Closing her eyes, she relaxed on the hard floor, resting her head on the pillow. This was the one thing she really looked forward to. She could just fall asleep here and forget what she heard earlier…

Blushing at the sensual noise that escaped her, Akira hesitantly took the bed next to her, glancing away when he noticed Ann was going to take it.

Shrugging, she took the one after, laying down as well. Ryuji and Yusuke followed after, sighing in appreciation once their backs felt the heat.

A relaxing silence took over, each thief unwinding from their worries and troubles of the past month.

Closing his eyes, Akira took off his glasses and placed them beside his head. Maybe he should make this a team tradition. It was tough and stressful work going through Palaces, and since their thief selves depended on their mental wellness, they should relax once in a while, right?...

Feeling fur tickle his nose, he cracked an eye open.

Darting out of the bag, Morgana silently padded over to Airi and curled up in her arms. Exhaling, she slowly wrapped her arms around the feline, half unconscious at this point.

Akira watched as her face softened in expression, her mouth slightly open while she faced his direction. Even though she always held a kind expression on her face, she always held this strange
sort of tension in her shoulders, like she had to make sure she looked kind. He knew why now, but still. Right now, she was completely relaxed, and he realized he hadn't ever seen such a face like this on her...

A small smile curled on his lips at the sight. Glancing at the others who had their eyes closed, he slowly took out his phone and set it on silent before taking a photo. He smiled at the picture before placing his phone back, mission accomplished.

He’d keep that his dirty little secret.

I keep forgetting to post the art you guys send me ORZ sorry!! Thanks a lot to 15LarueA for this cute little painting of Akira and Airi!
Chapter End Notes

-Musashi Koyama Onsen is a real place!
-Chilled vinegar sounds gross, but it's actually really refreshing to drink on a hot day. (They use a flavored vinegar that's appropriate for drinking). You can find them at a lot of onsens and spas along with cold milk.
-An italy towel (don't ask why it's called italy) is basically a roughly textured towel to help you exfoliate dirt and dead skins from yourself.
-Bedrock sauna is basically a tiled floor bed that is extremely heated so it helps your muscles
tsk tsk Akira
Chapter 108

Stretching their arms in the air, they sighed as they walked out of the onsen and toward the subway station.

They all fell asleep inside the bedrock sauna and woke up an hour later when an employee had to come in to kick them out. Luckily, Morgana was able to dart inside the bag before they spotted him, but they decided they had enough for the day and checked out.

“Where should we have the party then?” Ryuji asked as he laced his hands behind his head.

Ann tapped her chin. “We could celebrate at Airi’s place? Oh,” She turned to Akira. “You live right next to her, right? We never visited your place before.”

Akira blinked in surprise. “Oh, yeah. You guys haven’t been to the cafe yet. It’s really nothing special…”

Yusuke idly swept some hair out of his eyes, skin refreshed from the spa. “Perhaps we could celebrate there? Nee-san praises the coffee as ‘the best she’s ever had.’”

Airi blushed. “It is! Sojiro-san, Akira’s guardian, has almost every kind of bean available!”

Morgana purred as he leaned against Akira’s shoulder, his fur sleek and shining from the mineral filled air. “Then let’s have the party at Leblanc!”

Taking the train over to Yongenjaya, they entered the cafe, the bell jingling their arrival. Ann took a deep breath of the sophisticated scent of coffee beans and sighed in content. “Ahh, what a nice smell…”

Ryuji eyed the interior, noting the aged wood and old fashioned furniture. “This place looks so outdated…” He rubbed his nose. “Can’t say I hate it, though.”

Yusuke raised a brow. “People refer to that as ‘retro.””

Hearing the commotion inside the usually quiet cafe, Sojiro turned around from the cabinets, taken aback by the amount of teenagers. “Hm? Who’re they?” He asked his ward.

Akira smiled slightly. “These are our friends. This is Yusuke, Ann, and Ryuji.” He gestured to the other thieves. "Ann and Ryuji go to Shujin, while Yusuke is from Kosei.”

Ann smiled brightly at the barista. “Hello!” She waved amicably.

The barista's eyes widened. “A girl who isn’t Airi can tolerate you..?” He voiced, surprised.

The model laughed at his question. “Akira has really helped us a lot lately.”

Sojiro snorted. “Heh, I bet you’re the ones doing all the helping.”
The smile slowly fell from her face. “No, really, he’s been great.” She stressed. "Akira's the one who helped us all be friends."

Raising a brow at her insistence, he huffed in amusement. “Sit down. This round’ll be on the house.” He turned to Akira. “You’re helping, though.”

He nodded, moving behind the counter to take a few different containers of beans down.

The others took a seat at the counter, Morgana jumping out to sit on Airi’s lap. There weren’t any other customers so there was no need to hide.

“Uh…” Ryuji grimaced. “Just a soda for me, thanks. I don’t like coffee.”

Akira nodded as he began grinding the beans. “Right.” He mentally noted to remember that tidbit.

Yusuke took a look around. “The decor and atmosphere is very relaxing here.” He remarked.

Airi nodded in agreement. “It’s pretty nice, plus the coffee and curry are amazing.”

Sojiro snorted, carefully lifting the cups and placing them in front of the teenagers. “Hope you’re not just sayin’ that to get on my good side. Enjoy, kids.”

She smiled sheepishly as she picked up her coffee by the handle. “Aren’t I on your good side already?”

Picking up her cup as well, Ann took a long sip, humming in pleasure at the blend. “Wow...It’s delicious.” She grinned. “Thanks, Akira!”

Yusuke nodded in agreement. “Indeed.” He slowly smiled as he savored his own cup. “There’s great depth to its acidity.”

Taking a long swig of her coffee, Airi closed her eyes in appreciation. “This is really good for a beginner. Sojiro-ojisan’s been teaching you well.”

Akira smiled as he washed the filter in the sink. “Yeah. I’m getting better, I think.”

Ann perked up, placing her cup back on the counter. “Oh yeah, I remember now! I think I’ve seen Leblanc mentioned in a magazine before…”

Sojiro rubbed the back of his head. “That was a long time ago.” He smiled languidly, still pleased that she knew.

Widening his eyes, Ryuji glanced over at her cup. “For real? Gimme a taste.” He reached out, grabbing her cup and taking a hesitant sip. “Blech!” He recoiled from the taste as soon as the hot liquid touched his mouth and he placed it back. Grabbing his soda, he quickly downed the contents to get rid of the aftertaste. Gasping as he finished it all, he gave her look of disbelief. “It’s so bitter! This has gotta be cruel and unusual punishment.”

Sojiro chuckled as he crossed his arms. “Eh, I didn’t drink coffee when I was a kid either.”

Airi blinked, finishing her cup. “Really? When’d you start?”

He hummed, stroking his goatee. “Around the same time your old man started.”

Ann straightened up in her seat. “Oh, you knew her parents?” She asked curiously.
He glanced away. “Something like that. I was co-workers with her dad back in the day....” He shook his head of the memories and turned to his ward. “Go on and take them up to your room. No need to stay down here.”

Ann perked up and looked at the stairs. “Ooh, I wanna see!”

Sojiro sighed. “It’s only an attic.”

Ryuji rubbed at his mouth, scrunching up his face in disgust. “Man, that bitter taste just won’t leave my mouth...”

Drying his hands, Akira headed upstairs to get everything ready. Did he even make his bed?

Getting up from his seat, Yusuke inclined his head at the barista. “Thank you very much for the drink.”

Ryuji got up as well, stretching his arms. “Up these stairs, right?...Oh,” He turned back to the owner. “And thanks for the soda!” He grinned before running up the steps, the wood creaking underneath his weight.

Airi got up as well as she cradled Morgana in her arms. Shouldering her bag, she walked up the stairs after them.

Ann got up, about to follow her friends, but stopped when she noticed Sojiro observing her. “Hm?”

He crossed his arms as he scrutinized her. “So you’re, uh...Ann, right?”

She nodded with a smile. “Takamaki Ann. It’s nice to meet you, Sojiro-san!”

He hummed. “Ann-chan, huh...” He smiled slightly. “That’s a nice name.” He squinted his eyes at her. “You got a boyfriend?”

She blinked, taken aback at the question. “...Nope. Never have, either.” Kamoshida didn’t count. He could rot for all eternity as long as she could take back those horrible dates with him.

Ryuji...Nah. Airi was probably just joking around earlier. Right?

“Hey, you gotta get up here!” Ryuji yelled down for her from the attic. “This place’s freakin’ insane!”

Huffing, Sojiro gestured to the stairs with a smile. “Go on.”

She beamed. “Oh, right. Thank you for the coffee!” Standing up from the bar stool, she grabbed her bag and walked up the stairs.

Watching after her, Sojiro smirked. “Huh. Sweet girl like Airi. How’s he makin’ friends with all these pretty girls..?”

Ryuji eyed the room, looking at the bare walls and flooring, dodging a dangling lightbulb as he almost walked into one. “Whaddya think of this room? I dunno where to begin...”

Airi sat down on the couch, letting Morgana roam free from her arms. “It’s a room?...” She shrugged, eyeing the dust piling up on the furniture. “A little dirty since last time...”

Akira coughed awkwardly, a hint of embarrassment heating his cheeks as he stood in the middle of his room. “S-Sorry...I haven’t really had time to clean since I moved in. I’ll make sure to clean later.”
Yusuke glanced around before dismissing his surroundings. “It seems quite ordinary to me. Neesan’s house is by far superior, of course.”

Ryuji slumped at his input. “For real?”

The wood creaked as Ann walked up the steps, looking around with wide eyes. “Oh…”

“See?” Ryuji pressed. “Ain’t this crazy?”

She shook her head as she looked around. “It’s cleaner than I thought it would be.”

He scrunch up his face at her answer. “What?!”

Akira deadpanned. “Thanks.” He said flatly. “Glad to know you think I’m a slob.”

Jumping onto the couch, Morgana groomed an ear. “Well, sit wherever you’d like.”

Ann sat down next to Airi on the couch while Ryuji leaned against the work table. Akira took a seat on his bed, and Yusuke stayed on his feet, looking at his phone. “We’re all over the news.” He frowned. “Even those who previously believed in us have been influenced by the comments made on TV.”

Ryuji scowled. “This is all that fuckin’ Akechi’s fault!”

Airi shushed him. “Be more quiet, Ryuji. We don’t want Sojiro-ojisan to overhear us.”

Biting his lip, he nodded sullenly.

Ann sighed, hunching in her seat. “At this rate we’re just going to worry everyone instead of give them courage.”

Morgana languidly waved his tail back and forth. “We need to find a way to make our righteousness known to society. It’s time we think about our next move. You were planning on discussing that today, right?”

Yusuke nodded. “Yes, though we were sidetracked by the spa visit. First, we need to search for a candidate.”

Ryuji rubbed his head. “It’s not like we’re just gonna stumble upon some important target though. You guys don’t know anyone, do you?”

Ann shook her head. “I don’t…”

“Me neither…” Yusuke replied quietly.

Airi shook her head then paused. “…No.”

Shoulders slumping as he sighed, Ryuji took a seat on the floor next to Ann and crossed his legs. “Whaddya think, leader?”

Akira crossed his arms. “…What about the news?”

Morgana blinked in surprise. “Well...there probably are a lot of famous targets on TV…”

Yusuke shook his head. “However, the suspects on the news are already being pursued by the police. Even if we make them confess their crimes, the police will take the credit. That won’t do.”
Airi leaned back in her seat, idly petting Morgana. “So we need someone who the police don’t
know about…”

Ryuji punched his fist against the floorboards. “Damnit...We’re never gonna prove Akechi wrong
at this rate..!”

Several loud growls echoed in the bare room, and they all held their hands to their stomachs. “We
haven’t eaten in a while, huh…” Akira winced, feeling the first pangs of hunger.

“Yeah…” Ann groaned. “Plus, we’re all pretty tired from the spa…”

Holding up his still wrapped package, Yusuke looked down at it. “We have these...But, I prefer not
eating sweets for a meal.”

Airi stood up from the couch, stretching her arms. “Then...Let’s go get something. We’ll just have
to wait until we can find another target. Sitting around and worrying about it won’t help us…”

Ann clapped her hands. “How about that welcome party?” She pointed to one of the shelves with a
grin. “I think I found something. Isn’t that a portable stove? Can’t we make hot pot on it?”

Ryuji looked up at her in amusement. “Someone’s excited.”

Morgana perked up. “That sounds great! I’ve heard that eating hot pot together brings people
closer!”

Airi smiled. “It’s a very family thing to do, yeah. It’s pretty hot today though, should we really be
having hot pot?”

Akira shrugged. He hadn't had hot pot in years. “I’m up for it.”

Grinning, Ryuji got off the floor. “Anything with meat’s fine by me!”

Yusuke smiled at the opportunity. “I only ask that we finish it off with porridge. Extra parsley, of
course.”

Airi checked her phone for the time. “We should go to the supermarket now before it closes.”
Grabbing her bag, she walked toward the stairs.

“All right then!” Ryuji pumped his fist. “Akira, you get this place ready and we’ll go get the
ingredients!”

Yusuke hummed to himself. “I’ll need gingko nuts, wonton wrappers, and…” He mumbled the rest
of the food to himself as they moved down the stairs, the cacophony of footsteps stomping down
the old wood.

The others left to the supermarket, leaving the cafe much quieter than it was before. “Boss.” Akira
moved to the kitchen. “Do we have any large pots we can use?”

Sojiro turned to his ward. “For hot pot, right? I heard you guys talking about it.”

Akira nodded. “Do you wanna join us?”

He raised a brow at the invitation. “Don’t you know how busy I am? You guys go have fun.” He
gestured at the stove. “There should be an old pot beneath the stove that’s good.”

Nodding, Akira crouched in front of the cabinet, searching through the cramped space. There were
a lot of old pots and pans down here, but nothing that would be good for what they intended. Dusty brown caught his eye and he reached into the deeper crevices, grunting as he pulled out the heavy earthenware vessel. It was a little dirty, but it was definitely big enough for six people.

Cradling it in his arms, he closed the cabinet and stood up. Sojiro peered over his shoulder. “Oh, you found it. That should be perfect.”

He nodded, rinsing it in the sink.

“...Her name was Ann, right?” Sojiro asked as he crossed his arms, observing the teen. “She’s a nice girl.”

Akira paused in the midst of cleaning. “She is.”

“Just like Airi.”

“...Yeah.”

Humming, he narrowed his eyes at the younger man. “You’re not leading them on, right?”

Sputtering, Akira almost dropped and cracked the pot. “What?! No!”

Sojiro nodded. “Good. I can already tell you’re in too deep with Airi. As her self appointed uncle, I’m just makin’ sure.” He moved back to the counter, cleaning the cups from earlier. “I’ll be down here for a while...Just be careful with the fire, OK?”

Blushing furiously at the accusations, Akira nodded silently and brought the now clean vessel upstairs. The boss thought he was playing around? There’s no way he was that kind of guy. Plus, him being in too deep...

That was true.

“Can we get this?!" Ryuji held up the premium beef slices excitedly at the supermarket.

Airi blanched at the price. ¥1500 for 500 grams?! Was he crazy?! "No!"

Ann snatched it out of his hands and placed it back in the freezer. “No way! We’re on a budget, remember?”

He groaned before acquiescing. “Fine…” He grabbed the packages marked with sale signs, dropping it inside his basket.

They browsed the aisles for whatever they needed. Airi grabbed a bottle of soy and oyster sauce, adding it to her basket. She could just go home to get hers, but maybe Akira would want his own. He probably wasn’t allowed to use the cafe’s stocks.

“Nee-san,” Yusuke called out, holding two bundles of herbs in his hands from the vegetables section. “Would you prefer parsley or cilantro?”
“Parsley’s good with me!” She replied, moving down the aisle and back into the meat section. It was the most important part of hot pot.

Ryuji glued himself to the displays, drooling over the variety. He wiped his mouth. “Can we get some pork too? Or should we just stick with beef…”

Ann hummed as she scanned the freezer. “I think we should just go with beef. It’s the best way to eat hot pot. We need some udon too…” Grabbing his hand, she led him to the noodle section.

He blinked, staring down at their linked hands.

They disappeared behind the displays and Airi smiled, peeking out from her corner. That was pretty cute. Maybe this all started in middle school, now slowly becoming more.

Making her way to the check out, they all met up and placed their baskets of ingredients on the belt. The cashier rung everything and another employee bagged their purchases. “Your total is ¥15,230 please.”

Airi winced. That was...a lot.

Resigned, she was about to pull out her credit card when Ann placed the cash on the tray. “It’s on me this time.” She winked at them, taking the receipt.

“Thank you, Ann.” Yusuke inclined his head, heading to the end of the register to grab their bags.

Taking their purchases, they walked back to the cafe and up the stairs. Akira had already pulled the table out and placed the portable stove and pot on top. He also took some benches out of the pile of junk he shoved in the back of the staircase.

He perked up at their arrival as he filled the pot with water. “Hey. What’d you guys buy?”

They held up their bags. “Meat.” Ryuji grinned excitedly.

They let out a satisfied sigh when they finished their meal. It was two more hours of bonding and laughter, finishing off all the packages of beef and the few vegetables they did buy.

Ryuji groaned and leaned against the back of his chair, propping his leg up on his knee as he rubbed his stomach. “I can’t eat another bite…”

Akira nodded in agreement as he subtly loosened his belt. “Same...We might’ve bought too much…”

Licking his muzzle, Morgana beamed. “That was delicious, Lady Ann. I’m sure you’ll make a wonderful bride some-”

Ann yawned, interrupting what he was going to say. “Sorry,” She rubbed her eyes. “I’m gonna have to borrow the sofa.” Tucking her skirt securely underneath her, she lowered her head on Airi’s lap and closed her eyes.
The cellist looked down at her and idly patted her head.

Eyeing the model’s bare thighs that were on display, Ryuji leaned more to his right, trying to get a view. Morgana jumped up on the table as well, but darted away just as she opened her eyes to glare at them. Keeping her hand at the edge of her skirt, Ann closed her eyes again, falling into a light sleep.

Sweatdropping at their behavior, Airi frowned disapprovingly and they looked away guiltily.

Noticing the artist’s silence, Akira turned to him. “What’s wrong?”

Yusuke furrowed his brow, picking up a package of noodles. “...We haven’t finished our meal. What about the porridge, or even udon..?”

Ryuji groaned at the thought of more food. “Just leave it for next time, man...”

A quiet snore filled the room and they all looked down at the model. “She’s asleep already..?!" Morgana yelped in surprise.

Airi shrugged. “Not a surprise. The spa thing really tired us out, and then eating a big meal like that?” She covered her mouth as she yawned. “I kinda want to sleep too...”

Akira jerked his head toward his bed. “You guys can sleep on the bed if you want.”

She shook her head. “No, it’s OK. I shouldn’t sleep right after eating.”

Ryuji nodded. “We should let Ann sleep it off then.” He suggested quietly, making sure to keep his voice down.

A thought came to him and Yusuke sat up, resting his elbows on the table. “By the way, Ryuji...how do you know Ann?”

He blinked. “Huh? Oh, we went to middle school together. Airi too.”

Morgana tilted his head. “What was Lady Ann like back then?” He asked curiously.

“Not so different from now.” He answered. “Once we got to high school, we ended up in different classes and stopped talkin’...”

Airi lifted a brow. “She’s plenty different. She’s a lot louder and more confident now.”

He pursed his lips. “Well, yeah. I don’t think she had many friends. I mean she grew up overseas, plus there’s her looks. The popular kids hate her; the quiet ones stay away. Me and Airi were like the only people who talked to her until Shiho came along.”

Airi smiled softly. “Yeah. Even though we’ve known each other for...three years now? Four? We’re only close friends now.” Her smile turned mischievous. “Should I tell a story about our middle school days?”

Morgana perked up. “Oh, yes! I’d love to learn more about Lady Ann’s past!”

Ryuji scrunched up his face. “Which story..?” He asked apprehensively.

Airi grinned. “Haven’t you guys wondered when Ryuji began bleaching his hair?”

Akira and Yusuke blinked in surprise while the ex-runner groaned in realization. “Ugh, please
Snickering, she ignored him. “So, it was Ann’s first day at our middle school. She transferred in the middle of the second year, so there was a lot of gossip going around about her. I tried to help out, but…” She frowned a bit. She was busy with law textbooks and work. “I didn’t have as much time as I do now, so she was mostly alone.”

She shook her head. “Anyway, Ryuji was in our class too. He was already a bit of a delinquent even then, but he had his natural hair color. He noticed Ann was really sad because of how everyone else treated her, and he got so angry at how they judged her like that.” She bit back a smile. “Sooo…”

“Nooo…” Ryuji groaned as he held a hand up to his face in embarrassment.

“So,” She continued animatedly but quietly, conscious of the sleeping girl on her lap. “He comes in one day with a head full of bleached hair. He doesn’t say anything, but Ann definitely noticed. The entire school began gossiping about him instead of her, and that’s when they started talking.”

She beamed. “I’m pretty sure she was grateful, even if she never said it. He took the heat off her and bore all the gossip and rumors. He’s been bleaching his hair since to match her and I guess it grew to be his style.” She blinked as she remembered. “Oh, but when he was on the track team, he dyed his hair back to black for a while. After it was disbanded, he went back to being blond again.”

Akira smiled at the story. “That’s pretty cute, Ryuji.” He pointed out teasingly.

“Shut up!” The ex-runner grumbled, his cheeks burning red as he ducked his head. “I went back to black ‘cause they didn’t allow hair dye…”

Observing him with this new knowledge, Morgana purred reluctantly. “I’m surprised, Ryuji. You’re quite chivalrous for treating Lady Ann like...a lady.”

Airi grinned. “Should I talk about the dolphin story too? Akira knows a bit about-”

“OK, stop right there!” Ryuji gritted his teeth as he pointed his finger at her face. “Stop bringing up every damn story and embarrassing me!”

“But I’m your mom!” She said mockingly. “I’m supposed to embarrass you!”

Yusuke chuckled. “It seems you’re rather close after all. Well then, what about you three?”

Cooling down from his outburst, Ryuji blinked. “Us..?”

Yusuke nodded. “This is a great opportunity to get to know each other better. You know every detail of my past at this point. It’s only fair you tell me every detail of yours.”

The ex-runner rubbed the back of his head. “So you got nothin’ to lose, huh? All right, I’ll tell you. It’s just a normal story about a rotten kid, though.”

Airi frowned. “Ryuji…”

Giving her a small smile, he sat forward in his seat. “My dad left when I was young...Ever since then it’s just been me and my mom. I was actually tryin’ to get a track scholarship so I could make things easier for her. I even dyed my hair back to black so I’d fit in with regulation. In the end I just screwed it all up.” He shrugged weakly. “Turns out I’m a pretty bad son, huh?”
He chuckled bitterly at himself. “Back when I was a first-year, my mom got called by the school for me raisin’ my hand at Kamoshida. All the teachers kept houndin’ her for what I did, but she just stayed quiet through it all…” He gritted his teeth, staring down at the floorboards to avoid their gaze. “I’ll never forget the look she had on her face though...On the way home, she...she apologized to me. For bein’ a single mom and all…”

Yusuke frowned sorrowfully. “So that’s what happened...They say at school that everyone is equal, but in reality that’s a gross oversimplification…” He rested his arms on his lap. “...I understand how you feel.”

Akira frowned as he stared at his friend. He didn’t know how bad the situation was with Kamoshida. Breaking his leg was awful, but the aftermath was even more heartbreaking.

Airi fought back tears. “Ryuji...I’m so sorry. I never questioned how you broke your leg. I could’ve...I should’ve said something.” She sighed. “Maybe this could’ve been solved sooner and you’d still have your scholarship…”

He shook his head. “Nah. I know you were busy and I’m over it...I only wanted it to ease ma’s expenses, but…” He shrugged. “It’s over anyway.”

Yusuke turned to look at her. “And you, Nee-san? I’ve lived with you for several days now, but the reality is that I don’t know much about you either.”

Airi smiled weakly. “My turn to share, huh? Well, I grew up with two amazing parents until I was almost seven, when they were killed...” She stared blankly at the remains of their food packages, idly taking in the details but not registering it in her head. “I was sent to a strict institution that was affiliated with a Catholic church. Anything you do wrong, you’d be sent to bed without dinner and bruised hands. My best friend, Rui…” She bit her lip as she had to recall it again. “She died there. A priest wanted to...rape us? Molest us?” She huffed bitterly. “I don’t know, but he tried to force himself on us...”

“Shit…” Ryuji breathed as he stared at her in horror. The guys held their breaths as she continued her story, uncomfortably angry at the details.

“Rui killed him before he could do anything, but not before he...he st-strangled her to death.” She slowly breathed, trying to stop herself from hyperventilating. “Police swarmed the place and the institute was desperate to keep it quiet, but it was closed down all of a sudden and we were all transferred to other places or into the foster system. My new orphanage wasn’t really an orphanage, so we didn’t have a lot of money.”

She shrugged. “I spent a couple years there, learning from the older kids on how to steal to feed ourselves. We were called brats, scum, leeches...It didn’t matter as long as we got food in our stomachs. We were...are, invisible, forgotten by the government and shunned by society for something we can't control.” She gripped her hands, her knuckles turning white from the pressure. Shaking her head, she continued quietly. "I got my current homeroom teacher to sign on as my guardian and I moved back into my house a little over a year ago. I hadn't let anyone know I was an orphan until you guys, or else I'd just be seen as nothing again. So...that’s that, I guess.”

Yusuke let out a shaky breath, unsettled by her story. “Even someone as kind as you have had to suffer so horribly...Who was the murderer?”

Clenching her jaw, she looked away. “His name was Hisoka. He’s in prison now, so there’s no need to worry. One good thing about our justice system is that once you’re convicted of murder, you’re in there for life.”
He nodded slowly. “That’s one piece of good news…” He muttered.

“Mom…” Morgana murmured morosely. “You’ve had a hard life, huh…”

She smiled slightly. “Yeah...But, it’s over and done with. I also met all of you, so I can’t say it’s not better now. Right, Akira?”

Ryuji leaned back in his seat. “Right. When it comes to gettin’ labeled, nobody’s got it worse than Akira.”

Yusuke blinked. “Is this about his past? Not just his parents?”

Morgana looked up at his leader. “Now that I think about it, we never have heard the details.”

Akira lowered his head, letting his shoulders fall. “You guys want to hear it?…”

Airi smiled gently. “If you don’t mind sharing…”

Pursing his lips, he nodded. “Well...you know about my parents. My mother and father are both in realty and land development. We haven’t spoken in a while. One day when I was walking home from cram school, I heard a woman cry for help…” His eyes darkened, lost in the memories.

“Someone, please! Help!”

His head snapped up, looking in the direction at where the scream came from. It was really close by... He looked around, noticing no one was out in the streets this late at night. Should he do something?...

Furrowing his brow, he made his decision and ran toward the sounds of struggle. A young woman in office attire was trying to get away from a bald man in a suit, his hand clamped around her wrist in a bruising grip. “Stop, please!” She cried out, trying to pull her arm away.

Akira stared at what was happening. He clenched his fists and took a step forward, tearing the man off. “Get away from her!” He yelled, raising his voice for the first time in years. He took a step in front of the woman as the man unsteadily got back up, barely getting his balance as he squinted his eyes in their direction.

There was blood coming from the scratch on his forehead from his impact with the ground and he winced. “Damn brat...I’ll sue!” He slurred, holding a hand to his face, cheeks red from overdrinking.

Akira scowled. A drunkard too.

Giving the teenager a grateful look, the woman stepped forward. “If you keep this up…” She began hesitantly, keeping some distance between herself and her attacker. “Then I’ll report about the money! Is that fine with you?!”

He scoffed, blinking his eyes blurrily. “All I have to say is that you did it on your own, and it’s over.”

She took a step back. “But…” She teared up, all confidence gone. “I just did as I was told…”

Akira looked between them. Wasn’t this sexual assault? Were they co-workers? The bravado he gained from his initiative started draining away, and he had a bad feeling about how this was
going to turn out.

The almost rapist chuckled, his forehead still bleeding profusely. “Who do you think I am?”

“No…” She whimpered with defeat.

“Hey.” He roughly called out to her. “Make this statement to the cops. ‘This kid suddenly attacked me.’ Got it?”

Akira turned to him in shock. What?

“If you even try to say anything else, you know what’ll happen to you, right?” The bald man hinted threateningly and she looked away, clenching her eyes. “But…”

Scrunching his brow, Akira stepped forward. “This is bullshit.” He stated quietly. “You were clearly threatening her.”

He sneered. “Shut up. You’re done for. You’re gonna learn what happens when you cross me…”

“Excuse me, folks.”

A pair of policemen walked up to them and Akira sighed in relief. Good, law enforcement.

“We received a complaint about an argument here. Is something the matter?” The police officer asked before the almost rapist turned to him. “Oh! It’s you, sir.” His tone turned submissive as he inclined his head at his superior.

Akira’s eyes widened. What?

The bald man turned to glare at the woman. “So, what happened? Explain it to the good officer.” He drawled.

She trembled, clearly fighting with her own morals before bowing her head. “This young man suddenly attacked him…” She closed her eyes and bit her lip guiltily. “He shoved this gentleman to the ground and this man...got injured…”

Akira could only stare in shock and horror. What..?

The man crossed his arms. “…It’s as she says. Also...make sure you deal with this so my name isn’t mentioned at all. You understand what that means, correct?”

The police officer nodded quickly. “Y-Yes, sir!” Taking out a pair of handcuffs, the two officers approached the teenager.

He took a step back but it was no use as they locked the cuffs on his wrists and forcefully dragged him to their patrol car. Why was this happening? He was only trying to do the right thing. He was so shocked that he couldn’t even find the will to fight back.

His eyes caught the woman’s and she teared up. “I’m sorry.” She mouthed, even as the cops threw him into the back of their vehicle, slamming the door closed on him.

He could only sit there and watch as the man reached out and dragged the woman away, disappearing down the dark street. He couldn’t save her, and now he was going to jail…
“You stupid boy.” His mother sneered at him through the steel bars, her makeup impeccable and her black hair coiffed in a sleek bun.

He had spent almost two weeks at the local county jail, left in darkness as the guards forgot about him. He could barely remember the trial where he was unanimously found guilty, still in too much shock. He barely slept, wouldn’t have even if his cot wasn’t a plank of wood.

All these questions ran through his head. What could he have done? Why did that man have so much power? He knew he was doing the right thing, but here he was, being punished. Why?

His parents only showed up for the trial, and left as soon as the judge smacked their gavel. They wouldn’t spare any time for him when they could work, except now to berate him.

He closed his eyes, resigned and numb. It had always been like this...

“How dare you cause trouble for me and your father.” His mother scolded, crossing her arms over her suit as she glared down at him, cold gray eyes framed with thick lashes. He inherited those from her and she hated that. “Do you even comprehend what you’ve done? You’ve sullied our family name! Do you know how many people are talking about this?!”

She shook her head in disappointment. “I can’t believe I gave birth to such a troublemaker...Going to juvie, of all places!”

The door in the hallway opened and his father stepped through, his cold black eyes piercing through without any kind of warmth. He walked up to the cell in his perfectly pressed suit, his loafers clicking with every step. “Akira. I’m very disappointed in you.” He stated shortly before dismissing him, turning to his wife. “He’ll have another court hearing today before being placed on probation. Did you decide who would take him in?”

She crossed her arms. “…I have a client in Tokyo who gave me the information of their acquaintance.”

He nodded. “Good. That’s all then.” He glanced at his offspring, a flash of sorrow passing by, before walking out of the cell hall, the clacking of heels following him out.

Akira kept his head down, even as the steel door slammed close, leaving him alone in his cell. He stared down at the cement floor blankly. Something fell onto the ground, wetting the stone, and another, and another.

Bringing a hand up, he covered his face with his hands as he silently cried. Why did it turn out like this? He was only doing the right thing...
“...A week later, I rode the train into the city, and began my life here.” Akira ended quietly, keeping his head down. If he was honest, it didn’t hurt to remember what happened. He could only feel numb.

“Akira...” Airi sniffled, bringing a hand up to wipe her eyes. No one helped him. His own parents threw him away so easily. How could they...

Ryuji let out a shaky breath as he tried to hold in his anger. “Just listenin’ to it pisses me off...” He clenched his fist, punching his thigh in frustration. “Goddammit..! You got an assault on your record just for that?”

Yusuke shook his head as he glared down at the table. “The woman sounds quite horrible as well. She’s stayed quiet this whole time...”

“Hearing about a man like that...” Airi began quietly. “I can’t help but think he must’ve done something to her so she wouldn’t talk...”

They flinched at the thought, and Akira bowed his head even lower. He wasn’t able to save her, and now who knew what happened...

Morgana bristled at the story. “That man is just the kind of person whose heart we should steal! Who is he, and where can we find him?!?”

Akira slowly shook his head and closed his eyes in resignation. “I don’t know...” All he could remember was that voice.

His ears fell against his scalp as Morgana stared sadly up at him. “You can’t remember, huh..? Well it was at night, and I’m sure you were in shock after getting arrested. I understand all too well the pain of not being able to remember important details of your life.”

Yusuke crossed his arms. “The victim’s personal information is always kept secret. Identifying that man will prove difficult...” He sighed. “Besides, the courts already made their ruling, didn’t they? Even if we manage to get revenge, Akira’s past record won’t go away.”

Airi frowned. “No...but we’d be able to get back at that man. Who knows how many other people he’s hurt...”

Shaking his head, Ryuji gritted his teeth. “I can’t stand it...This world is so messed up!” He roughly leaned back in his chair. “The weak’re left to fight for themselves, while rotten adults get away with whatever they want!”

Morgana nodded grimly. “And those in power don’t do anything to help the situation.”

Yusuke sat up in his seat. “Can’t we fix this, though? Nobody would even know...We just need to show the world what true justice is. We’ll make them come to their senses.”

Airi nodded approvingly. “Yeah, I agree with that. We’re not the only victims, but we are the only ones capable of changing things.”
Ryuji shot up from his chair. “That’s gotta be what our powers’re for!”

Morgana purred in content. “Sounds good to me. The flashier our missions are, the cooler we end up looking!”

Akira smiled as he observed his friends’ reactions. “You guys…” His friends were the best.

“You’ve all taught me so much.” Yusuke smiled. “And now we’ve grown as a team.”

Feeling movement on her lap, Airi looked down and saw Ann was awake. She slowly sat up, rubbing her eyes. “...What’re you guys getting all excited about?” She mumbled sleepily.

Ryuji blinked, taking a seat again. “Sorry, did we wake you up?”

She shook her head. “Nah, not really. I’ve been up for a while now.”

Airi huffed in amusement as she crossed her legs, her thighs free of any weight now. “Eavesdropping like a true phantom thief.”

The model gave her a grin. “Yep! I’m a natural!” She shook her head. “Still, this weird feeling came over me while I was listening to you guys...It almost feels like I’ve known you all forever…” She sat forward, crossing her legs. “Do you think it’s because our backgrounds are so similar?”

Ryuji snorted, grinning as he rubbed his nose. “Well...it sure ain’t ‘cause of anything good.”

They grinned at each other, knowing they were a team of outcasts and orphans.

“Similar, huh…” Morgana whispered, hunching his back cheerlessly. “I’m the only one who doesn’t fit in…” They turned to look at him. “I don’t have any past to look back on...No memories…” He shook his head, his ears flopping dejectedly.

Ryuji gave him a big grin. “Whaddya mean? We could search the whole world and we wouldn’t find a bigger misfit than you. You fit right in with us, and the reason we’re goin’ to Mementos is to get your memories back, right?”

Yusuke chuckled quietly. “I’m sure your past will be just as troubled as ours.”

Akira smirked. “No doubt. He’s a phantom thief, after all.”

Morgana puffed up, but they could see he was genuinely touched by their words. “We’ll see about that!”

Airi grinned at his Tsundere attitude. “Plus, aren’t we making ones right now?”

He blinked in surprise. “Making...memories..?” He looked down at the floor for a moment before nodding. “Yeah. I won’t give up searching for them, but...this would be a memory too.” Jumping on the table, he landed on her lap and curled up into a ball.

She looked down and smiled softly, running a hand through his sleek fur.

Ann looked down at him as he purred in delight. “I actually feel like I’ve known Morgana for a really long time too. It’s so strange...I can’t really put it into words.”

Morgana pouted. “I’m helping you guys out for my own sake. Don’t get me wrong...If you don’t get stronger, investigating Mementos won’t be anything but a pipe dream! I wouldn’t get my memories back, and we’d never find the reason why mom always gets so sick down there!”
Ryuji slumped and sighed. “That sure was a quick turnaround. One second you’re depressed, the next you’re actin’ all tough…”

Akira snorted. “What a Tsundere.” He grinned slyly as a pair of blue feline eyes turned to glare at him.

“All joking aside…” Ann leaned back against the sofa. “Let’s take this seriously. We should go as far with it as we can… I want to punish those corrupt adults and give courage to people in trouble.” She held up her fist. “Only we can do that!”

Ryuji grinned at her speech. “Ha! You can say that again!”

Yusuke nodded, smiling contently. “Being a member of the Phantom Thieves will surely help me grow, both as an artist and as a person.”

Morgana meowed. “Of course. You’re under my tutelage, after all. There’s nothing we can’t accomplish!”

“I hope we can change the world…” Airi beamed. “We should be all right since Akira’s our leader.”

Akira smiled and nodded. He would do everything for them. “Leave it to me.”

Her phone buzzed Airi took it out, furrowing her brow at the number. Patting Morgana’s butt to tell him to get off, she stood up from the couch and walked over to the windows, accepting the call. “Hello?”

The others turned to watch curiously as her back tensed, her nodding and saying yes every couple of seconds before hanging up. “What’s up?” Ryuji scratched his head.

Biting her lip, she turned around. “Um…” She began nervously. “Might be some trouble.”

Akira furrowed his brow. “Why? What happened?”

She sighed, grabbing her bag and shouldered it. “So you know I live alone as a minor? I’m technically not allowed to, but they let me since Kawakami-sensei signed off on it. She has to say she visits once every two weeks, but child services usually sends a pair of agents to inspect the house every couple of months. They just found out the dates on her reports didn't coincide and they're coming right now to check…” She chuckled weakly as her shoulders slumped. “They can’t see that anyone else lives there either…”

Yusuke furrowed his brow. “Then... What should I do?”

She bit her lip, looking around the room before an idea struck her. “... Can you stay here for the night? They’ll be gone tonight, but they usually monitor the property for twenty four hours. I can’t let them see you…”

He slowly blinked. “That is acceptable. So long as Akira agrees.”

The leader lifted his brows, taken aback by this sudden twist of events. “Uh...I’ll have to ask Boss, but sure.”

Airi beamed. “Thanks so much. I’m really sorry for pushing you off on someone else, Yusuke.”

He shook his head. “It’s all right. If I’m bothering you, I can always move into the school dorms.”
Airi held up her hands. “No, it’s fine. I like having you as my housemate and I don’t want you to have to live in the dorms.” She smiled before checking the time. “Shit, OK, I have to go now. Who knows how long they’ll stay…”

Ann stood up as well, grabbing her bag. “I’ll leave with you. It’s pretty late and the trains might stop running soon. Ryuji?”

Ryuji nodded, slinging his bag behind his shoulder. “Guess it’s time to call it a night.” “Good night, Morgana! Yusuke! Akira!” They waved as they headed down the stairs, leaving the cafe.

Morgana stared after them before his ears wilted. “Dammit, I have to turn back into a human soon…” He fretted. “I can’t let her get taken by Ryuji..!”

Akira sweatdropped, patting him on the head. He stood up from his bench and stretched his arms up in the air, still full from their meal. “Can you help me clean up?”

Yusuke nodded and stood up as well, the two of them rearranging the room back to how it was originally. Bringing the dirty pot downstairs, Akira washed it in the sink before drying it and placing it back inside the cupboard. Sojiro was still here, reading a newspaper on one of the bar stools.

“Um, Boss?”

“Hm?” He continued reading his paper, not paying attention to the teenager.

He nervously adjusted his glasses. “Can a friend stay for the night?”

Lowering the newspaper, Sojiro raised a brow. “Why? I saw Airi, Ann-chan, and the loud one leave already. Does your friend not have a place?”

“He lives with Airi, but she said some child service agents were here today..?”

He rolled his eyes. “Oh. Today’s the day they finally come, huh? Well…” He sighed. “Sure. Let him know he can stay for as long as he wants.” Standing up from his seat, he folded his newspaper and took off his apron. “I’m off for the night. Don’t get up to trouble with company.” He warned as he left the cafe, the bell signalling his departure.

Akira sighed. Mission accomplished. He was about to walk up the stairs when the bell rang again and he turned around.

Airi closed the door with a gasp, struggling to hold a wrapped portrait and a bag of fabric. Blinking, he hurried to help her, taking the heavy canvas from her.

“Thanks.” She exhaled as she rolled her neck. “These are Yusuke’s clothes and pajamas, and that right there is “Sayuri.”” She gestured to the object in his hands. “I didn’t want to leave it in the house in case the agents find it.”

He nodded. “Right, I’ll give these to him.”

She smiled gratefully. “Thanks so much, Akira. I’m sorry I made you do this so last minute, but I’d get in big trouble if they find out I have someone else living there before the papers go through.”

Akira tilted his head. “What papers?”

She bit her lip. “...I didn’t tell Yusuke yet, but I put in the request to see Madarame. I haven’t gotten
approved yet, but if I do, I can ask him to put my address down as his permanent residence and Yusuke can officially live with me.”

He smiled. “That’s really kind of you.” He remarked.

She shrugged. “He doesn’t have a home, and I know how that feels, so…” She clapped her hands together. “I’m sorry again for making you do this.”

He shook his head. “It’s all right. It’s only for one night.”

Airi gave him another smile before her phone buzzed. Cursing, she took it out and read the message. “Shit, I have to get back. I told them I was going to get drinks from the outdoor vending machines. I’ll see you tomorrow byeee!” Not thinking clearly, she quickly leaned up to kiss him on the cheek before dashing out the door.

Akira stood there for a few moments, face heating up and his heart beating fast from the quick peck. That was her second kiss...

Shaking his head, he gathered the bag and frame in his hands and walked back upstairs. Yusuke had taken a seat on the sofa, his hands on his lap. “Here.” Akira handed him the bag of clothes and held out the portrait.

Blinking, Yusuke’s eyes widened and took the portrait. “‘Sayuri’? Why do you have it?”

“Airi came back to drop this off, saying she didn’t want the agents to find it.”

Morgana hummed. “Smart of her. Who knows what they would do if they discovered a famous painting like that in her house.”

Taking his pajamas, Akira went downstairs to change into them in the bathroom before walking back up. Yusuke had changed into his sleepwear as well, a simple purple cotton shirt and black drawstring pants. He had taken the futon blanket out of the bag and used it as a comforter on the couch, browsing his phone.

He looked up at hearing the footsteps. “You know, I enjoyed our spa visit. The hot water was quite relaxing. We should go again sometime.”

Akira nodded, getting on the bed. “Yeah. I’m thinking we should make it a team tradition…Uh, what do you want for breakfast tomorrow? There’s only curry and ramen…”

He shook his head. “You needn’t worry, I’ll be fine. Good night.”

Morgana jumped up to turn the lights off, leaving the room enveloped in darkness.

Flinging his thin blanket on top of him, Akira closed his eyes as he felt the feline curl up next to his side. Today was fun. He hoped that he would be able to hang out with his friends like this again, so carefree and happy...

He woke up with a gasp, the sound of chains echoing in the chamber. He was back in his Velvet
Standing up, he went over to the steel bars and found his jailers, all of their strange yellow gazes snapping to his presence.

“The prisoner Kurusu Akira has returned.” Justine announced.

Caroline hit the cell with her baton. “You’re in the presence of our master. Stand up straight!”

Pursing his lips, Akira straightened his back as he stared at the inhuman man in the middle of the room.

“The bonds that you have reeled in are quite intriguing…” Igor began. “In other words, they all have been unfairly labeled by society and are standing up against such fates. Have you noticed?” His usual grin stretching wider. “Your heart seems to inspire theirs.” He chuckled as he uncrossed his legs. “Outcasts of society...In other words, you’re picaresque. Deepen your bonds with them. Those will become the strength behind your rehabilitation...I look forward to it.”


“I shall grant you an ability befitting of your newfound growth. Consider it a gift.” Igor stated, snapping his fingers. “May you continue devoting yourself to further rehabilitation.”

Akira nodded. “Thanks.” He wondered, though. Igor could grant him space for Personas, and the twins helped him fuse them. Were they gods..?

“It’s almost time…” Igor grinned, crossing his legs once again. “How will you fare in the coming events?”

A shrill bell rang out throughout the cell chambers, penetrating his brain. Clenching his eyes, he could feel himself fall through the floor and into a void, feeling nothing, hearing nothing...

Airi smiled politely as she poured the agents their tea. They were sat in the living room, the TV turned to a game show. They were at her door already when she left the cafe, and she reluctantly invited them in.

When guiding them to the living room, she had spotted the still covered “Sayuri” painting in the tatami room and almost tripped, silently panicking. She had to get that out of here. Who knew what they’d do if they unwrapped it.

Making a quick excuse to get drinks from the outdoor vending machine, she shoved Yusuke’s clothes into a bag and hefted the portrait into her arms before leaving the house. The agent didn’t notice, too busy examining her living room. She left them with Akira before heading straight back here.

She blushed slightly, remembering that she had kissed him on the cheek again. Hopefully he wasn’t mad about it...

“So…” The agent began languidly, eyes glued to the game show where the contestants had to see
whether something was real or made out of chocolate. “How has everything been here?” He lifted his cup to his lips, taking a sip.

“It’s been fine.” Airi smiled. “I’ve been taking care of the house, cooking my meals, going to school.”

He nodded, writing it down on his report. “...And how’s school? Have you been attending every day?”

She nodded. “I go every day on time, and my grades are the top of my year.”

He hummed. “That’s good, that’s good...”

A grumble sounded out through the room and the other agent rubbed his stomach. “Sorry, you got any food?” He asked bluntly.

She nodded. “Is there anything you’d like?”

He scratched the side of his head. “How about...some yakisoba? That good with you?”

She nodded again. “OK, I can make that in...five minutes. Please excuse me until then.” Bowing slightly to the two, she headed into the kitchen to begin preparing. They always did this. They’d come over for their report late in the night, and then make her cook for them. She couldn’t refuse either because she wasn’t sure if they’d mark her file. At least they were nice about it.

Quickly chopping the beef, she turned on the gas and fried the meat, adding the beef and soy sauce. She was so tired from today, she just wanted to drop on her bed and fall asleep. But no. Resisting the urge to sigh, she killed the heat and scooped the food onto the plate, bringing it back to the living room.

“Thanks, Kimisawa-chan!” He grinned, accepting the meal. “You always cook so well!”

She huffed in amusement. “And that’s why you always come at night on an empty stomach, right?”

He smiled sheepishly. “You caught me.”

The other agent straightened his papers, getting up from the chaise. “All right, let’s do the inspection then.”

She nodded nervously, heading down the hall with him.

He looked over every nook and cranny, writing it down on his report. Her heart jumped when he walked and opened the closet in the tatami room, raising a brow at the obviously male clothes piled neatly on the shelves. “...Is someone else living here?”

She shook her head. “No! They’re...They’re my boyfriend’s, Akira.” She fibbed. “He spends the night when he visits since he lives in Edogawa.” He observed her for a moment and she sweated. Please don’t find out I’m lying...

He shrugged, closing the closet. “Whatever, it’s not my business.” He walked past her to the stairs and she let out a quiet sigh. Close call. Now only two more hours of this until they leave, and then twenty four hours under surveillance. Great.

Closing the door with a smile a while later, Airi felt herself slump, her face immediately falling. It
was close to 1AM now, and she was exhausted. They finally left for the nearby Izakaya, promising that the record will be another positive in her file.

Chugging upstairs, she took another bath for the day and closed her eyes, slipping into the hot waters. It was just so relaxing…

Her eyes snapped open as she breathed in water. Resurfacing with a gasp, she coughed, trying to get all the water out of her lungs. She had fallen asleep in the now cold bath.

Shivering, she quickly got up and toweled herself, draining the tub. Changing into her pajamas, she walked back into her room and froze.

An envelope was on her bed.

Her window was left open, the curtains blowing out into the night. Someone had been in her room. Someone had broken into her house.

Her breath quickened, pulse jumping right underneath her skin. Was it the same person? Biting her lip, she slowly walked over to her bed, and grasped the thick paper. She unraveled the string holding it together and opened it up, peering inside. Photographs.

She slid them out and stared.

It was time stamped with the date of her parents’ murders, photographs of both their ID photos as well as their...

She gripped the laminated cards, her nails cutting crescents on the surface.

Photos of the scene where they had collapsed on the ground, a bullet hole through their chests. The next photo was of her, and she observed her child self. Her big red eyes that continued to cry even as she said everything was fine...

She took out the last photo and froze. Her blood ran cold.

That gentle grin had been burned into her memory, his sad and unhinged eyes piercing through her as he knelt down next to her. Patting her on the head even as the police cuffed him and dragged him away.

The paper shook and she looked down at her hands that were trembling. Letting everything fall to the ground, she covered her face and backed away, her back hitting the wall.

She slowly slid down to the ground, gripping her head. What was happening?

Chapter End Notes

Izakaya is a bar and grill, popular with salarymen after a long day of work where they can unwind
Chapter 110

Chapter Notes

Might be really busy tomorrow so I'm posting this a day early!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

---6/12, SUNDAY, EARLY MORNING, YONGENJAYA BACKSTREETS.

She stared up at the ceiling, feeling the heavy dark circles weigh beneath her eyes.

She didn’t sleep at all. After her mini breakdown, she put all the photos away into the same drawer she put the document in. Then she proceeded to lock everything. The tatami room, the study, the bathroom window, her own bedroom door and window, everything that could be locked was locked. It probably wouldn’t stop any real threat who knew how to use lockpicks, but it helped her frayed nerves.

She then climbed into bed and tried to sleep, but every noise, every click of the clock hands, every rustling leaf from the outside, everything fucking scared her.

Her heart jumped into her throat so many times, she was convinced it was stuck there. She should at least try to do something today. Maybe that University fair…

She shook her head. No. There was no time to think about University when she had two break ins. They hadn’t stolen anything, but just the fact that they were even in here made her skin crawl with anxiety. She was still under surveillance too…

She shot off the bed. The surveillance! Maybe it caught whoever broke in. She knew that whoever it was must’ve come in after the agents left because they went into her room and the envelope wasn’t there yet.

Picking up her cellphone, she called the agency about her case. Maybe this could be the end of it and no one else had to worry, like Yusuke…

Yusuke took a long swig of his coffee, sighing with content. “It’s such a delight to enjoy coffee of this quality, especially in the mornings.”

Sojiro smirked at the compliment. “Always nice to hear from a customer. How was your night here?”

The artist took another sip. “It was fine. My futon at Nee-san’s is much more comfortable, however this was more than adequate. Thank you again for letting me stay.”
Sojiro raised a brow. “When’d you start living with her anyway?”

Yusuke looked down at his half finished coffee. “I used to be a student of Madarame’s. Madarame Ichiryusai, if you are unaware of current news. After his arrest, I had the option of staying at the school dorms, but they are rather...cramped and filthy. Nee-san had offered me the option of her home as asylum a few weeks before and so I moved in on June 5th.”

The barista nodded, rubbing his goatee at the story. “‘Nee-san,” huh? I’m not surprised.”

Yusuke nodded. “I’ll be returning to her house by tonight. I realized something after talking with everyone last night.” He laced his hands on the table. “Perhaps it’s due to my upbringing, but I don’t know anything of the world, let alone other people. I am...sheltered, was kept ignorant. If I’m to depict people in my art, I need to learn more about them; I must interact with them more. They had taught me so much just from yesterday’s events, it made me realize I should reach out to the people closest to me, starting at school.”

Sojiro crossed his arms. “I see. Good on you for realizing that yourself.”

Yusuke chuckled. “There’s no need to exaggerate. May I come again sometime to enjoy your coffee?”

“My door’s always open.”

Finishing his coffee, Yusuke placed the empty cup against the counter. “Akira’s been through a lot too, from what I’ve heard…” He furrowed his brow. “Are you related to him?”

Taken aback, Sojiro shook his head. “Huh? Oh...How would I describe it...We’re just acquaintances.” He sighed. “Not family or anything.”

“I may be overstepping my bounds, but why did you decide to take him in?”

He rubbed his chin. “My reason, huh…” He huffed. “Probably because...he reminds me of my old self.”

Yusuke blinked. “That’s all?”

Sojiro smirked slightly. “Doesn’t take much when someone takes consideration on someone else. Your art instructor- Um, “former” art instructor. He must’ve felt something for you too, besides just stealing your talents.”

Yusuke frowned softly, remembering the elderly man’s kind disposition and the state of his mother’s grave. Perhaps the kindness was an act, but there was no monetary reward for upkeeping a forgotten person’s tomb. “Truth be told...I cannot hate him from the depths of my heart either.”

Standing up from his seat, he shouldered his bag. “I should get going. I have some errands I would like to run before going home.”

“Hey,” Sojiro called out to the art student. “You sure about this?” He gestured to the wall where “Sayuri” was, hung up there earlier when Yusuke had woken up. “It’d be a waste to keep here, and wouldn’t this be better at Airi’s?”

Yusuke shook his head. “With those agents coming in and out, it would be an inconvenience to hang it up there.” He gazed up at the painting, observing how it blended in with the cafe’s decor but standing out just a little. “Adding a hint of color to an otherwise ordinary day...I’m sure my mother would’ve done the same.”
“...I see.” Sojiro answered after a moment. “I’ll hold on to it for you then.”

“Thank you for the coffee.” Yusuke smiled, heading for the door. “...I’ll come again.”

Akira woke up with a gasp and sat up on his bed. Bringing a hand up, he wiped the sweat that dripped down his forehead. Rehabilitation, rehabilitation. He was starting to hate that word.

“You’re finally awake.”

Akira looked down, seeing Morgana on the floor before his eyes darted up, looking around the empty room. “Where’s Yusuke?” He mumbled out, voice scratchy from sleep.

The feline shrugged. “Don’t know. He wasn’t here when I woke up. Maybe he’s downstairs?”

Flipping his covers off, he got up from his head and walked down the stairs, still in his pajamas.

Sojiro looked up from the counter and raised a brow. “You’re finally up. You know it’s past noon, right? That kid Yusuke went out already, saying he was going to ‘learn more about people.’” He gestured to the wall where a painting was recently implanted. “He left this painting before he took off, though. Supposedly to thank us for taking care of him.”

Akira stared in surprise. “‘Sayuri’...” Yusuke left that here? It was his most precious possession.

“It’s rare to see a kid acting so grateful these days.” Sojiro smiled slightly as he took in the painting with his eyes. “And this painting is amazing. Not only is the mother stunning, but the expression on her face...” He smirked in amusement. “The regulars will probably freak out when they see it in here.”

Akira laughed quietly. “You mean that pompous guy who always drinks his coffee with his pinky up?”

Sojiro barked out a laugh. “Ooh, I can’t wait to see his face. Still...” He narrowed his eyes at the portrait. “I feel like I’ve seen it somewhere. It’s a bit different from how I remember it, though...” Dismissing it from his mind, he turned to his ward. “Well...If you’re up for the day, go on and get dressed. I opened shop hours ago, so go take the cat out somewhere.”

He nodded and darted up the stairs. Dressing in a black shirt and a white dress shirt left unbuttoned, he tightened the belt on his jeans when his phone rang out.

Y: Thank you again for letting me stay the night.
Y: Apologies for leaving so quietly, but your rest seemed peaceful.
Y: I decided to head out into the city for the day to observe people.
Y: Furthermore, I’ve entrusted the “Sayuri” to your protector, Sojiro.
Y: That painting should no longer exist in reality...but it is what my mother truly painted.
Y: I am simply satisfied that we were able to obtain it.
Y: And it was all because of you guys. I cannot thank you enough.
Y: PS, I still believe porridge is the best way to end a hot pot.
He snorted softly at the messages and put his phone away. “So Yusuake left already, huh.” Morgana remarked quietly. “Oh well. It was nice to have another roommate around.”

His phone buzzed again and he took it out of his pocket.

**R:** Yo I just checked the Phan-site.
**R:** There’s some kinda thread on there looking for info about the burglars using the Phantom Thieves name.
**R:** Sounds pretty lame to me.
**An:** Oh, I saw that too. They target restaurants, right?
**An:** I actually found a really interesting post on there.
**An:** My brother has suddenly started acting violent towards everyone.”
**An:** I might end up getting killed at this rate…”
**An:** I wonder if it’s because he got caught up with all those weird people in Shibuya.”
**R:** You think he means those burglars when he’s talking about them “weird people”?  
**Y:** It may be too soon to assume that.
**An:** The post said that he started spending a bunch of money lately, too…Isn’t that kind of suspicious?
**An:** I wonder how many burglar groups there even are in Shibuya…
**R:** Damn, things’re really starting to get serious.
**Ak:** Let’s look into it.
**An:** I thought you’d say that.
**Y:** Although how exactly do we go about investigating?
**An:** We’ll go to Shibuya in the middle of the night and catch them all red-handed!
**R:** No way. The police’ll totally nab us if we were out that late.

“Plus, it would be bad if the chief knew you were out in the middle of the night.” Morgana mentioned.

Akira sighed and nodded. There went that idea. He narrowed his eyes at the screen. Airi hadn’t responded at all yet…

**Y:** Hm, if they target restaurants…
**Y:** Aha! What if we drew them to Leblanc?
**R:** What?!

“There’s no way…” Morgana sweatdropped. “Who would go after a shop like this?”

**An:** Wouldn’t that cause a lot of trouble for Boss..?  
**Y:** “Leblanc Targeted!” It seems like a viable plan to me…
**Ak:** Let’s not…
**R:** Yeah, you’d get kicked out of Leblanc if we failed!
**Y:** Oh, I suppose I left the “Sayuri” there as well. I had forgotten.
**R:** How’d you forget something that important?!  
**An:** Either way…
**An:** I don’t really want more thieves to be posing as us in the future.
**An:** I wish there was some way we could make an example of these ones…
**Y:** At the moment, our lack of info means we will just have to wait.
**Y:** We can continue searching for more information wherever possible, though.  
**An:** Yeah.
R: I’m gonna try looking for stuff too!
Ak: Where’s Airi?
R: Oh shit, you’re right. She hasn’t responded at all.
Y: I tried contacting her earlier, but she didn’t answer her phone.
Y: I hadn’t wanted to go home in case the surveillance was still ongoing.
Ak: I’ll try to contact her. Maybe she’s still there.
An: Keep us updated!

“Where is mom, anyway?” Morgana fretted as he read the messages.

“I don’t know…” Akira replied quietly, already starting to feel worried. He opened a new chat window, thumbs flying across the screen.

Ak: Where are you?
Ak: You didn’t respond to the group messages.
Ak: Airi?

He sighed, letting his hand fall to his lap. She really wasn’t responding then. His phone rang again and he groaned, sliding his messages. Was he popular today or what?

M: This one’s super special!
M: It’s not even anywhere on the forum yet…
M: Anyway, do you remember that bully Takanashi Daisuke whose heart you changed earlier?
M: Well...It turns out there was someone pulling the strings the whole time!
M: It seems like Takanashi didn’t have a choice but to listen to what this guy told him to do.
M: But ordering someone to bully other people is a pretty crappy thing to do, isn’t it?
Ak: That’s horrible.
M: Right?! It’s totally unacceptable.
M: This person has to be somewhere in our school, right? You should go take a look around.
M: In the meantime, I’ll secretly do a little more research too!

“If we want to go after this target, we’ll need a name.” Morgana licked a paw. “Let’s investigate the school tomorrow.”

Nodding, Akira finally put his phone away and stood up, ready to go out. It was a sunny day today and he still had to find Airi...

She slammed her hand against the wall, groaning in frustration. The agency said she couldn’t have access to any of the footage they were capturing of her house, and they ignored her concerns about a break in, saying it wasn’t their jurisdiction.

Resisting the urge to scream, Airi stomped to her closet and took out her summer outfit. There’s no way she was going to just let herself be caught by whoever was following her while she sat at home, twiddling her thumbs. At least Yusuke wasn’t here as well.
Putting on a chiffon dress, she picked up her cello case. Heading downstairs, she quickly put on a pair of sandals before opening the door. “Huh?!” She gasped in surprise when she saw Akira on the other side of her little gate, hand about to ring the doorbell.

He stared at her for a second before letting his arm fall. “Uh...Hi?” He greeted after an awkward moment.

She blinked, and blinked. “Hey...” She greeted back, closing the door behind her. “What’re you doing here?”

He continued to stare at her, his eyes moving downward as he took in her outfit. Feeling more awkward as time passed and he still hadn’t said anything, she hesitantly reached up and poked his cheek. “Akira?”

He blinked, snapping out of his trance, and rubbed the back of his neck. “Er, sorry. You...You look really pretty today.” He mumbled.

She blushed at the unexpected compliment. “O-Oh, thank you. Was there something you needed?”

He nodded. “You didn’t respond to any of the messages today. Is something wrong?”

Airi hesitated. Should she tell him? It was getting out of hand, but...No. This was her problem. She wasn’t going to add to his. “Uh, I was just talking to one of the agents about when their next visit is, so I couldn’t see any of the messages.”

He regarded her for a moment. “...OK.” He accepted after a while. “Well, are you going somewhere today? You have your cello...”

She blinked before nodding. “Yeah. I just wanted to get out of the house and maybe try playing again...” She bit her lip. Since he was here... “Are you free?”

He smiled softly. “Always.”

Giving him a grateful smile, she let herself out of her property and they walked to the station together, side by side. About to take her wallet out at the turnstiles, the newsstand on the side caught her eye. Her feet moved without her command and she bought a copy without thinking, already opening it up.

Pausing, Akira walked up behind her. “What’s up?” He asked curiously.

Airi stayed silent as her eyes scanned the pages, searching for something. She didn’t know what though, but it was as if something inside her told her to do this. Maybe something to explain a string of break-ins? Or burglaries nearby?

Flipping the next page, her eyes widened at the title of the article.

“Wrongful Imprisonment: Let Out After 10 Years!”

The words barely registered in her brain but her hands began to shake, rattling the paper. Gripping the newspaper in one hand, she ran back down the streets they had just come from.

“Airi?!”

She heard Akira yell out behind her but she couldn’t stop running. She couldn’t stop. She couldn’t stop.
Slamming the door open to Cafe Leblanc, she called out hysterically. “Sojiro-ojisan!”

Jumping at the shout, Sojiro turned to look at her in the midst of cleaning a cup. “What the-?! Airi?” He blinked, bewildered at her entrance. “What’s wrong?”

She couldn’t even bring herself to say it, the words stuck in her throat like thick sludge that clogged her lungs and her heart. Her hand shot out, still trembling like a leaf, and he hesitantly took the newspaper. Giving her an odd but worried look, he opened it up and scanned the articles.

Breathing harshly, she collapsed in one of the booths, taking off her cello case and leaning it against the table.

The door slammed open again and Akira ran in, panting slightly from the sudden exercise. “Airi!” He rushed up to her, kneeling down as he scanned her face worriedly. “What’s wrong? Why’d you run off like that?”

She didn’t respond, too busy focusing on her breathing as she curled up into a ball. In, and out...In, and out...

“What?!” Sojiro’s eyes widened as he re-read the article. “He’s out!!”

Akira looked up at him in confusion. “Who? What’s going on?” He asked, frustrated that neither one of them would tell him what had set them off.

“Him…” Sojiro whispered harshly, throwing the newspaper down on the counter with disgust. “What the hell is going on…”

Furrowing his brow, Akira grabbed the tabloid and read the contents.

*Seto Hisoka, 39, was imprisoned ten years ago on two accounts of first degree murder. After searching the scene with the deaths of the Kimisawas, he was left to rot in Fuchuu Keimusho. However, another investigation was launched just a few months ago, reopening the case. After a thorough examination of present and new evidence, it was ruled that he was wrongfully imprisoned due to a lack of trial and has been released.*


Her heart starting to slow down from her controlled breathing, Airi nodded jerkily. “Y-Yeah...That’s him. No way I’d ever forget his name.”

Airi knew nothing about him except that he killed her parents for papers. What papers? She didn’t know. He mentioned another name but she could barely remember that night, the unmoving bodies of her parents being her main focus. He must’ve knew where they- she lived, if he was able to find them in their neighborhood. It wasn’t too far-fetched to think it was him who was breaking and entering her house.

“I see…” His smile slowly turned darker, his pupils shrinking under the cheap city lamps. “You’re like me then. I’ll be back, don’t worry.”

She slowly hugged herself. He said he would be back. Was it him who left those documents and photos? Was he trying to bait her with the information she’d been searching for? How did he get his hands on them?

Her nails began digging into her skin, leaving crescent marks on the light surface. She wasn’t like him. She wasn't anything like him...
Hands gripped her wrists and pulled them away from herself, stopping her from drawing blood. She snapped out of her thoughts and looked up at Akira who gently held her hands, looking down at her with concern. “Airi?”

Taking a deep breath, she slowly let it out, her panic draining away with it. “…I’m OK.” She mumbled.

“This has to be a mistake.” Sojiro stated roughly, grinding his teeth in anger and crossing his arms. “There’s no way. The evidence is piled against him.”

She nodded jerkily, feeling faint from the fright. Her head was beginning to spin. “Yeah…” There’s no way he was innocent. She saw with her own two eyes what he did to her parents. “I...I feel dizzy.” She confessed faintly.

Pursing his lips, Akira let go of her wrists and placed a hand behind her back and underneath her knees. With a grunt, he lifted her up in his arms, bridal style, and slowly began walking toward the stairs.

“Huh?” Airi gasped, blinking up at him. He was carrying her?

Sojiro watched them, eyebrows raised up to his hairline. “Huh…”

Reaching the attic, Akira walked over to his bed and gently placed her down on the surface. “Get some rest.” He ordered quietly. “I’ll go get your cello. You’re safe here, OK?” Giving her a soft smile, he went back downstairs, the wood creaking underneath his boots.

She stared after him for a moment before laying down on the mattress, taking off her shoes in the process. It wasn’t as comfortable as her own, but at this point, she was so tired and weighed down that she felt like she was never going to leave this spot.

Morgana jumped up on the bed, looking at her with worry. “Mom?” He meowed quietly.

She smiled tiredly at him, opening her arms. “I’m OK…” She repeated, though her words held no real reassurance.

Giving her another look of concern, he curled up in her arms, his soft and small body anchoring her sanity.

Burying her face in the pillow, she breathed in, taking in the mild scent of Akira’s shampoo. It was so familiar and comforting and she was so tired…

Walking back downstairs, Akira reached into the booth to heft the heavy instrument up on his shoulder. About to head back, the newspaper caught his eye again and he scowled. He was so tempted to burn it, but he knew that wouldn’t help. “Boss…” He walked up to the counter where the older man was still muttering angrily to himself. “Do you know this Hisoka guy?”

Pursing his lips, the barista let out a rough sigh, the aged lines on his face creasing deeper. “Hisoka was…our co-worker. Before I had this cafe, I worked in the government along with Airi’s old man. We would occasionally grab coffees in the break room together. He was always nice and quiet, little skittish, but…”

His eyes darkened. “The longer he worked with us, the more he changed. He started talking about how he met someone special in the department, someone he was going to woo. His smiles became fake and he began wearing gloves everywhere. Then he started disappearing for days…”
He let out a weary sigh. “It all culminated to him killing Airi’s parents…I don’t know why he
snapped like that, and I don’t know if they were his only victims. Why’d it all have to end up like
this..?” He murmured bitterly. "Them, and then her..."

Akira furrowed his brow at the story. “Is there a chance he’d come back for Airi?” He asked
tensely.

Sojiro glared sharply at his ward. “There’s always a chance. We don’t know his motivations…” He
crossed his arms. “What I want to know is who let him out?”

The teenager gaped at the question. “What?” Let him out?

The barista's jaw tightened before he opened his mouth. “There was an overwhelming amount of
evidence against him, and everyone was sure he was gone for life, but now he’s out after ten years?
Someone’s pulling some heavy strings…” He sighed. “Unfortunately, there’s no way we’d be able
to find out who...and it’d be pointless anyway. The guy’s already out.”

Akira furrowed his brow before nodding slowly. “...All right. Thanks for telling me all this.”

His dark eyes snapped to his ward. “...Listen, I don’t want to force you to do anything, but I want
you to accompany Airi for a while. You saw earlier, she was scared out of her mind. He killed her
parents and now he might be back to finish the job. Keep an eye on her, OK?”

Akira nodded firmly. “Of course.” He wasn’t going to let anything happen to her. Not when he
could prevent it.

Pivoting on his heel, he walked back up the stairs, his footsteps quieting when he noticed his guest
had fallen asleep. Sending a text to the others about her location, he put his phone on silent.

Gently placing the cello case on his couch, he pulled up a chair next to the bed, observing her
sleeping face. Her forehead was still creased with worry, the dark circles under her eyes prominent
now that she was more relaxed.

Reaching out, he gently smoothed her brow with his thumb, giving Morgana a few scritches as he
pulled his hand back. He’d let her rest here.

A hand reached out to grip his and he paused, looking down at Airi as she unconsciously held on,
as if she didn’t want him to go.

He softened, lacing their fingers together. Of course he’d stay.

Slowly regaining consciousness, Airi stirred, burying her face in the pillow. She stilled. This
wasn’t her bed. And what was that attached to her hand.

She opened her eyes, blinking slowly as her vision cleared. She was still in Akira’s room in Cafe
Leblanc. Morgana was curled up in her arms, still asleep in a ball, snoring softly. Akira was sitting
next to the bed on a chair as he idly browsed his phone. He hadn’t noticed she had woken up, his
eyes still glued to the screen.
His hand was entwined with hers. His long fingers had curled around her own, almost protectively, and his palm was warm, comforting and just...here. He was here for her. His thumb was even caressing the back of her hand. She noted that even though his hand was softer than her own calloused one, his felt so much stronger, so reassuring.

It was really...nice, to be able to savor skin contact with another person like this.

Airi slowly sat up, reluctantly taking her hand back from his. Already she missed the warmth of his palm, but she pushed that out of her mind.

Akira blinked at the sudden movement and smiled at her, cracking his fingers from hours of being stationary. “Good evening.”

She rubbed her eyes. “I really fell asleep..? What time is it?”

“It’s 7:15PM now.” He whispered as he stretched his arms in the air. “You’ve been asleep since.”

Her eyebrows raised in surprise. She really felt safe with him here to have slept that long. “Sorry. You wasted a whole day to keep me company while I slept…”

He waved her away. “Don’t worry about it. Your safety is more important.” His smile fell away into a frown. “How do you feel?”

She bit her lip and looked down at the still slumbering feline. “...I don’t know. Scared? Angry?” She sighed, trying to make sense of herself. “I just don’t know what to do...The court ruled him innocent, but I know what I saw. How am I supposed to fight against that..?”

Their phones buzzed.

R: So whaddya want to do about our next target?
Y: Well that’s sudden.
R: Well after what that guy said, sitting around doing nothing just pisses me off!
An: You’re talking about Akechi-kun, right? I know how you feel.
Y: Ah, that high school detective.
R: He’d hafta shut up if we changed another person’s heart.
Ai: Calm down. He’s challenging us.
Ai: He wants us to mess up.
Ak: We should go in with a level head.
R: Yeah, but we still need a target!
An: But he did mention that the police are starting to mobilize…
An: Either way, I don’t think we should leave Akechi-kun be.
Y: This is the perfect time to meet and discuss what our strategy should be going forward.
Ai: Let’s meet up at the hideout tomorrow.

She let her arms fall as she sighed. There wasn’t time for her to panic when they had to make their next move. It was already 7:20PM…

Her stomach let out a growl, waking Morgana up with a jolt. “Is there a Shadow?!” He yelped, looking around wildly, still half asleep.

Akira snorted, opening his bag for him. “Nope, just a hungry dragon.”

Airi pouted. “Thanks.”
He grinned before standing up, and held his hand out to her. Blinking, she took it, and he helped her off the bed. She went over to her cello and shouldered it, making sure it was secure. She didn’t even get to play today...

Walking downstairs, Akira ordered two sets of curry for them, Sojiro grumbling while he got their orders ready.

They sat down at a booth, leaning their elbows on the table. There weren’t any other customers around, meaning Morgana could sneak his head out of the bag without being caught.

Scooping the boiling hot sauce onto the rice, the barista brought the plates and placed them in front of them. “How you feelin’, Airi?” He asked, concerned.

Airi smiled slightly, just barely lifting the corners of her mouth. “I’ll be OK…” She grimaced. “Maybe...Maybe he’s changed. He...probably won’t come back for me, right?” Those words sounded weak, even to her.

He tightened his jaw. “…I can’t say that for certain.”

She let out a sigh and nodded dejectedly. “Yeah…As long as he doesn’t come after me, I’ll be OK.” Even though someone had followed her home, even though someone had stolen her keys and left a message, even though someone had broken into her house again and left those photos. As long as he didn’t come after her…

Furrowing his brow in concern, Akira reached out and placed his hand on top of hers. “I’ll be with you just in case. Yusuke’ll also be with you at home. We’ll make sure nothing happens.”

She looked up at him and smiled softly. He was right. “Yeah…” Her stomach growled again and she laughed quietly, picking up her spoon. “Let’s eat then?”

He nodded, picking up his spoon as well and began digging into the delicious curry, savoring the expert blend of spices.

Taking out his phone, Akira began a text conversation.

Ak: I need a favor.
Y: What is it?
Ak: I need you to look out for Airi. Stay with her if I’m not around.
Y: Can you elaborate? What exactly has happened?
Ak: Hisoka’s out of prison.
Y: ...I see. I will be sure to return home shortly.
Ak: Thanks. Don’t let the others know yet.
Y: There is no need for thanks. I care for her as well.

Minimizing the texts, he was about to place his phone back when a paw stopped him. “What was that?” Morgana asked, narrowing his eyes.

Akira furrowed his brow in confusion and looked back at his screen, blanching at his background. He had it set to the slideshow setting, meaning the photos occasionally changed from his albums. A particular photo was on the screen right now, one that he secretly took yesterday. “Er- I can explain…”

Airi paused in eating her food. “Explain what?” She blinked curiously from her seat across from him.
Sweating nervously, he tried to put his phone away but Morgana smacked it out of his hand with a well timed paw and it went careening on the table, sliding off onto Airi’s lap.

Picking it up, she stared blankly at the photo of her and Morgana snuggling inside the bedrock sauna. She didn’t remember him taking this. “...What.”

Akira tensed, eyes darting left and right, anywhere but her. “Uh...I mean...” He stammered. “It was cute..?” He shrugged weakly, not being able to come up with any alibi.

She felt her brows lift up the longer she gazed at the photo. “You took a photo of me and Morgana...without us knowing...and while we were asleep...”

He flinched, hunching his shoulders. “OK, that sounds really bad...”

Morgana looked up at him with squinted eyes. “I never would’ve thought of you as a creep, but this takes the cake.”

His eyes widened. “A creep..?” He was a creep? He did take a photo of them without them knowing, but was it really that bad?

Airi bit her lip, gripping the metal phone case. “...It is really creepy.” Especially since someone had been leaving her photos that she never knew existed. She didn’t want to think of the person sitting across from her in the same vein. She was supposed to be able to trust him. “Please don’t take any more photos of me without me knowing.” She requested blankly.

Pursing his lips, Akira nodded guiltily, keeping his head down. She was right; it wasn’t appropriate to take photos of people without their permission. He had forgotten even something as simple as that. He couldn't even meet her eyes to see the sheer disappointment in them. “I’m sorry...I’ll delete it.” He murmured.

She wordlessly handed the phone back to him and he quickly deleted the photo from his album, shoulders hunched over as if he was expecting her to yell at him.

Airi stared at him for moment before sighing. She could never stay mad at him. “Morgana, come here?”

The feline looked at her inquisitively but did as she asked, jumping out of the bag and up onto her side of the booth. She gently picked him up and hugged him to her chest. “Here.”

Akira looked up at her shyly and blinked, not understanding what she meant.

She gave him a small smile. “I’m giving you permission now, right? Morgana?”

The feline purred from the embrace, rubbing his chin on her arms. “...Fine. Just this once.” He relented with a smirk. "Make sure you take it at a good angle so you can capture my handsomeness.”

Perking up, Akira hesitantly took his phone out again and opened the camera function. “Ready?...1...2...3...”

He took the photo with a snap and admired it with a small smile. Airi had that soft smile on her face, the warm lighting in the hanging light fixture helping to erase some of her dark circles. Her hair was a little messy from sleeping on it, but it was endearing for some reason. Morgana also had a cute expression on his face, the photo capturing him mid smile so his little pink tongue was on display. This was a hundred times better than his previous photo of the two and he was glad she
forgave him for it.

Making it his new wallpaper, he put his phone away and gave her a shy smile. “Thanks...Sorry again. I don’t usually take photos, so...”

Letting Morgana down on the couch, Airi gave her classmate an amused smile. “I can tell. Just be more aware next time, OK? Consent is important, even when it’s not sexual.”

He sputtered, hiding his reddening face in his hands. Of course it would end up as sex talk with her. Every time...

Getting a text from Mishima asking to meet up, Akira offered to walk her home.

Hesitant, she nodded. She had to go back home sometime. It wasn’t like she could just stay in Akira’s bed forever.

She paused. That sounded dirty.

Getting back to her front door, he waited until she unlocked it before waving, turning to walk toward the train station. She waved back, her smile slowly falling as his silhouette became smaller and smaller until he turned the corner. Sighing, she turned to close the door.

“Do you understand yet?”

Gasping, her head shot up and she looked around the dark streets. Blood pounding in her ears, she glanced at all the streets and alleys, finding no one.

Hands beginning to shake again, she slammed the door closed and locked it, pushing her back against it. Did she understand yet? What did that mean? Was it really him?

Super forgot because I'm an idiot but thank you so much to Akai34 for this absolutely wonderful drawing of Airi and Akira!!! I love it so much!!!
Fuchuu Keimusho is a prison in Fucho, Tokyo
Mishima - rank 4
Chapter Notes

Didn't end up doing the thing because I feel dizzy so here's another chapter post lol

See the end of the chapter for more notes

------6/13, MONDAY, EARLY MORNING, SUBWAYS.

Covering her mouth as she yawned, she rested her head against Akira’s shoulder, the train rumbling as it sped toward the heart of Tokyo.

She was only able to sleep for a few hours, four at most. After hearing someone speak behind her, she went and locked everything again, not trusting leaving any sort of opening unguarded. Yusuke had come back after she got home and stayed with her in the Study for the evening, doing their homework together.

She was grateful for that. It was always safer with another person around. Akira had probably told him…

“This is Shibuya. I repeat, this is Shibuya. The time is now 7:12AM, the next stop is…”

Crawling to a stop, the doors opened and the thieves walked out amongst the crowd of pedestrians. Swiping their wallets at the turnstile, they transferred to the Ginza line to wait for their train.

“Fancy seeing you here.”

Stiffening at the somewhat familiar voice, they turned around and saw Akechi walk up to them, dressed in his summer school uniform. “I didn’t think we used the same station.” He remarked politely as he adjusted his white and black striped tie around the collar of his short sleeved button up. “Meeting here must be fate.” He slid his eyes to Airi and smiled. “Hello again. We had a small debate about Hegel’s philosophy, did we not?”

She forced herself to smile cordially. “Yeah, it’s nice to see you again.”

His eyes slid to Yusuke. “Hello, I don’t believe we’ve met. My name is Akechi Goro, I’m a-”

“Student detective, I am aware.” Yusuke replied neutrally. “My name is Kitagawa Yusuke.” He inclined his head as a greeting, but the glint in his eyes implied that the pleasantries was only an act. “A pleasure.”

Taken aback by the abrupt interruption, Akechi coughed slightly before responding. “I see you’ve heard of me. It’s nice to meet you as well, Kitagawa-san.” He turned to focus on Akira. “How are you doing?”

Akira shrugged. “I’m sleepy.” It was true. He spent some of the night thinking to himself. About his current situation. His friends. A murderer being let out of jail. His own actions and decisions. His reality had shifted so much and he never put much time to sorting it all out.

Akechi blinked. “Did you stay up too late? Are you all right?..Ah,” He smiled, more genuine than
his previous one. “I do like that response, though. It’s honest, and it keeps the conversation from
dragging. I’ve been getting interviews a lot lately, so I’ve been wondering how to answer such
questions... I suppose it is best to simply be yourself and say what you think. You’ve given me
much to consider. If it isn’t too much trouble, may I speak with you again sometime?”

Akira nodded, amused at him getting all that from him saying he was sleepy. “Sure.”

Akechi beamed before nodding to the other two, transferring out of the line and disappearing
within the crowd of people.

Airi stared after him. Was that really the Go-kun she knew? They could just share the same first
name. Akechi was a lot nicer than that brat...

The floor beneath them rumbled as a train pulled into the station, and they got on their way to
school.

“So I handed a bill over at a convenience store, and they told me they don’t take foreign
currency…” Ushimaru-sensei sneered. “But what I gave them was a bona fide Japanese bank note.
Don’t tell me young people these days don’t know who Ito Hirobumi is.”

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out his wallet and the bank note in particular, showing it to the
class. “I shudder to think that these will be the people shouldering Japan’s economy…” He shook
his head disapprovingly. “I hope you all know your stuff. Here’s a quiz just to make sure.
Takamaki!”

Frightened at the unexpected call, Ann sat up in her seat.

“Paper money is issued by the Bank of Japan, but who issues the coins?”

She furrowed her brow as she idly twisted a ponytail. “Doesn’t the government?”

Raising a brow, Ushimaru clapped. “That’s right. Seems you’ve been listening. Unlike paper
money, coins are issued by the government. Originally, the government made both coins and paper
money. However, with the ability to make as much money as they wanted, the economy fell into
chaos.” He lectured to the class. “An independent organization- namely the Bank of Japan- has
been tasked with printing paper money since.”

“Hey, did you know that? I had no idea!”

“Takamaki-chan’s studying a lot more now…”

She grinned, scratching her cheek in embarrassment and elation.

Airi smiled slightly, proud of the model for studying on her own.

“Coins, which don’t have as much of an effect on the economy, are still produced by the
government.” Ushimaru-sensei continued. “You simply can’t trust a moron to look after your
finances. The best they can manage is pocket change.”
The class dispersed into the hallways as soon as the last bell rang. Feeling her phone buzz, Airi took it out of her bag.

Ma: **Airi-chan, please meet me in the student council room.**
Ma: **Bring Kurusu-kun with you.**
Ai: **Is something wrong?**
Ma: **Please follow my instructions.**
Ai: **OK.**

She bit her lip. What did Makoto-senpai want? Placing it back in her bag, she stood up and turned to Akira. “We’re being summoned.” She informed quietly.

He blinked, putting his books away. “What? Where?”

“Oh, you’re still here!”

They turned around, seeing Kawakami walk up to them. “Niijima-san’s looking for you. Could you head to the student council room right away?”

He furrowed his brow and turned to Airi. “Is that what you were talking about?”

She nodded. “She just texted me about it.”

The teacher rolled her eyes. “If she told you to go, why am I running errands for her?” She rubbed the back of her head. “I know she’s the Principal’s favorite or whatever... Anyway, you guys should get going.” With that, she walked out of the room, sliding the door behind her.

Now that she was gone, Morgana popped his head out of the desk, jumping into the bag. “Niijima’s the student council president, right?” He narrowed his eyes. “What could she want..?”

They all looked at each other and sighed, leaving the room and walking up to the third floor. Whatever this was, they should get it over with.

Airi slid the door to the council room open and they walked in, closing the door behind them. Makoto was already there, leaning against the desk with her hands folded on her lap. “Ah. Earlier than expected.” She remarked coolly, narrowing her eyes at the class president. “...Have a seat.”

Taken aback by the sudden hostility, Airi furrowed her brow and did as she was told, Akira sitting next to her.

The student council president took a seat across from them, her laptop opened on the desk. “I’ll get straight to the point. Kamoshida and Madarame. Won’t you tell me the truth behind the Phantom Thieves’ incidents?”

Their eyes widened in shock. What?

“Can’t answer that? Ah, of course.” Makoto continued. “There’s no way either of you would admit to such things.” Reaching into her skirt pocket, she pulled out her phone, opening an app. “Have a
“If someone else could help ‘em, we wouldn’t be doin’ stuff as the Phantom Thieves to start with!” Ryuji’s voice filtered out of the speaker, filling their veins with ice.

“So you think it’s true..?” Ann’s voice came in. “We’ll be OK if we keep doing this...right?”

“We should be. They can’t gather any concrete evidence on us.” Her own voice filtered through from the recording and Airi closed her eyes in resignation. Fuck. “But we should try to be more quiet. We can look like a close group of friends, but the instant anyone overhears us, it’s game over.”

The recording finished and they sat there in silence. Narrowing her eyes at them, Makoto swept some of her hair behind an ear. “...What could all this mean?” She asked icily.

“We screwed up…” Morgana whispered, mortified at being caught.

She crossed her arms. “Was it blackmail? Hypnosis? How do you corner someone into making them confess?” Her voice lulled into a false calm. “Won’t you tell me how you did it?”

Airi bit her lip, trying to think up any way to salvage this. “Makoto-senpai, I—”

“No more lies, Kimisawa.” Makoto bit out.

She flinched at the use of her family name, seeing the betrayal in the other girl’s eyes. That hurt.

Furrowing his brow at her focused ire, Akira rested his hands on his lap. “Maybe you should ask the culprits.” He answered coolly.

Makoto hmphed in displeasure. “...You want to say this doesn’t prove anything, don’t you? I believe that you four are the Phantom Thieves.” Her expression smoothed. “Now, what would the police think if they heard my recording?”

They tensed at her threat. “It’d be bad if we’re put under police surveillance.” Morgana whispered through the fabric of the bag. “There’s no telling what’ll happen to Akira, too!”

Airi bit back a curse. That was true. He was still on probation, no matter how well he was doing at school. If she leaked that recording out to law enforcement, he’d be taken away for questioning and they’d never be able to find him. Her chest clenched at the thought. She couldn’t let that happen.

“If you confess the truth, I don’t mind just leaving this between the three of us…” Makoto offered coolly. “You’ll tell me, won’t you?”

They kept their mouths shut, but a familiar ringtone rang out in the room and Akira slowly took his phone out of his pocket.

He glanced over at the council president and she nodded. “Go ahead.”

Pursing his lips, he accepted the call. “Hello?”

“Hey, where you at?” Ryuji asked enthusiastically, his voice loud enough for all the occupants to hear even though he wasn’t put on speaker. “Takin’ a leak? Let’s meet up at the usual spot to hold our Phantom Thieves meetin’! Bring Airi too!”

Putting her face in her hands, Airi just barely resisted to scream. Why, Ryuji. Why. Him and his big mouth.
Panicking now, Akira quickly disconnected the call and glanced at the council president apprehensively. “That idiot!!” Morgana hissed in dismay.

Makoto smiled satisfactorily. “As loud as always... but his timing’s perfect. I’d like everyone else to hear this as well. Won’t you take me to your other friends?”

The two Yongenjaya residents glanced at each other and sighed. They had no other choice. Standing up, they both nodded, heading for the door.

They walked out of the school building together, an awkward tension filling the air. Airi glanced to her right where Makoto was, eyes focused straight ahead. “Um...Makoto-senpai-”

“It’s fine.” Makoto interrupted her, voice quiet as they walked down the road to the station. “I understand. It’s no surprise that you’d prioritize your group over our new friendship.”

Airi furrowed her brow. “That’s not why I didn’t say anything, it’s because-”

“You wanted to get close to me to move the spotlight off of your group.” Makoto stated matter-of-factly. “It’s a good tactic. Unfortunately for you, I had already suspected you before you ever decided to be friends with me. Did it not occur to you how strange it was for the ‘school’s favorite class representative’ to be associating with the outcasts? I had thought they were using you, but now to realize you’ve been with them all along...”

Flinching at the mocking nickname, Airi narrowed her eyes. “I decided to be friends with you because I know you’re a good person who tries to uphold their duties.” She answered carefully. "It had nothing to do with our current...problem.”

“Had? You used past tense, meaning it has something to do with it now.” Makoto deducted coolly. “You’ve been lying to me even before that time in Shibuya, haven’t you? As I told you, I understand. I don’t blame you for lying to me, I’m nowhere near the top of your priorities, nor are your fellow students-”

“If you could just listen to me for one fucking second!” Airi shouted, just about ready to snap.

The council president turned to her in surprise, eyes wide at her outburst.

Taking a deep breath, Airi tried to calm down. She was already functioning on less than four hours of sleep last night, and hadn’t been getting enough sleep for the past few days in a row. Her patience was thinning with each hour. Calm down. “...Let’s say I’m a phantom thief. What was my first action?”

“...Changing Kamoshida.” Makoto answered hesitantly, furrowing her brow at where this was going.

Airi nodded slowly. “Right. Why?”

“...His abuse of certain students.”

“Yes. Now, going by your theory of me and Akira being phantom thieves, doesn’t it say something about us? If that’s true?”

Makoto pursed her lips. “I’m sure that you are. It means...” She let out a sigh. “It means you care. I apologize for jumping to conclusions. Still...” She paused before shaking her head. “I’ll explain once I’ve met the rest of your group.”
Closing her eyes, Airi nodded resignedly. “...Fine.”

Giving her a look of concern, Akira placed a hand on her shoulder, trying to comfort her. He didn’t know about her and her superior’s relationship, but he could see they were both hurt in this situation.

Her eyes fluttered open and she gave him a small but tired smile.

They swiped their wallets at the turnstile and took the train to Shibuya. Getting out of the Ginza line, they headed left to the station passageway. Already they could see their other teammates waiting for them at the hideout. Ryuji was lounging on the floor, checking his phone while Ann had a magazine in her face, trying to pass the time.

Yusuke was scanning the passerby and caught their silhouettes, blinking in surprise. They walked up to them and Ryuji balked at their unexpected guest. “Wh-What the hell?”

Ann narrowed her eyes, lowering her magazine. “What’s the meaning of this?”

“I had them lead me here.” Makoto responded calmly. “Sakamoto Ryuji, Takamaki Ann…” Her eyes slid to the artist. “And you’re Kitagawa-kun, correct? Second year at Kosei High and former pupil of Madarame?” A smile grew on her lips and she took out her phone. “I wanted to ask you all about this.”

She replayed the same recording from earlier, watching as the blood slowly drained from their faces. Ryuji and Ann glanced at each other and cringed.

“An extremely similar technique was used for both Kamoshida and Madarame…” She extrapolated, putting her phone away. “While those affected by their acts were just coincidentally meeting up…” She shook her head at their amateur mistake. “How could that not raise suspicions?”

Glancing at each other, Yusuke crossed his arms as he furrowed his brow. “What do you intend to do?” He asked warily. “Have you come just to say you’re going to report us?”

Ann glared at her. “It was the Principal who told you to find us. The school can’t have ties to criminals, after all! And yet they turn a blind eye when it comes to suicide and sexual harassment.” She frowned pityingly. “Those adults are just using you. I feel sorry for you.”

Airi couldn’t even find it in herself to scold her, and she glanced away tiredly.

Makoto grimaced and looked away. “I…I know…” She whispered, defeat disfiguring her voice.

Ann looked at her in surprise. “Huh..?”

Taking a deep breath, Makoto squared her shoulders. “That’s why I would like to verify the justice you speak of.”

They looked at her in surprise. “What?” Ryuji gaped.

“I’m the only one who knows about you.” Makoto continued. “If you prove what you’re doing is truly just, I’ll erase the recording.”

Airi watched her restlessly. Was this why she was so adamant on finding their other identities? To blackmail them?
“She wants to make a deal…” Morgana whispered to Akira who narrowed his eyes.

“There is someone whose heart I’d like you to change, and...Airi-chan knows who it is.”

Airi blinked, noticing that she used her first name again. Guess she was forgiven. “I do? If you’re talking about the Principal, we can’t do that…”

“That’s unfortunate, but you don’t deny that you can for someone else?” Makoto raised a brow, quickly catching on. “Anyway, I can’t tell you just yet. Let’s continue our talk after school tomorrow. On the roof.” She sharpened her eyes. “Assuming you all accept my offer, that is.” With that, she walked away, blending into the crowd of people.

They stared after her before sighing. “This is turnin’ into a real pain…” Ryuji muttered as he rubbed the top of his head.

Akira exhaled, his brow creasing from the increased complications. “Let’s go somewhere private to talk about this. We don’t need anyone else to listen in.”

The two blonds flinched at his wording and nodded sullenly.

Leaving the station, they walked over to Central Street and up the stairs into the diner. Perking up at their appearance, Yukimi walked up to them. “Hey guys! Eating here?”

Yusuke nodded. “A more...private spot, if you can, Yukimi-nee.”

Catching onto his subdued tone, she nodded and directed them to a table near the back, farther away from the other customers. They all took a seat and she brought them waters, making sure to leave them alone.

Lacing his hands together on the table, Yusuke stared disapprovingly at Ryuji. “...You were careless. I don’t think you truly understood how high the stakes were. Anything to say, Ryuji?”

He sputtered. “Why’re you singlin’ me out? Ann and Airi got recorded too, y’know!”

Ann winced at the reminder. “I’m so sorry…”

Airi sighed heavily as she leaned back in her seat. “I think she already knew it was us whether or not she had recorded that...” Makoto had said she had suspected her from the very beginning of the year because she hung out with the “outcasts.” Wouldn’t that mean she became friends while already suspicious of her? Was she underhanded, or was there another reason why she seemed so betrayed earlier. They weren’t that close, but Airi still felt guilty about lying to her like that.

Ryuji frowned demurely. “What should we do? That girl’s got dirt on us…”

Losing his ire, Yusuke took a sip of his water. “A recording seems to be insufficient evidence, though. And even with that, there’s no way they could prove our methods.”

Ann nodded in agreement. “Considering who we’re dealing with, I think it might be a trap.”

Airi shook her head. “No, she said I knew the target, and it’s not the Principal. That had to mean something…” But what? What did she mean by that?

Sneaking his head out of the bag, Morgana whispered morosely. “Regardless, Akira would be in real trouble. He’s on probation, after all.”

They grimaced at the reminder. “Things’d get rough if we didn’t have our leader and buddy…”
Ryuji murmured. “And I totally don’t wanna deal with the police…”

“Then…” Yusuke frowned. “We have no other choice but to go along with it.”

Morgana nodded grimly. “Yes, it’s best we agree, at least for the time being. We made a crucial mistake…but not a critical one. We’ll just have to recover from here on out.”

Airi nodded in agreement. “Ryuji, please try to be more quiet. We’re lucky that Makoto-senpai wants to bargain with us, but if someone else overheard us, like Akechi-san…”

Ryuji groaned quietly. “Yeah yeah...My bad. Sorry, guys. I’ll try…” He pursed his lips apologetically before looking at Akira. “So...we doin’ this?”

Akira nodded. “It’s our only choice. Never mind me being on probation, but all of you would get in trouble as well…” And he wouldn’t risk that.

Ryuji nodded. “All right. We’re meetin’ on the school rooftop tomorrow, yeah?”

Yusuke slowly blinked. “What about me? I could always sneak in if necessary.”

Ann shook her head. “That’ll draw too much attention. You should just wait outside, Yusuke.” She looked down at her water apprehensively. “What could she be scheming..?”

Akira shrugged as he downed the rest of his water. “The only thing we can do is hear her out, or else…”

Making it back home with Yusuke, they both took a bath before taking taking a seat in the living room. Rain poured down on the windows, the sky dark from the murky clouds and the late time. It was the beginning of the rainy season, lasting from the middle of June to July. It was a good thing she’d already fortified the foundations from potential leaks.

Nursing a hot cup of tea, their phones rang out.

R: I’m so fucking pissed.
R: Do we just gotta do what she says..?
Y: Considering what has happened, it seems we have no other choice.
An: I wonder whose heart the student council president wants us to change.
An: Airi, any ideas? She said you know who it is.
Ai: ...I’m trying to think, but no one in particular comes to mind.
Ai: Sorry.
Ak: It’s all right. We’ll find out tomorrow.
An: She’d have a reason for picking that person, right?
Y: I am curious myself…
Y: She mentioned how she wants us to prove our justice, did she not?
An: Yeah, she definitely did.
Y: Then there must be some reasoning behind her choice.
Y: Please contact me immediately if you find anything out.
Y: And don’t go picking any fights, OK? Do you understand, Ryuji?
R: Why’re you singling me out? I ain’t dumb!
Ai: Lay off, all of you. He learned his lesson already.

She put her phone down and sighed. “Who is she talking about..?”

Yusuke put his phone away and lightly grasped his mug. “You are positive you don’t have any idea who she is requesting?”

Airi shook her head. “No...Other than the Principal. I already checked though, he doesn’t have a Palace or a Mementos chamber.”

He hummed, taking a sip of tea. “I could not have expected things to turn out this way, especially after our party...Speaking of events,” He placed his cup down on the table and faced her. “Nee-san, how safe do you feel right now?”

She blinked. “Safe? Oh…” She wilted. “You mean about Hisoka...To be honest, I’m a little worried. I don’t know if he’ll come back for me.” He already had. “-Or move on and kill another person...Maybe he’s changed in these ten years?” She shrugged weakly, staring at her tea pensively. “I don’t know…”

He furrowed his brow. “Well...I am present to keep you safe, as well as Akira whose only two blocks away. We will protect you.”

She gave him a small but grateful smile. “Thank you...Otoute.”

He blinked in surprise at the new name. “Otoute..?” He smiled shyly. “You’re welcome, Aneki.”

They grinned.

Chapter End Notes

Otoute - little brother, more familial
Aneki - older sister, more familial
Chapter 112

Chapter Notes

Thank you for 632 kudos and 21.7k hits!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

---6/14, TUESDAY, EARLY MORNING, SUBWAYS.

“Hey, Kimi-chan! And Kimi-chan’s boyfriend!”

They turned around and saw Ohya walk up to them, her trusty DSLR around her neck. “How’ve you guys been? Going to school now?” She grinned, still wearing her flashy red lipstick.

“G-Good morning, Ohya…” Airi smiled awkwardly, blushing at the terms she used. Everyone really did think they were together...

Feeling his cheeks heat up at the nickname, Akira coughed slightly. “Good morning, Ohya-san.”

Yusuke tilted his head, observing the reporter. “This is the reporter who published our stories, isn’t she not?”

Airi nodded. “Yep, this is Ohya Ichiko. Ohya, this is Kitagawa Yusuke.”

Ohya perked up. “Oh, right! I remember your name from the entry you e-mailed me! How’ve you guys been since then?”

He smiled lightheartedly. “Everyone who participated has been much happier lately. We’ve also reclaimed all our artworks back.” He bowed at the waist. “Thank you again, Ohya-san. We couldn’t have accomplished this without your skills and connections.”

Scratching her cheek in embarrassment, she waved him away. “Nah, you misunderstand. I did it ‘cause it was my job. I’m glad you guys got a good ending out of it though!” She grinned. “I’m just heading home now. The morning sun is too bright…”

Akira blinked. “What about your job?”

Ohya snorted. “Where do you think I’m comin’ from?” She covered her mouth as she yawned. “Man, all-nighters are tough. You guys work hard on your studies, I’m going home.” She waved as she left the Ginza line, walking past the turnstiles.

“She’s…” Yusuke began hesitantly. “An interesting individual.”

Airi smiled sheepishly, fighting the urge to yawn. She didn’t get much sleep last night either. “Yeah…”
Waiting a few minutes after the bell rang, the thieves regrouped on the second floor and nodded grimly to each other. It was time to meet with the student council president.

Walking up the stairs, they headed toward the roof, opening the door with a creak. Makoto was already there, leaning against one of the desks with her hands crossed on her lap. She looked up at the sound of the door opening. “I was thinking you might not show.”

Airi bit her lip. “Whose heart do you want us to change? You said I know who it is, but...I can’t think of anyone.”

Her lips tightened. “...A mafia boss.” Makoto announced grimly. "One that I have been trying to track down since three years ago.”

Airi's eyes widened. “Wait, what?...You mean for the scams?” What did she mean by three years ago.?

Makoto nodded. “This group seems to be the cause of the rise in phishing scams.” She scowled. “What’s worse, once you’re in their sights, they won’t stop threatening you until they get what they want.” Her frown deepened at the grim situation. “They’ll force you to take part in their scams, threaten your family, and ultimately destroy your life.”

“Holy shit…” Ryuji breathed out, eyes wide in shock and horror.

“Then…” Airi whispered, a hand coming up to cover her mouth. “Those anonymous requests we got to deal with the situation...It must be even worse than it sounded.”

Ann flinched at the news. “No!”

Makoto nodded, straightening up from the desk. “They primarily target juveniles.”

Akira narrowed his eyes at the gruesome circumstances. “Do you have a name?” He asked lowly, getting straight to their objective.

Makoto shook her head. “Nobody knows the boss’ name, no matter how hard I have searched. The victims are being threatened not to testify, so even the police can’t get a grasp of the situation.”

Airi furrowed her brow. “Is that what you overheard a few days ago at Shibuya? But...you’re asking us to do the impossible.”

Makoto narrowed her eyes. “You should be able to pull it off...If you’re really the righteous Phantom Thieves. You told me yesterday that you cared, so you should do this.” A mocking smile grew on her lips. “Or is Akechi-kun correct when he says you act without justice?”

Morgana bristled at her continued attack at their morals. “Can’t you say something witty back at her?” He whispered to his leader.

Akira deadpanned. What could he even say? “Something witty. Whatever.”

Hearing that, Airi gave him an odd look before focusing back at the student council president.

“Theyir main hub of activity is in Shibuya…” Makoto grimaced. “I hate to admit this, but that’s all the information I have. You have two weeks. Once that has passed, I’ll submit all the evidence I have to the police and to the school.” She slowly exhaled. “I hope you don’t let me down…” She
stated, locking eyes with red ones before walking toward the door, closing it behind her.

Airi flinched as the door slammed closed. Clearly it was meant for her.

They turned to face each other. “She really had the upper hand in that exchange…” Morgana murmured sullenly.

Ryuji furiously rubbed his head. “‘Don’t let me down’...Dammit, she was just bossin’ us around…”

Akira sighed, feeling his shoulders tighten up from the confrontation. “She’s really blackmailing us. Let’s meet up with Yusuke and tell him what happened.”

They shouldered their bags and walked down from the roof, exiting the building on the first floor. Yusuke was waiting at the school entrance, phone in hand as he waited for any news.

He looked up at their approach. “So, what is our plan of action?”

Glancing around at their surroundings and at the still lingering students, Akira shook his head. “Not here.”

They walked to the train station, taking the train to Shibuya and stopping at their hideout. As usual, crowds of pedestrians would pass by, none of them giving a glance to the high school students.

“So?” Yusuke tilted his head as he placed his bag on the floor.

Ryuji sighed, taking a seat on the floor and leaning back against the safety railings. “We gotta target a mafia boss...Those scams that’re happenin’ in Shibuya? Some students from our school got tangled in it too, and now she’s askin’ us to do somethin’ about it.”

Ann resisted the urge to growl as she pulled at her pigtails. “Urgh...I’m so mad!”

Yusuke furrowed his brow as he crossed his arms. “The mafia? Hm…”

The model deflated, the anger leaving her in a mess of little morale. “Can we really do this..?” She asked uncertainly.

Airi exhaled sharply. “We have to. Never mind being blackmailed into this, she’s given us a good reason to…” She grasped her arm as she frowned. “How many people in school have been threatened already..?”

Morgana sighed. “Either way, we have almost no information on our target. This guy’s a crime boss, so I wouldn’t be surprised if he had a Palace. Still…”

Yusuke blinked, letting his arms fall to his sides. “Isn’t this a prime opportunity for us though?”

Ann scrunched up her face. “How?! We’re in huge trouble!”

“Even after we punished an evil man who seemed to be good, the public did not acknowledge us.” He explained calmly. “However, if we take down an actual criminal, let alone a target the police don’t have answers for…” He trailed off, letting them connect the dots.

Akira perked up. “Then more people would believe in us.”

Gasping in realization, Ryuji stood up from the floor, a grin on his face. “I get it! That means even Akechi’ll hafta acknowledge us as the Phantom Thieves!”
“Shh!” Airi shushed him, holding a finger in front of her lips. “Stop saying we’re the Phantom Thieves in public!” She whispered.

He winced, rubbing the back of his head sheepishly. “Right, sorry…” He turned to Akira. “Well...whaddya say, leader?”

Akira smirked. “Let’s prove our justice.”

The ex-runner pumped a fist in excitement. “Hell yeah! We just gotta do what we always do!”

“Our time limit is two weeks, correct?” Yusuke asked. “We can’t afford to waste too much time...I’ll ask around Kosei and see if there are any victims.”

Airi closed her eyes in resignation, already feeling the stress increase. Two weeks to find a mafia boss, while juggling school, work, and her own paranoia...Fuck it. What was more important were other people’s safety. Her own problems didn’t matter right now. “I’ll try to ask around the school and see if they can tell me anything else. Not sure if they will though, they might not talk about it to a class representative...”

“They might to me.” Akira stated, shouldering his bag. “Me and Morgana can ask around as well.”

Ann nodded. “OK, I know some girls who go to Shibuya pretty often. I’ll check with them about it.”

Ryuji crossed his legs as he leaned against the railing. “All right, then I’m gonna see what I can find on the net.” He grinned. “We figured out what to do during the whole Kamoshida thing, right?”

Akira nodded. “All right then. We’ll use this week to try to find as much as we can, then we’ll go from there.”

Everyone nodded in agreement. “Then, I’m gonna go now...” Ryuji rubbed his nose, slinging his schoolbag behind his shoulder. “I’ll see you guys!” He waved as he ran down the passageway and deeper into the station.

Checking her phone, Ann looked up at them and shouldered her bag as well. “I’m going to my agency to ask around. I’ll let you guys know what I’ve found.” She wiggled her fingers at them and left, leaving the three Yongenjaya residents at the station.

Yusuke turned to Akira. “Could I have a moment?”

He blinked. “What’s up?”

“Well, it’s...” He hesitated, a troubled frown on his face. “I have a yearning to see “Sayuri”...So if you’re heading homeward, I’ll accompany you.”

Akira nodded. “Sure. You’re always welcome to visit, y’know. Boss likes you.” He turned to the cellist who was checking her phone. “Airi? You coming too?”

She shook her head, putting her mobile away. “Used up all their money for sweets.”

Akira nodded. “OK... Why don’t we walk you to the flower shop? I’ll probably come back here later so I can pick you up.”
She blinked before smiling shyly. It really set off the butterflies in her heart that they were being so protective. When was the last time anyone went to such lengths for her? Rui... “Thank you...I’d appreciate it.”

After dropping Airi off at her job, they took the train together back to Yongenjaya, walking into the cafe. Whatever tension had tightened the artist’s shoulders relaxed as soon as he saw the painting, and he took a seat at a booth, observing contently. “Ah, the “Sayuri”...It seems to suit this cafe quite well.” He smiled. “I’m glad I chose to leave it here.”

Akira leaned against the counter, resting his hands in his pockets. “Yeah, it adds some nice atmosphere.”

Observing it for a bit longer, Yusuke flinched, bringing his arms to hug himself. “Akira…” He began grimly. “I fear I have found myself in quite a horrible mess!”

Taken aback by his sudden change in mood, Akira could only blink. “Huh..? What are you talking about?”

Yusuke sighed. “To put it bluntly, I am in need of your assistance...Please, listen to what I must say.” He rested his chin against the back of his hand. “Throughout my artistic career, there have been moments I’ve struggled with particular motifs or techniques...However, those struggles came to pass on each occasion.”

He grimaced. “Yet now I find myself in a similar situation...but the more I try to escape it, the worse it becomes. It seems I am trapped in what we in the art world call a 'slump'…” He looked up at Akira. “Are you aware that I am attending Kosei on an art scholarship?”

Akira nodded. “Yeah, Airi told me. Don’t you have to keep your grades up to stay on it?”

He nodded grimly. “Yes, such coveted grants are not given as charity. I must continually achieve within my field to remain eligible...Were I to lose my scholarship...I would likely have no choice but to leave the school as well.”

He shook his head at the thought. “In the earlier days of my career, I would exclusively paint what I desired, when I desired it. The only goal I had in mind was the pursuit of pure beauty...That goal is what drove me onward.”

His eyes slid to the portrait, softening as he took in his mother’s likeness. “I wanted nothing more than to attain the lustrous allure of the “Sayuri” in my own work…”

His eyes darkened. “Yet what reason do I have now? Holding on to my scholarship? To not be a burden on Aneki’s finances and generosity? Worldly desires are all that spur my brush to move...and the resulting work reflects such impurity of mind. To be honest,” He hesitated before sighing deeply. “I am unsure as to whether I can even call myself an artist anymore…”

Akira frowned sympathetically. “You’re so tough on yourself.”

Yusuke pursed his lips. “...My apologies. It seems I got somewhat carried away there. But...I
simply cannot accept this lack of purpose in my work. That is why I am so upset with my own indecision. Such a vague ambition is, in essence, a sin of sorts…”

He huffed quietly. “Though I suppose allowing my young career to come to an end here would be even more sinful.” He crossed his arms. “I only wish to create a work I can be genuinely proud of…”

He jerked his chin over at the painting. “Akira. Please look over there at the “Sayuri.” Her incandescent figure, alluring gaze...That is the meaning of pure beauty! Yet no matter how hard I try to replicate it, an elegance so sweet remains elusive to me..!”

His voice began increasing in volume as his fervor grew. “Why is that, you ask? It is surely because the painter behind the work differs...Because the soul differs..! But if my estimations are correct, the “soul” is nothing but another way to speak of the human heart. What, then, is the heart..? How does it bring forth such beauty?” He flexed his fingers in the air, trying to grasp at something metaphorical. “I must understand..!”

Blinking at his enthusiasm, he sighed and deflated. “To be perfectly frank, though...I am unsure of how to do so.” He looked up at his leader with hopeful eyes. “Akira...Would you be able to provide me assistance? You have already brought profound change to my world. Hence, I believe you of all people may be able to bring me closer to the truth.”

Akira smiled and nodded. “I’d be glad to help.”

Yusuke sighed in elation. “You would?! Wonderful. At the moment, my art teacher has yet to notice any drastic changes in my work…” He grimaced. “But I cannot hide forever. Impurity of the heart will undoubtedly seep onto an artist’s canvas eventually.” He grasped his chin thoughtfully before noting the time on the clock. “I must go now. I should go back home to cook dinner.”

Akira blinked at the new information. “You cook?”

He nodded. “Yes. Aneki has yet to savor my own cuisine, but with recent events...I felt that I should contribute more to ease her paranoia.” He confessed quietly. “She has not been sleeping well, though I don’t think she realizes I know this.”

Akira frowned at the news. “This whole thing with Hisoka’s starting to unnerve her…” He checked the time as well, noting it was getting late. “I should go pick her up then.”

Yusuke nodded and the two left the cafe, splitting up in opposite directions.

Scanning his wallet at the turnstile, Akira walked down into the station, waiting for the next train. His phone rang in his pocket and he took it out.

R: So I checked online, and people are talking about it all over.
R: Now, in my expert opinion, Iida of Class 2-D is guilty.
Ai: Iida-kun? Really?
An: Wait, start at the beginning. What’s he guilty of?
R: Supposedly he’s been spending money left and right recently.
R: Said it’s because of some great part-time job he got.
Ai: How did I not hear about this? Dammit.
Y: Even as class president, I doubt you would be privy to everything.
Y: It may very well be worth looking into if it’s true.
R: Right?
R: Can you try asking him about it, Airi? I’m pretty sure he’d spill if it was you.
A: I can try.
A: I’ll be with you!
A: Though, I’ve rarely talked to Iida-kun before…
A: Hopefully nothing happens, but Akira can back us up in case, right?
A: Leave it to me.
A: Thank you. Hopefully you won’t have to. Iida-kun isn’t a violent guy.
R: Actually Airi, let Ann do it. I’m hoping for some great things this time from Takamaki-san’s world-class wonderful acting.
A: Shut it.
Y: I hope this will get us even marginally closer to their so-called boss.
Y: I leave this Iida to you three. And I have high hopes for your acting as well, Ann.
A: You’re both missing the point!

“Is it true that Iida guy’s guilty?” Morgana whispered from his shoulder. “Well, we’ll need to dig up some dirt first thing in the morning.”

Akira nodded in agreement. The train pulled up to the station and he got on, gripping onto a safety rail.

He looked up at the TVs, noting the news. “Up next, we discuss looming dangers approaching our city. A team of reporters followed a police investigator who is on the mafia case. What was clear is that there is little the police can do.”

He frowned faintly at the news. So their next target really was untraceable by police investigations. How were they going to do this..?

Airi sighed as she wiped the sweat from her forehead, fanning herself with a hand. The mall was air conditioned but the flower shop had several heat lamps for their cacti, making this small corner way warmer than the rest of the plaza. Luckily, she was wearing a chiffon dress so it was breezy when she moved around.

Wrapping up one more bouquet, she placed them inside the refrigerator, slamming the door closed. She walked back into the storefront, about to take off her apron.

“Oh, Kimisawa-chan!” Hanasaki waved to her from the counter. “A customer left this for you.”

She furrowed her brow. “A customer?” She walked up to the older woman.

Her boss nodded. “He came in when you were counting stock in the back and told me to leave this with you. He also bought a large bouquet of red spider lilies.” She took it out from under the counter, placing a manila folder and one white camellia on the surface.

Airi stared blankly. He was waiting? She hesitantly picked up the envelope and with a flick of her nail, opened the seal. Flipping the cover, she peered inside. Closing it back, she placed it and the flower into her bag. “...Thank you, Hanasaki-san.”
Hanasaki peered at her face, starting to worry. “Do you know that customer? Leaving you a white camellia means he’s waiting for you...but red spider lilies are for funerals. Is he waiting for you at a cemetery? He was a little too old to pursue you romantically...”

Airi bit her lip. “...Hanasaki-san, please tell me if he comes back. I...I don’t think I’ll be coming to work for a while.” She couldn’t put her boss in danger.

Her boss blinked. “Is something wrong? You’re usually very consistent.”

She shook her head. “There’s a lot to do at school, so I won’t have time to work.” She lied.

Hanasaki smiled. “OK, take your time. You’re always welcome here, you know!”

Airi smiled shyly and bowed. She was the best. “Thank you.”

“Airi?”

She straightened up and turned to the storefront where Akira was walking in dressed in a black shirt, unbuttoned white shirt rolled up to his elbows, and blue jeans. “Oh, hey.” She waved, taking off her apron and folding it. “I thought you were joking earlier when you said you’d pick me up.”

He gave her an unimpressed frown. “I never joke when it comes to your safety.”

Taken aback by his sincerity, she smiled gratefully, her heart fluttering at his words. “Right...Thank you.” She murmured.

Blinking curiously, Hanasaki slinked up from behind her, peering at the new guest. “Oh? Isn’t this the boy who escorts you here sometimes?”

Airi nodded. “Hanasaki-san, this is Kurusu Akira, my classmate and friend. Akira, this is Hanasaki Reika, my boss.”

He smiled and bowed slightly, sweating all the while. Blooming Flower Lovely Petal. That’s...a very fitting name for a florist. “Nice to meet you, Hanasaki-san.”

Noticing his expression, Hanasaki smirked. “Yes, I know. What an amazing name for a florist, right?” She shook her head. “Anyway, you said you’re here to pick Kimisawa-chan up?” A mischievous smile grew on her lips and she sized him up, nodding approvingly. “You’re together, right? You’re a good looking young man and she’s a very pretty young lady...” She hinted.

Airi sighed at her digging, even as her cheeks heated up at her question. “N-No...We’re not. Anyway, I’m going to go home now. Have a good night, Hanasaki-san.”

“Mmkay.” She smiled knowingly as she waved at them. “Stay safe!”

Airi waved back and they left the mall, entering into the Underground Walkway. “So, is there anything you want to do while we’re out?”

Morgana leaned his head against Akira’s shoulder. “Hmm...” He hummed as he thought about the various activities that were available in the city. “...Oh! We could confront that storekeep about that gun.”

Akira blinked, remembering what happened over a month ago. “Oh, right...” He still had the fake gun in a drawer back in his room. “Do you mind if we go over there?”

Airi shrugged. “Sure.”
They walked up the stairs and into the city proper, heading toward Central Street. Avoiding the crowds, she eyed some shady looking men standing around the alleys. Could some of these men be the scammers?

They turned the corner at the crepe shop and walked into Untouchable, the strong air conditioning blowing the humidity out. Still sat on a chair behind the counter was Iwai, face immersed in a hunting magazine and his feet propped up on the glass.

Airi looked around curiously. This was only the second time she came here, the first time being when she bought her sniper rifle. Would he have new models she could try?

Akira moved to the counter, resting his hands in his pockets.

Iwai peeked out at him with one eye, chewing on a toothpick. “...You again? Are you gonna try and sell me somethin’ weird again?”

Akira took a deep breath, heart pulsing faster. This could totally be illegal but the potential payoff would be worth it. “I looked inside the bag.”

He exhaled slowly. “I see...So you took a look inside, huh?” He glanced over at Airi who was checking out a hunting knife. “She with you?”

Akira nodded.

“Right...Well, that was a custom gun that I modified to look as real as possible. I had a customer who was interested in it.” He smirked languidly. “You helped me out by smugglin’ it outta here so that I didn’t get caught by those detectives. You can have that gun, if ya want.”

Akira blinked in surprise. “...Thanks.” It’ll definitely help in the Metaverse since it looked more real than his current one.

Iwai narrowed his eyes. “...You’re an accomplice now, so don’t go snitchin’. I got everything on my security camera.”

“I want to see more.”

He paused and raised a brow. “Oh ho...” Leaning to the side, he eyed the cellist near the aisle.

She smiled prettily, covering her ears and turning away from them. She knew if they got this man on their side, they’d have a tremendous advantage when dealing with Palaces and Mementos. She’d let her leader do his work.

Iwai huffed in amusement before turning back to the phantom thieves leader. “...Wanna talk in the back?”

Akira nodded and followed him to the steel locked door at the rear of the store, disappearing behind it with a heavy clank.

Letting her arms fall to her side, Airi peered around in earnest this time. There were a lot of different military equipment on the racks. Walking up to the counter, she lifted a brow as she eyed a bayonet. Maybe she could attach that to the end of her rifle, in case any enemies got too close...

Her eyes darted around the empty store, noting the security cameras on the ceiling. Taking the envelope out of her bag, she peered inside again, feeling something akin to hopelessness well up inside her. So he knew where her job was. He was confident enough to just walk up with people...
around and leave her more photos.

She took them out of the envelope, staring at a photo of her own face at age seven. This was right before her “performance,” as she could still see the fire of rebellion in her eyes.

She took a look at the second photo in the pile. Her dead eyes and blank face blended in with all the other orphans in the institute, sitting down for Sunday sermons. The last photo was of her and…

Her breath hitched. Rui. She had almost forgotten what she really looked liked. She took in the warm brown hair and warm brown eyes, grinning happily with one front tooth gone as she handed child Airi a dandelion seed. This was right before the priest...

The back door creaked open and she quickly put the photos back in the envelope, shoving it in her bag. She couldn’t let Akira know. He’d only worry more for her.

Sighing, he walked up to her as he shouldered his bag, not seeing what she did. “It’s done.” He stated quietly, placing a hand on her back and leading her out of the store.

They walked down into the subway, swiping their wallets at the turnstiles. “So what did you guys settle with?” She whispered, mindful of any eavesdroppers. They didn’t need another Makoto incident.

The train pulled up into the station and they got on, taking a seat. “He’ll help us customize our guns so long as I do some...errands for him.” Akira murmured, adjusting his glasses.

She furrowed her brow warily. “Errands? What kind?...He’s not with the yakuza, right?”

He shook his head. “No. I have a feeling he doesn’t like being affiliated with them.” He smirked slightly, a hint of Joker peeking through. “But this means we’ll get more powerful firearms, which means we could probably get more money in the Metaverse.”

She sweatdropped at his eagerness to threaten Shadows. “That’s good…?”

“This is Yongenjaya. I repeat, this is Yongenjaya. The time is now 8:41PM, the next stop is…”

As the train crawled to a stop, they got out as soon as the doors slid open and they walked to ground level, heading down the familiar backstreets. He walked her back to her house, waiting for her to open the door before leaving to the cafe, waving goodbye.

She waved as she stared at his back, watching him leave until he turned the corner and out of sight.

Glancing around warily, she closed the door and locked it, taking her shoes off in the foyer. Stepping in further into the house, she furrowed her brows, taking a deep inhale of the aromas. Was someone cooking?

Curious now, she walked down the hallway and into the dining room, stopping when she saw Yusuke at the stove, a bandana tied to hold his hair back and a frilly pink apron on his front. She forgot she had that homewarming gift from Kawakami… “Yusuke..?” She hesitantly called out.

He looked up at the sound of her voice just as he killed the heat, turning off the stove. “Ah, Aneki. Welcome home.” He smiled a greeting, opening the rice cooker and scooping some onto two plates. “Please, take a seat.”

Bewildered, she could only obey and slowly maneuvered to a chair, sitting down at the dining table. “What’s all this..?”
Lifting the plates, he effortlessly moved to the dining side, gently placing them onto the table. He took a seat across from her, handing her a pair of chopsticks. “Bon Appetit.” He smiled, watching her expectantly.

She looked down at her meal. It was rice shaped into an oval, sautéed chicken strips on the side, aesthetically placed in a zigzag pattern. Deep green aioli drops decorated the porcelain, onion flowers planted between to create some sort of artistic portrait on a plate. “This...looks like fancy French cuisine.” She laughed delightfully, feeling lighter for the first time in several days. “Thank you, Yusuke. You didn’t have to cook.”

Yusuke shook his head, lifting his chopsticks in his hand. “No, thank you, Aneki. I have observed your disposition slowly diminish these past few days. I…” He hesitated for a second. “I wanted to do something for you. You had welcomed me into your home without objection, accommodated my painting, and even cook me meals. I want you to know I appreciate your generosity.”

She bit her lip, trying not to cry. “Thank you…” She sniffed, bringing a hand up to rub her eyes of any stray tears. When was the last time anyone had cooked for her? Her parents… “You aren’t a burden on me, y’know.”

She looked down at her meal again, feeling her lips spread into a grin. “This looks delicious. Itadakimasu!” Adjusting her chopsticks, she took a bite of chicken with an onion flower, savoring the salty but seasoned flavors. “This is really good...I didn’t know you could cook so well.”

He smiled, eating his portion as well. “Thank you. I didn’t have much opportunity to cook meals as extravagant as these, but with this newfound freedom, I have been thinking up new recipes, like another art form…”

His loafers clicked against the concrete as he walked through the dead silent night. The leaves rustled ominously from the slight wind, the trees looming above like giants. The plastic crinkled in his grip as he climbed the steps and turned the corner, stopping at a certain row. The markers were aged and unclean from neglect, though they seemed to have been cleaned around three years ago.

He smiled slightly. Had Sojiro come over the years? He was too busy these days with Wakaba’s daughter and that new ward to have visited recently.

The dead flowers within the holder were withered husks, threatening to dissolve into dust the second he touched them with a gloved hand. With his other hand, he placed the bucket on the ground and he proceeded to silently cleanse the site. He had no right to be here and so he should not speak.

The sacred water trickled down the dirty stone, wiping away the dirt and dust from the natural elements. The portraits of his victims were stark against the grime, his former co-worker smiling with his beautiful wife.

He gazed at them, the guilt pushing up his esophagus and the words almost tumbled out of his mouth but he stopped it, choking them back. He had no right. He had no right. He had no right.
His pupils shrunk as the blood, oh the blood...How it pooled around their bodies. All because of him. Because of **him**.

*He gave her a sad smile, a black gloved hand coming up to pat the top of her head. “I didn’t want to, you know?”*

*She stared at him as the tears slowly trickled down her cheeks, her once pristine recital dress stained at the hem with the blood of her parents. "Why? They're fine."*

*Taken aback, he sighed. "I see..." She didn't understand. Just like him. He didn't understand how he could pull the trigger, to kill, to murder his friend and his wife, but his voice kept telling him to. ‘Hisoka, do it. Do it, and you'll be much closer to me in turn.’*

*His heart ached and his smile turned darker, his pupils shrinking under the cheap city lamps. There was no going back. He can only repent in prison. “You’re like me then. I’ll be back, don’t worry.”*

He smiled dementedly as he placed the bouquet of red spider lilies into the holder. Yes, he was back because **he** had released him. He would reunite them so they could be a family again. After all...

What was more blood on his hands?

Chapter End Notes

Using Hanakotoba/Japanese flower language
White camellia - waiting
Red spider Lilies - Never to meet again/Abandonment/ Lost memory. Used to guide the dead to reincarnation.

Iwai rank 1
---6/15, WEDNESDAY, MORNING, SHUJIN ACADEMY.

Red eyes surveyed the classroom, honing in on one person in particular. Two rows to the right, one row to the front. He was average in looks, with black hair cut into a short style and black eyes, wearing the normal Shujin summer uniform. Bingo.

Taking out her phone in the middle of Usami-sensei’s lecture, Airi hid her hand inside her desk and sent a text to everyone.

Ai: Iida-kun’s here.
R: Great. Corner him when you have a chance.
Ak: We’re counting on you.
An: I got your back!
Y: I do not doubt you would achieve some sort of results.
Y: Let us know if you learn anything.
Ai: Got it.

Once the bell rang, some students left the room, prepared to head home. Luckily for them, Iida had stayed behind to take some notes.

Airi observed the usually cocky classmate. His usual lighthearted smirk was gone, replaced by a somber frown with his face drawn from stress. His shoulders were hunched over as if he wanted to hide, and he kept his head down, even when he stood up.

Taking the opportunity, Airi got up from her seat as well, signalling to her teammates that she was going in. They nodded and watched her as she approached the student, moving closer to listen in. “Iida-kun?” She called out softly.

Shoulders tensing, he turned around and gave her a small smile. “Oh, hi Kimisawa-senpai…”

She furrowed her brow in concern. “Are you OK? You look so tired now…Is there something bothering you?”

Eyes darting away, he shook his head. “O-Oh, no. I’m fine…Really, I am. I’ve just...been having some problems is all.”

She pursed her lips. Maybe if she pressed a little more…”I can try to help you...Is it school related? Or your job?”

He tensed. “M-My job? Uh...It’s fine. It’s going well.”

She smiled. Bingo. “Really? Can you tell me about it? My job suddenly let me go and…” She
twiddled with her fingers, trying to seem more demure. “I really need the money…”

He scrunched up his face, his resolve wavering slightly. “Uh...I doubt you really need my help. A girl like you could get a job anywhere, right?”

She blinked. “Yeah...but I need another job fast. I…” She glanced out the window, watching as the rain splattered against the glass and an idea came to her. “Had a flood in, and the damage is really bad. I need to fix it soon or else, my house might collapse…” She ducked her head, her lip quivering at the thought. “Please? I heard from the others about your job.”

He sputtered. “Heard from the others? Was it Nishiyama who-”

“Nishiyama..?” Airi's braid hid the glint in her eyes at the name. Her eyes slid to her left where Akira and Ann were feigning a casual conversation, clearly listening in as their eyes occasionally landed on them.

She subtly gestured to the door and they nodded, leaving the room to find Nishiyama.

“How is Nishiyama-kun? Are you guys still in the science club? I remember you asked me about increasing the budget...”

Leaving the room, Akira and Ann glanced at each other. “I’ll check the first floors.” She stated, heading down the stairs. He nodded, shouldering his bag to search this floor.

“Hey, you got a minute?”

He turned around, seeing Mishima walk up to him. “You’re looking for something, right? I saw Airi-senpai signal you guys. I want to help you out, so please ask me anything.”

Akira nodded, resting his hands in his pockets. “Do you know where Nishiyama is?”

Mishima blinked. “Nishiyama? He usually hangs out with Iida…” His eyes lit up with realization. “Oh, you want to ask him about Iida, right? That’s why Airi-senpai was talking to him…” He tapped his chin. “He usually stays till late, so he should still be in the school. I think I heard Himeno from the newspaper club talk about how he hangs out in the library. I’ll keep digging around while you look for him!”

Akira nodded. “Thanks man.” He patted his shoulder, moving past the Phan boy to the library. He hadn’t been there yet, but he knew it was his best chance so far. He didn’t know how far Airi could get...

“It’s a good thing Mishima is on our side.” Morgana purred quietly, peeking out of the darkness in the bag. “Let’s hurry to the library and find this Nishiyama guy!”

Heading up the stairs to the third floor, he walked over to the library, sliding the door open. He entered into the school’s information center, his footsteps as loud as gunshots in the dead quiet room. His eyes surveyed the people in here, trying to find someone who looked like a “Nishiyama.”

He walked past a couple study tables, keeping his face blank even as some of the students looked
up at him.

“Hey, isn’t that the transfer student? What’s he doing here?”

“He’s the kid with the criminal record, right? What the heck is he doing in a library?”

“Leave him alone...He got second place for second years, remember? He’s clearly serious about studying.”

He ignored the comments. At least they weren’t calling him a murderer like they used to. That last person though...

He glanced over at them, noting it was Takeda who sat behind him in class. Thank you.

He walked up to a male student in one of the aisles, face burrowed in a book. “Excuse me, are you Nishiyama?”

Nishiyama looked up from his book. “Yeah that’s me...” He squinted his eyes. “You’re THAT transfer student, right..? You need something?” He asked warily.

“What’s this about a job?”

“Job..?” He took a step back in fear. “Are you talking about that one time? I-I don’t know...I said I didn’t want to do it...Th-That’s something Iida- Wait...” He paused, his mind coming to a conclusion. “Are you doing something to him?! He’s been acting really strange lately...”

Akira shook his head. “I want to help him. I can see he’s in trouble, and Airi’s trying to help...Anything you know would be appreciated.”

He furrowed his brow. “Kimisawa-senpai’s working on this, too...?” He sighed. “...One day the two of us went to Shibuya, and a man approached us over near Central Street. He asked if we were interested in an easy part-time job...I said I wasn’t, but Iida was into it...He was asking the guy all sorts of questions.”

“What was the job?”

Nishiyama shook his head. “U-Um, I don’t know...I was so scared I ended up going home alone...But according to Iida, it only takes ten minutes, and is good for people who don’t stand out.”

Akira nodded slowly, digesting the information. So it was fast and untraceable. “Anything else?”

Nishiyama looked down. “Iida started spending a lot of money. That’s when his strange behavior began, too...But that’s all I know...” He looked up hopefully. ”That’s enough, right?”

Akira nodded. “Yeah, that’s plenty. Thank you for trusting me.”

Nishiyama observed him for a moment. “...I hope you can help him.”

He nodded again before heading for the doors, leaving the quiet room. “A man on Central Street, hm?” Morgana frowned. “That is suspicious...Maybe he was making him commit crimes?”

His phone rang and he took it out.

Y: Have you found anything, Akira?
Y: I have tried looking into this high paying part-time job myself.
People seem to be talking about it here as well. Supposedly a man will talk to you in broad daylight over on Central Street… And your job is to deliver a small envelope he hands you.

Well, I will contact you again if I learn anything more.

He sent a quick text to Ann to meet back in the class before he placed his phone back in his pocket. A small envelope?

“So that means this part-time job is somehow crime-related…” Morgana murmured grimly. “It takes ten minutes, is good for people who don’t stand out, and involves a small envelope. Does that ring any bells? It’s something the mafia would definitely be up to.”

Akira frowned at the only conclusion he could arrive at. “Drugs. Probably some type of pill or powder to be placed in an envelope.”

Morgana gaped. “Like illegal drugs..? Maybe they made Iida smuggle drugs for them. That definitely fits with the small envelope, and you can get arrested just for possession…”

Frowning deeply, he headed back to class. This became much more dangerous than they imagined. Landing from the stairs, he bumped into Mishima again. “Oh!” The Phan boy blinked. “Hey. Did you meet Nishiyama?”

Akira nodded. “Yeah, he told me a bit.”

“Did he tell you about the rumors?” Mishima whispered. “Rumor has it Iida’s got a part-time job, and it’s insane. Something about trafficking drugs… I hear they ask you to take part in it down at Central Street.” He shivered at the thought, gulping in fear. “In broad daylight even…”

The phantom thief eyed his shorter classmate for a moment. “Maybe you should avoid Central Street for a while. You live near Shibuya, right? Try to be careful.” He pursed his lips. “…I know Airi would be sad if anything happened to you.”

Blanching, Mishima nodded. “You’re right. It’s not really safe right now…I’ll avoid it for her sake.”

Resisting the urge to roll his eyes, Akira walked back into class just as Ann came back in too.

Airi was still chatting with Iida, slowly pressing him for the truth while Ann smiled encouragingly behind her. “…Please, Iida-kun.” Airi clasped her hands in front of her in a plead. “I really do need to know… Is it dangerous for you? I can help.”

Iida faltered, eyes looking everywhere except for the class representative in front of him. “I… I can’t. Who knows what they’d do to you…”

Akira walked up behind her. “Iida, just tell us the truth.”

He sputtered. “Kurusu?! Come on, you too..? I already told you, I don’t know…” He repeated quietly like a broken record.

Akira frowned. “Nishiyama told me everything.”

“He did?!” Iida took a step back and clenched his fists. “That bastard… Dammit!”

Dropping the demure act, Airi straightened up and looked him directly in the eye. “Tell us, Iida-kun. Are they threatening you?”
He pursed his lips, clearly struggling with himself before sighing. “Yeah...But I don’t want to talk about it here. Let’s go somewhere a little quieter.”

They followed him out of the classroom and up the stairs, stopping in front of the rooftop door where there were no other students around. “OK, you can’t tell anyone that I told you this, got it?!” He hissed, looking around warily for any eavesdroppers. “I’ve only told one person about this, but…” He looked down at the ground in shame. “They told me they had an easy part-time job for me, and I ended up smuggling drugs…”

Airi's eyes widened in shock and she shared the look with Ann. Drugs?!

Akira frowned. “So the rumors are true…”

Iida nodded dejectedly. “All I had to do was put envelopes into coin lockers, and they said they’d give me a hefty paycheck. I didn’t know what was in the envelopes though! Still,” He sighed heavily. “This is what came out of it…”

Ann bit her lip. “Are you being threatened?” She asked quietly

He looked away. “I gave them my bank account info. The money got deposited in there...They started threatening me pretty soon after that…” He recounted bleakly. “They had pictures of me carrying the goods. Said they’d expose what I did unless I paid them off…”

Airi idly grasped her arm. “So you’re being blackmailed into doing illicit crimes, giving them the opportunity to gather more leverage over you…” She sighed heavily. “How did it get this bad..?”

Iida turned to her. “Why are you even asking me this stuff..?” His eyes brightened. “Are...Are the student council going to do something?!”

Her lips tightened before she nodded. It wouldn’t hurt to lie if it made him feel better. “Yes, that’s right. We’re going to try our best to get you and any others out of this situation. Don’t worry,” She gave him a small reassuring smile, patting him on his shoulder. “You won’t have to do this for much longer.”

He stared at her for a moment before slowly nodding. “…OK. If you’re really serious about this, try heading over to Central Street. That’s where they told me about it…” He glanced over at the transfer student. “You should have Kurusu go with you. I don’t know what they do to pretty girls…” He slowly inched toward the stairs. “I-I told you everything you want to know, right? Can I go?”

Akira nodded. “We’ll take care of this.”

Iida nodded slowly before leaving down the stairs, leaving the four thieves in the small corner. Their phones rang.

R: How’d it go?
R: Did Ann have to act?
An: Nope, Airi got it all under control.
An: Akira got some more info too.
Ak: It’s drugs.
Ai: They ask you to put small envelopes in lockers and they blackmail you with photos.
Y: So they ask you to deliver drugs...
R: That’s serious.
R: I just searched for “Shibuya Drugs” and got tons of hits too.
Y: That must be what I heard people talking about in Shibuya.
Y: They seem to be going about this quite openly during the daytime. What bold methodology.
An: I would’ve imagined they would do this at night...I wonder why they chose the day.
Ak: They go for high schoolers.
Y: I see.
Y: Yes, more students will be out during the day, while the police will be more cautious at night.
Ai: Ryuji, you’re at Shibuya right now, right? Do you see anyone suspicious?
R: Yeah, I’m at Central. It’s tough to tell though.
R: I mean, there’s just way too many people. The goddamn rain’s not helping either.
An: Be careful.
Y: The sun will be setting soon. What should we do, Akira?
Ak: Let’s leave this for tomorrow. Weather report said it should be clear.
Ai: Seems like our only option. We should split up and search after school.
Y: In any case, we have some new intel. Let us call that progress for today.
An: Whoever asks us to take on that job should know who their boss is too.
R: All right, I’ll get in touch with you guys later tonight and we can come up with a plan.

They put their phones away with a sigh. “Guess we should just go home for the day…” Ann murmured, shoulders slumped at their progress.

Airi nodded tiredly, feeling her eyes about to close without her permission. “Stay safe.”

They walked down the stairs from the roof, Airi heading toward the student council room to make a quick drop of paperwork on the scams. Just as she was about to open the door, she noticed someone was already inside and peeked in through the crack.

Sitting inside the empty student council room with nary a soul around, orange sunlight gleaming through the one window to cast deep shadows inside, she took a deep breath and finally let her shoulders rest. She could feel how drawn her face was. How tense and tight her muscles were, fatigued from doing nothing.

Clenching her teeth, Makoto gripped her hands together, barely feeling her nails dig into her skin. She was so close now, but she hated knowing she had to rely on others about this. Hated knowing she couldn't rely on her own competence to see this through.

When the principal had subtly threatened her about her University letter, she knew she was being used for something, but what could she do except do what he asked? Her future was on the line. Her sister wanted- needed her to get into a good university so that she could pull her own weight around the house.

Makoto refused to be a burden, but sometimes, she felt so exhausted from all the expectations. If only... "If only you were here, Otou-san..." She whispered in the empty room. "Please guide me...What should I do about all the students being threatened outside of school? What should I do about the Phantom Thieves?" She clenched her fists to the point where she felt her knuckles crack. "If only you hadn't died on duty..." She took a deep breath and let it out in an exhausted sigh. "If I
can just find out his name, then I can finish your case and save everyone in school. Then Sis would..." She bit back a sob. "Sis would...

She held her head down and let the shadows cover her face, hiding the intense rage and frustration within her eyes.

Biting her lip, Airi moved back from the crack in the door and slowly walked away toward the stairway, making sure her foot steps were silent. She shouldn't intrude, though she couldn't help but wonder. She knew Makoto-senpai lived with her sister who worked as a prosecutor, with no mention of parents. Occasionally she would hear her mention her father as a police officer, but then she would clam up and place her council president facade back on.

Had her father died in the line of duty? It must've been hard on her...

"Airi?"

She blinked and looked up to see Akira waiting for her with both their school bags slung over his shoulder, giving her a curious look. "You done?" He inquired, straightening up from his slouch against the wall.

Smiling, Airi nodded and walked next to him out of school. "Yeah..."

She would keep Makoto-senpai's business as Makoto-senpai's business. No one else needed to know about this, especially when it had nothing to do with their new target.

---

Akira and Airi stopped at Leblanc, the bell ringing their admission.

Sojiro looked up at them before deflating. "Oh, thought I actually had a customer, but it’s just you two..." He sighed. "I never get many customers when it rains. The cash register is gonna run dry at this rate..."

Airi smiled sheepishly as she moved to the counter. "Sorry. Is business really that bad?"

He crossed his arms. "As long as I can keep this place open, it’s fine. Want a cup while you’re here?"

Their phones rang out. She nodded while she took hers out of her pocket.

**An:** We have to find them tomorrow for sure. This is the only lead we have right now.

**Y:** Yes. It is highly likely that this part-time solicitor is somehow related to the mafia.

**Y:** If we tail him, he could lead us straight back to his boss.

**R:** He talked to Iida and Nishiyama over at Central street, right?

**Ai:** We have to be really careful about this. We may be phantom thieves but these are real life thugs.

**Ai:** We don’t have our powers to protect us on this side.
An: You're right...This could be really dangerous.
R: Stay sharp, guys.
Y: Who should be the one to approach the target?
Ak: Morgana, I choose you.
An: That’s not a bad idea. Cats have nine lives, right? Morgana can spare one for this.
Ai: Uh NO. We’re not risking his life for this.

Morgana cringed from reading over Akira's shoulder. "What?! Just because I look like a cat, doesn't mean I am one!" He whimpered, ears close to his scalp. "Lady Ann, how could you..."

R: Yeah, and wouldn’t the mafia get caught off guard if they had a cat coming to deliver drugs for ‘em?
Y: In other words, Akira will be going. I have no objections.
Y: Tricking people and using that as blackmail...These bastards are true cowards.
An: It’s kinda scary to think people like that are all around us in this city…
R: Well guys, we gotta brace ourselves. We’re up against a serious criminal here.

Airi placed her phone back in her pocket and turned to her leader. “Be careful, Akira.” She fretted, making sure to be quiet so the barista wouldn’t overhear. “We don’t know what they would do if something goes wrong…”

He nodded, leaning against the counter. “I got this, don’t worry. We’ll make sure to take their Heart.” He stated confidently. "Then there's no way Nijima-senpai can blackmail us."

She smiled and nodded. They could do this. This would be their third official job as Phantom Thieves.

A cup was placed in front of her and Sojiro moved from behind the counter, taking a seat in one of the booths with a newspaper. “...There hasn’t been any more news on Hisoka.” He informed quietly as he opened the tabloids. “Seems he just disappeared after he got out.”

The smile fell from her face at the reminder and she nodded demurely. “Yeah…” He was getting closer. She had put those extra photos in the drawer with the rest of his “presents.” There was no way she could ignore him for much longer...

Frowning at her sad disposition, Akira took a seat next to her, placing his bag on his lap. “Airi, nothing will happen. Yusuke and I will make sure to keep you safe.” He paused, taking his phone out as it buzzed, glancing at the texts from Kawakami. “...Shouldn’t we tell Ryuji and Ann about this? Having more eyes around would be useful.”

She shook her head, picking up her coffee. “I don’t want to worry them. The scams and Makoto-senpai’s blackmail already has them panicking…” The less people who knew, the better. She had no real substantial proof that he was targeting her. Even if she took all the "presents" he left her, no one would believe her. The only upside is that Hisoka didn't seem to have any interest in Yusuke. Only her.

So long as no one else was in danger...She'll persevere.

Pursing his lips, Akira nodded in acquiesce. “OK. Why don’t I at least walk you home?”

----6/16, THURSDAY, EARLY MORNING, SUBWAYS.
They huddled in the crowded morning train on their way to school. The mood was slightly somber at the thought of their next job. As soon as school let out, they were headed to Central Street to try to pinpoint a scammer. “Ugh, it’s so stuffy in this bag...” Morgana whispered as he wiggled around inside the small space.

Akira reached up to tug the zipper a little lower, holding the bag up near the air conditioning vents.

“Now for today’s Train News.” They looked up at the quiet announcement, watching the TV screens lining the tops of the walls. “Today’s headlines are... Shady Drug Deals in Shibuya! Is the same organization behind both this and the extortions? Alongside the phishing scams that have been on the rise, this may be their source of funding.”

Yusuke frowned. “Even the news has covered the situation, which means there are more victims than we realize. We must act swiftly.”

“Restaurant Factory Fire!” A worker from the restaurant giant Haneruya was arrested for arson. Though he admits to the charges, he claims to not know why he did it. This industry is raising eyebrows.”

Airi scrunched up her face. “Another restaurant scandal? Didn’t one place have a guy strip naked in the kitchen? Ugh.”

Morgana hummed. “With all these extortions and scandals... this world’s really messed up.”

“This is Aoyama-Itchome. I repeat, This is Aoyama-Itchome. The time is now 7:15AM...”

Getting off, they waved to Yusuke as he continued on his own journey to school, and they walked up onto the streets. Walking down the familiar road to school, they listened in on the chatter around them.

“I saw Niijima arguing with the principal about the mafia or... something.”

“What was that all about?”

“I hear her older sister’s involved with the investigation. Maybe she’s just trying to play detective, too.”

“Are you kidding me? I can’t handle a student council president with no focus. She and the principal can both get lost.”

“Who do you want as the new council president then?”

“...Kimisawa-senpai? I usually see her go around asking people about their day and their grades. That study group she did saved me, man.”

“Oh, I could see that... Yeah, she’d probably be way better at the job.”

Airi frowned at their gossip. Makoto-senpai had told her about the rumors, but to really hear them trash talk the council president while simultaneously praising her showed that they had no idea how little power the student council had. Her sister being involved though? That was troubling...

Akira nudged her with his elbow. “Should I start calling you student council president soon?” He teased.
She huffed in amusement. “Maybe next year when Makoto-senpai graduates. I don’t want to cause more arguments between us.” She was already on thin ice as it was.

He mused at that. “Next year, huh...I won’t be here...”

Her smile fell. “Yeah...You’re going back home in March, right?” He wouldn’t live here anymore. She wouldn’t see him every morning. She wouldn’t be able to hang out with him almost everyday. She wouldn’t be able to hold hands with him, or see his smile, or…

Giving her a small but reassuring smile, he wrapped an arm around her shoulders as they neared the school. “It’s all right. The court says I’ll be going back but it doesn’t mean I have to stay there, right?” He wouldn’t leave her. He wasn’t going to stay in that cold and lonely house when he had friends, a warm cafe room, and her here.

She leaned into him and nodded. “Yeah...You’ll come back, right?”

Chapter End Notes

Kawakami rank 2
Once classes ended, they all met up at the hideout.

Ann surveyed the passageway, noting all the students walking around. “There sure are a lot of high schoolers during the day.” She remarked. "They must be targeting them somehow.”

Yusuke swept his bangs out of his eyes. “It will be quite difficult to figure out how given the number of people around though.”

Akira frowned as he stared out the large windows, watching the famous Shibuya crossing. How many of them were victims? “We have to do this.”

Ryuji grinned. “Right! We’re gonna grab ‘em by the tail!”

Airi turned to her leader. “Like we said yesterday, you should go to Central Street. Be careful, though.” She frowned worriedly. “Don’t get cornered.”

He nodded and they all straightened up, shouldering their bags.

“Sweet, let’s get goin’!” Ryuji rolled his shoulder. “If you find any shady people, send it through text!”

Nodding, they all split up around the area to gather information. Ryuji looked around the station, Ann eavesdropped at the station square, Airi asked around the underground mall, Yusuke headed around the stores, and Akira walked into Central Street.

Glancing around, Akira tried to single out any people who seemed suspicious. Looking to the left, he stopped, noticing a certain student council president near the bookstore. He withheld a sigh and walked up to her. “Niijima-senpai.”

Makoto turned around and gave him a small but polite smile. “Kurusu-kun. Are you investigating with your friends today? I hope something comes out of it.” She said coolly though there was some sort of hint of desperation in there. "I’ll be counting on you.”

Narrowing his eyes, he nodded. “Right...Are you directing that at me? Or at Airi?”

She kept her polite smile but he could see the muscles in her cheeks strain. “Can’t it be both? Since Airi-chan is so competent, I would hope I can count on her as well.”

Raising a brow, he walked away without a word. She seemed a little touchy when it came to the cellist. Could it be related to the gossip this morning about her dwindling reputation? But then why was she so emotionally invested in this? Doing her job as a council president was one thing, but it wasn't like any of this personally affected her.

“Is she still following us?” Morgana whispered uncomfortably. “Nah, that can’t be.”

Akira exhaled, walking down the street. It was crowded like usual, but there seemed to be an undercurrent of tension present. People were nervously glancing around, kids more subdued at the heavy mood.
Passing by two officers, he stopped nearby, checking his phone while keeping his ears open.

“Once again, nothing to report.” A cop sighed. "There are many people falling victim, yet no perpetrators…”

“They appear and disappear as they please...Not only that, but they blend in with normal teenagers…”

“Stop complaining!” The other officer scolded. “If we don’t try getting information, people will say the police are useless! The media are already on our case, and the higher-ups aren’t doing a thing...This is bad for morale…”

Digesting the information in his head, Akira continued on his way. So the police units were useless. His eyes caught what seemed to be a confrontation and he walked closer.

“Hey,” A menacing man in a suit with a briefcase gestured to two students. “Aren’t you interested in all the hottest brand names? We’re having a special sale just over there. How ‘bout you go take a peek?”

His associate, a threatening looking man with slicked bleached hair and piercings all over his face, nodded. “We ordered way too much, so I have a ton left over. My boss’ll kill me if I go back to him with all these extras. Look, I’ll sell ‘em to you for cheap. Whaddya say?”

One of the students turned to his friend. “What should we do?”

His friend hummed. “It depends on the price, wouldn’t you say?”

Looking around, the guy with piercings turned to Akira. “Hey, what about you? These are unforgettable deals.”

Akira blinked. This sounded more like a counterfeit sale. No drugs or mafia. “I’m not interested.”

The hustler sighed. “Well, that’s disappointing. Come back if you change your mind.”

Ignoring them, the phantom thieves leader walked down the alley, spotting a homeless man digging through the trash. Bums were usually the invisible citizens, overhearing a whole bunch of things they weren’t privy to. Trying to interrogate him, the beggar pointed him to the station where another homeless friend was at. Resisting the urge to sigh, Akira headed that way, pausing when he felt his phone buzz in his pocket.

R: Miss President's here. I walked past her at the station.
Y: Is she keeping an eye on us?
An: Maybe. I guess she’s curious about all of this.
Ai: Don’t let her get to you. This is her problem, too.
R: All right. How’re things on your guys’ end?
An: Nothing so far. I’m going to try staking out the underground walkway.
Ai: Nothing from the stores.
Ai: I’m going to start asking the window shoppers.
R: Then I’ll check around the Inogami Line.
Y: I will gather some more intel in the underground shopping mall as well.
Y: Aneki, let us meet up.
Ai: OK. Akira, keep up your end!
“Everyone’s really going about this seriously.” Morgana purred, puffing up his chest with pride. “They’re definitely worthy of being phantom thieves. We can’t fall behind either. Let’s look for that homeless man.”

“You seem to be working hard.”

Furrowing his brow at the familiar voice, Akira turned around to see Makoto walk up to him. “Did you find any clues?” She asked.

He regarded her for a moment. “I’m looking for a homeless person.” He revealed.

She blinked in surprise. “Hm..? You’re trying to find a homeless person?” She nodded approvingly. “That’s a good idea. They would know a lot about what goes on in this town. I haven’t seen any here, but I would bet there are some in the underground area…”

Akira nodded. “Thanks.”

He was about to hurry to the underground when she spoke again. “Where is Airi-chan looking?”

He stopped, turning his head to look at her. “...She’s at the underground mall.”

Makoto hummed thoughtfully. “There would certainly be a lot of students there, and people with money to spend would congregate…” She smiled, though it looked bitter. “Smart.”

Straightening up, Akira frowned. “Are you...jealous of her?”

She tensed and avoided his gaze. “...Th-That’s nonsense. Why would I be jealous of a underclassman? Airi-chan is...a very hard working student. I wish you the best of luck.” She quickly walked away, keeping her head down.

He frowned after her. She didn’t sound very convincing...

His phone rang just as he finished talking with the homeless person in the underground. Turning the corner, he leaned against the wall and took it out.

An: How’s it going? Have you found anything?
Ak: Maybe a little.
Y: Ah, so you’ve grasped something already. As to be expected of our leader, Akira.
Ai: You’re amazing, Akira. What have we found so far?
R: I’ll start.
R: Supposedly some guy near the accessway was talking about some kinda “strong drugs.”
R: I’m not counting on anything, but I’ll go check it out.
An: As for me, I heard about someone soliciting a “high-paying job” in the station plaza.
An: Apparently they’re mostly targeting girls. I’ll go see what it’s about.
Y: On my end, I heard there are people saying strange things in the back alley near the arcade.
Y: Something about ice and vegetables, and something about snow tomorrow...
Y: I will go observe, just in case. The arcade is on Central Street, correct?
Ai: A student told me I should check near the movie theater for shady men, so I’ll be heading that way.
Ai: It sounds more like a ticket scam instead of drug trafficking, but I’ll give it a shot.
Ak: Good luck, guys. I’ll come over to help out.

“Well, let’s head over to help them out.” Morgana whispered. “I have no idea which of these leads are real. Try going to the most suspicious-sounding place.”

Akira grasped his chin. The closest place would be Ryuji’s spot near the hideout, so he’ll head there. Walking up the stairs in the station, he made his way over to the Ginza Line. Spotting a head of blond in the sea of brown and black near one of the advertising pillars, he walked closer to the ex-runner. “Find anything?”

Ryuji turned to him, an elderly woman with a cane next to him. “Oh, Akira. Sorry, my lead didn’t end up bein’ anything.” He frowned apologetically. “That dude at the stairs was talkin’ about drugs to make his hair grow...Pretty misleadin’, huh? Sheesh…” He sighed before turning back to the old woman. “Cmon baa-chan, you’re lookin’ pretty shaky, so I don’t mind givin’ you a hand.”

Disappointed but not surprised, Akira nodded and headed out of the station and into the square, looking for another head of blonde. Passing by a man trying to coerce a girl into being in a video, he walked up to Ann next to the Hachiko statue.

Ann perk up when she noticed him. “Sorry, Akira.” She apologized. “There’s nothing over here. Look, someone’s asking about a video shoot over by the train...but I guess that’s for models?” She shrugged helplessly. “In any case, they’re not here. Go try seeing what Ryuji, Yusuke, and Airi have.”

“OK.” He nodded, heading back into Central Street. Two leads to nowhere, two more possibilities to check out. Their outcome seemed bleak at the moment. Walking through the crowds, he spotted Yusuke next to the bookstore with...a patrol officer.

Akira walked closer, eavesdropping on their conversation.

“...I was simply wondering where the arcade is. I’ll be going now.” Yusuke tried to move past the cop but was stopped when they held out a hand.

“Arcade...?” The patrol officer repeated. "You’re a high school student, aren’t you? You’d better not be looking for trouble. All kinds of shady activity happens at arcades.”

Yusuke tilted his head naively. “What are you talking about? It’s nothing more than a place you go to play games...”

Sweatdropping, Akira continued down the street toward the movie theater. Clearly the artist didn’t have a lead either, and there was no way he could go up to him to ask when that officer was interrogating him. Hopefully he’d be fine.

Searching around, he spotted a head of pink in the sea of brown and black. Airi was embroiled in a heated conversation with a man in a hoodie, him trying to give her an envelope. Alarmed, Akira quickly walked up behind her, just in case.

“-Told you, that’s not what I’m asking for.” He heard her say exasperatedly. “I’m only asking if you know anything about the gangs in the area?”
“I only know to stay outta their business. Ya sure ya ain’t interested? I’ve got a coupon for 50% off at The Body Chop!”

Airi facepalmed. “...Maybe, but...No, never mind. Sorry for bothering.” Ignoring his calls, she turned away and was about to start walking but bumped into her leader. “Oof!” She blinked, taking a step back. “Oh, Akira. Sorry, my lead turned out to be pretty goofy.”

Akira gave the shady dealer an odd look as he tried to entice another person with his envelope, going further down the street away from them. “...What was he trying to sell you?”

She sighed. “Something about coupons for designer stores and brands. He said he’d sell them to me for a price...” She shook her head. “Oh well. Did you find out anything from the others?”

He shook his head. “No. Not a thing.”

Making eye contact, they both let out a sigh. Seemed like today was a failure.

Morgana shook his ears. “Where would something shady take place? Can either of you think of a location?”

Airi blinked. “...Alleyways? Should we check them too?”

Akira nodded in agreement, shouldering his bag. They began trekking behind the gilded Shibuya streets, walking through the cramped alleys and back streets. Checking around the Protein Lovers gym, they were about to turn back around to check another street.

“Hello.”

Makoto walked up to them with a polite smile. “Have you made any progress toward finding the boss?” She inquired, a hint of hopefulness gleaming through her voice.

Akira eyed her for a moment. “...Things are going well.” He fibbed. Don’t show weakness.

“I see...” She trailed off, observing him before focusing on the class president. “And you, Airi-chan? Anything so far?”

Airi smiled hesitantly. “Not unless you want a 50% off coupon for The Body Chop.”

Makoto blinked, taken aback. “O-Oh...?”

“Hey, you two got some time? I have a great job for you.”

They turned around to see a guy walk up to them languidly, his hands on his hips and a lazy smirk on his face. Airi narrowed her eyes, recognizing his posture. She’d seen it all the time back at San’ya. He was definitely a gangster. Question was, was he one of the ones they were searching for?

“It’s real easy.” He coerced. “Guess you could call it a delivery job.”

Makoto smiled satisfactorily. “It seems we didn’t have to look very hard in the end.” She murmured, knowing she was close to her objective.

“You’re high schoolers, yeah?” The man asked casually. “Don’t you want something more than just your allowances?”

Makoto hummed. “By delivery, do you mean that of suspicious materials?”
He smirked. "Heh, you’re a funny girl. How ‘bout it, you two?"

Airi blinked, noticing he hadn’t mentioned her, and pointed to herself. “Not me, though?”

He grinned. “Someone as pretty as you? You look like you belong in the spotlight. Why don’t you grab a job at modeling?”

She pursed her lips. She belonged in the spotlight? Meaning they wanted people to blend in. With her light rose hair, she’d be spotted in a crowd right away.

“It’s an easy job, you two.”

“So you won’t answer my question?” Makoto regarded him coolly. “Then I was right…”

He raised a brow and walked up to her, towering over her even as he slouched. “What’s up with you anyways? Why’re you asking all these questions, huh?”

Akira furrowed his brow and took a step forward. Even if she was somewhat annoying, she was still a fellow student and an innocent civilian. “Violence is not the answer.” Akira warned.

Taken aback, Makoto gave him an odd look. “Oh…”

The overly friendly guy tch’ed, taking a couple steps back. “…It was all a joke. Why would I get worked up over some dumb kids?” He shook his head. “Anyways, I can’t hang. Seeya!”

“When?” Makoto began hesitantly, tucking some hair behind an ear. “If you don’t want to deal with us, we could always go see your boss ourselves.”

He scoffed, shaking his head at her request. “You’re really gonna say that, knowing who he is? Heh, no way I believe that. Welp, I’m outta here. You guys are annoying me.” He turned and left, blending into the crowd at Central Street.

Makoto narrowed her eyes at his fast departure. “I’m pretty sure he’s part of the mafia we’re looking for.”

Airi frowned worriedly. “That was really reckless of you, Makoto-senpai. You don’t know what they’re capable of…”

Her lips twisted and Makoto narrowed her eyes at her. “It’s better than having no lead.” She snapped quietly before her eyes darted away. "I need to find out his name..."

Pursing his lips at the rising tension, Akira stepped between them. “Let’s go after him.”

Makoto shook her head. “We should get some proof before we do that. I tried to trick him into saying something, but he dodged all the traps I was laying down.” She grasped her chin thoughtfully before turning to him. “By the way…” She hesitated. “Thanks for standing up for me. I’m going to go now.” She inclined her head at them before walking away.

Airi watched her leave with a hurt frown. Why was Makoto being so hostile to her? Was it just because she lied about being a phantom thief or was it something else?

Now that they were alone, Morgana snuck out of the bag, leaning on his shoulder. “That boss seems tricky…” He remarked grimly. “It looks like he’s taught his subordinates well too. No wonder the police are having trouble catching him.”

Airi nodded in agreement, still a little troubled by how Makoto was acting. She usually wasn’t so
reckless. “You were really brave there, Akira.” She commended him with a small smile. “You stepped up to protect her even though we’re unarmed.”

Morgana nodded. “You didn’t back down at all against that hooligan. That took some serious guts.” He wilted. “Though we still didn’t end up with any new information…Let’s stop for today.”

Two phones rang out in the empty alleyway and they took them out.

R: Wanna meet up?
Ak: Let’s do it.
An: Do you think it’s safe though?
An: We did ask tons of people, so there’s a chance we’re getting followed.
Ai: Smart. We’re definitely drawing too much attention to ourselves.
Y: Agreed. Just to be safe, we should refrain from doing anything to make ourselves stand out.
Y: The sun will be setting soon, so let us disband for today and report on our findings tomorrow.
An: Why don’t we meet at karaoke tomorrow? We can talk in private, and it’ll be cheap after school.
Y: Ah, that must be what they call hustle hour.
R: Dude, it’s muscle hour.
R: Wait, is that wrong too?
Ai: It’s happy hour, and it usually implies alcohol.
An: Muscle hour just sounds sweaty…
An: Anyway, see you guys at karaoke tomorrow.

Looking at each other, they shrugged and headed home for the day.

Swiping their wallets at the turnstiles, they made their way back to Yongenjaya. The dark sky had split open while they were underground and poured rain onto the asphalt, prompting them to take out their umbrellas. Airi eyed around the alleyways and corners as they walked down the street, straining her eyesight to see if anyone suspicious was around.

Walking to her house, Akira was about to head back to the cafe when his phone rang. Furrowing his brow, he took it out of his pocket and stared at the screen. It was an unknown number. Accepting the call, he placed it next to his ear. “…Hello?”

“Kurusu-kun? This is Niijima, Niijima Makoto…Thanks. For earlier.”

He stayed silent for a moment, too engrossed with the fact that she had gotten his contact from somewhere. “How’d you get my number?”

She sighed. “…I dug it up. I realize I’m apologizing after the fact, but…It just didn’t feel right, keeping it from you, so…That’s all. Bye.” She promptly hung up, leaving him to stare at his phone in befuddlement. What the hell?..?

“Was that…Makoto-senpai?” Airi asked slowly as she opened the door.

He nodded, putting his mobile back in his pocket. “She said she dug up my info…Somehow…” He sighed, ruffling his hair in aggravation. Why was he being stalked? “What is with her..?”

Airi bit her lip, the possibilities running through her head. The council president could just be doing this to get rid of the mafia boss, no matter the cost. Yet…a darker, sleep deprived side of her
mind told her that she probably liked the phantom thieves leader in some way to be putting in so much effort to follow his movements. She followed him at school, at Shibuya, and now somehow found his phone number. Not her's, or Ann's, or Ryuji's.

Her lips twisted into a bitter frown. Did she actually find him attractive or...was this just her way of getting back at her? Or she was just going crazy from lack of sleep.

“Airi?”

She blinked, snapping out of her dark thoughts. “Uh, yeah?”

Akira gave her a concerned frown. “You sure you’re OK?”

She gave him a small smile and nodded. “Yeah, I’m fine. I’m just going to stay home for a while, maybe do some practice…” Whatever it took to distract her from the situation.

He nodded slowly. “OK, I’m going to go back home now. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She waved as he left back to the cafe, closing the door behind her and locking it. Yusuke wasn’t back yet, but that was OK, he had keys.

Putting her umbrella in the rack, she took off her shoes and padded upstairs into her room. Making sure her window was locked once, twice, four times, she went over to the drawer and opened it.

Photos upon photos stared back at her and she took them out, examining the people within. Her fingers traced the silhouette of her parents, memorizing the last time they were alive. The only versions she remembered clearly was from the portrait in the shrine downstairs. How long until her memories couldn’t be relied upon anymore? How long until she began to forget? Her mother’s smile, her father’s laughter...

Slowly exhaling, she took another photo out from the pile, staring at Rui’s sunny grin. Rui...’You didn’t deserve to die. You didn’t deserve to go like that. This world was so rotten that everyone forgot about you except me. No one to remember you existed...Would that be me someday?’

She didn’t have anything close to this for herself. She had nothing to remember Rui with aside from her own life.

Even though she was scared out of her mind that that man was stalking her, these photos almost made up for it. Almost. At least Yusuke was safe. He wasn’t going to target her little brother, only her.

Straightening up the pile, she placed it back in the drawer and closed it. She hadn’t received any more photos yet, but she was almost positive that he wouldn’t know about her activities after Rui’s death. That haven in San’ya had no official paperwork. Every child that had taken refuge there was essentially surviving unseen in society.

No official document could prove they stole and lived terribly with no heat and barely any electricity. Wherever he was getting these photos and information from, they wouldn’t have anything on her.

On them.

“C’mon, lil sis!” Nishiki taunted as he ran ahead with the goods in his arms along with Takase. “Keep up with us!”
She panted, her much shorter legs not being able to keep pace. “I’m trying..!”

This was her first outing with them. After two weeks of teaching her how to make lockpicks and the best ways to distract storekeeps, they finally let her help out.

She was desperate. She couldn’t do this without Rui. Life was so bleak now, as if the sun was a little dimmer now that she was gone. She wanted to give up so bad, but the hunger gripped her guts. It hurt. She had to eat.

Her foot caught a crack in the gravel and she tripped, skidding her bare knees and chin on the concrete. “Nngh..!”

The two older boys stopped once they heard her grunt out in pain and they turned around. “Lil sis!” Nishiki yelled, running back to grip her elbow, pulling her up. “C’mon, c’mon…” He muttered, placing her back on her feet as she unsteadily gained her balance.

“Get back here, you little shits!”

They glanced back, blanching as the storekeep they stole from had gained up on them. Scrambling to their feet, they kept running, dodging into the dingy and trash filled alleyways.

“You scum! Dammit...” They heard behind them, the footsteps stopping as they refused to follow them in.

Their worn shoes splashed against the disgusting puddles on the ground as they made their way back to their building a few minutes away. It was a glorified shack hidden behind other, much taller apartment buildings. The ceiling leaked at certain spots and the originally white walls were stained with age and poor maintenance. At least they had running water and electricity.

They panted as they came to a stop. “All right…” Takase breathed as he straightened up, cracking his neck. “Airi, show us what you’ve learned.”

Nodding shakily, she took a deep breath and took a badly made lock pick from her waistband, inserting it into the lock. After a minute of fiddling and some cursing, she finally got it open, the door swinging inward.

“Good job!” He praised, patting her on her head.

She pursed her lips at the pandering action and moved away, letting his next pat hit the air. “Thanks…” She answered quietly. Even though he had been so nice, she was still wary.

He pouted and slumped. “You’re so not cute…”

Rolling his eyes, Nishiki pushed past him and headed inside, dumping his onigiri and cheap bentos on the rickety table. They followed him in, locking the door behind them, and they took a seat on mismatched stools, making sure they had enough.

They weren’t the only group out perusing the district, but they were dispatched first since her light pink hair would grab attention. While they goaded the storekeep into running after them, another group would sneak into the unattended store and grab more things, leaving before they came back. This was the only way they could get enough food.

Nishiki sighed as he rested his arms on the table. “That was a good run, guys. We’ve got enough for a week here, and the other group should have enough for another.” He smirked. “We can grab more shit later to get a surplus.”
Takase nodded. “We should. We’ve got school tomorrow, remember?”

The other boy groaned, ruffling his dark red hair. “Don’t remind me. At least school lunch’s free. If I have to sit through another lecture about how ‘Japan’s the best,’ I’m gonna fuckin’ puke.”

Airi slowly blinked, wincing as she poked at the raw skin on her knees. “…Just go so you can get an education.” It was important to be seen as smart. If people thought you were smart, you were treated with more respect. If you respected others as an intelligent person, people would genuinely like you and you wouldn’t have to worry about being thrown away into a dump like this.

She wanted to live in a proper house that wasn’t crammed with other children. To eat without worry because she could afford it. To then be able to help others in the same situation so they’d never end up like Rui…

Leaning to the side, Takase gave her a worried frown. “Oh, right. You fell earlier, right? I’ll get the first aid.” He stood up and walked over to the bathroom, grabbing the pack from the top shelf. It was only for emergencies since supplies were expensive and they couldn’t steal from a pharmacy.

Walking back into the room, he placed it on the table and popped it open, taking out a bottle of rubbing alcohol and a rag. Damping the cloth, he knelt down and dabbed at her wounds.

Airi winced, clenching her eyes at the burning sensation crawling into her cuts. “Ow…!”

“Quit being a baby.” Nishiki grumbled as he stood up, unrolling the bandages. Shoving Takase out of the way, he quickly and expertly wrapped her knees up, patting them down. “That good?”

She nodded, experimentally bending her legs. “Yeah…Thanks, Nishiki.”

He snorted, straightening up from his crouch. “Just call me Nii-san. It’s what you underlings should be calling your captain.” He grinned, a canine tooth poking out from under his lip.

Takase deadpanned, getting up from the floor and dusting himself off. “Stop with the yakuza lingo, man. We’re not a clan.”

“No, but we’re a family, right?” He refuted, plopping down onto his chair again. “And as a family, we look out for each other.”

Airi stared at him for a moment before nodding. They had to be family in this place. “…OK. You promise, right?”

Nishiki nodded solemnly, replacing his grin with a firm expression. “Promise. You need anything, I’ve got your back, Lil sis.”

Snapping out of those memories, she shook her head and went for a bath. Takase was gone now, but Nishiki…He disappeared once he turned sixteen and he left for the streets.

Was he dead? Was he alive? She wouldn't know…
Getting back to the cafe, Sojiro looked up from his newspaper. He had been scouring the daily copies for any more information about Hisoka, but came up with nothing each time and the creases in his forehead deepened with stress. “Hey,” he greeted his ward. “Some girl called looking for you around noon. Said she’s the student president and that she’s got something that belongs to you. She seemed to know you, so I gave her your number.”

Akira sweatdropped. So that’s how she got his number.

“She must’ve looked up Leblanc’s address trying to contact you.” Morgana muttered. “That Nijima sure is thorough! Then again,” he hummed. “She called you just to apologize...maybe mom’s right, she doesn’t seem so bad after all.”

The phantom thieves leader slowly shook his head. It would’ve been less underhanded if she just asked for his information. And why just him? She could just ask Airi instead, she had her phone number.

The TV was on the news channel and he walked up to it. “In other news, there was an arson incident at a factory belonging to restaurant giant Haneruya.” The newscaster informed, shuffling their papers. “An employee was arrested, but claims to be unable to recall any details of the crime. When questioned about his motive, the employee insisted he did not know what came over him. Incidents like these with suspects whose motives are unclear have been happening more often in the restaurant industry…”

Morgana flicked his ears. “It’s weird that they don’t remember. How is anyone supposed to prevent these weird crimes?”

Akira shrugged. It seemed really weird that so many incidents like this kept happening. His phone buzzed in his pocket, and he noticed it was Mishima asking to hang out. He glanced out the window, noticing it was still raining. Should he?...

Ak: Are you home yet?
Y: I have just left Yongenjaya station. Why?
Ak: I’m going out and wanted to make sure someone was with Airi.
Y: Ah, understood. I’ll be home within the minute.

His concern eased, he left the cafe again to hang out with the Phan-boy. Maybe he had more news…

Chapter End Notes

Mishima rank 4
Chapter 115

Chapter Notes

Thank you for 650+ kudos! Wow!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

----6/17, FRIDAY, EARLY MORNING, SUBWAYS.

“So we meet again.”

Resisting the urge to sigh at the now familiar voice, they turned around to see the student detective walk up to them, briefcase in hand like always.

Akechi gave them a polite smile but mostly focused on the transfer student himself. “But my, what murky weather we’re having…” He sighed. “Speaking of murky...there haven’t been any new developments in the phantom thief incidents. If they go so far as using calling cards to get attention, I doubt Madarame’s case will be the last. What kind of target will they choose next?” He grasped his chin thoughtfully with one hand. “What do you think?”

Akira raised a brow. He kept asking them about the Phantom Thieves. Was he being suspected? He should probably say something that would help their reputation. “A criminal, I would think.”

Akechi hummed. “The Phantom Thieves only target criminals, huh...Is that really true?” His smile dimmed. “Supposing it is, there are plenty of villains in the world. How do they choose who to go after?...” He stared down at the ground, seemingly lost in thought.

They glanced at each other. Even though he was clearly making himself their rival, he wasn’t that bad of a guy.

Airi pursed her lips. If he didn’t turn out to be who she thought he was, at least. She really was hoping so. She didn’t want to think of the somewhat arrogant but mostly kind student detective as the same kid who knocked her front teeth out. Even though they were baby teeth and were going to fall out anyway.

Akechi blinked, snapping out of his thoughts. “...Oh, sorry. I’m getting lost in my own head...I have to stay on top of any Phantom Thieves activity due to what I said on the air. If you hear any rumors at school, I hope you can let me know.”

Akira nodded. ‘Nope.’

Smiling at them one last time, Akechi left the Ginza Line and into Shibuya, leaving them to watch his retreating back.

“...Is he following you?” Yusuke asked calmly.

Airi huffed in amusement. “Is he Makoto-senpai number two? Or maybe he’s just so charmed by you.” She teased even as Akira gave her an unimpressed look. “He didn’t even look at me or Yusuke the entire time he was talking to you…” They would be pretty hot as a couple since they
were "rivals," but deep inside, she didn’t want that to be true. She really needed to get some sleep so her mind would stop coming up with such ridiculous things.

Akira facepalmed. “Why me…” He voiced, muffled by his hand.

The school bell rang, signalling the end of classes for the day and the students dispersed from the rooms. The group of thieves had promised to meet up at Karaoke today to share what information they had, and hopefully find something useful in their search for a name.

Drying her hands, Airi left the bathroom and walked back to class. She passed by several students in the hallways gossiping as usual. Ever since that TV interview with Akechi, a lot of people had been saying how the Phantom Thieves didn't exist or were some form of terrorist group. It was disheartening to hear opinions changing so fast, especially when their first target had been the school's rapist and abuser.

At least she knew most of the former volleyball team actually supported the Phantom Thieves. She still remembered when Watanabe and Tanaka had talked about how the vigilante group had saved them, and it helped distract her from all the disparaging rumors. It was strange to be gossiped about but not have it directly be about her. They didn't know she and three others inside the building were Phantom Thieves.

"Akechi-kun was so cool on TV. I can't believe he's our age!"

"Maybe he's right about the Phantom Thieves. No one knows how they "steal" hearts anyway...Are they changing people to be bad?"

"Did you see Nijijima's face earlier? I tried to talk to her but she brushed me off. Something about other concerns. What a bitch..."

"These days, you gotta go to one of the other council members. Did you try Kimisawa? She's pretty nice about it. Oh, there she is right now."

"Hey! Don't point to her, she might look this way. She wouldn't be able to help..."

Furrowing her brow at the statement, Airi was about to turn around to ask their concerns when someone almost bumped into her. Taking a step back, she blinked and bowed slightly. "Oh, Takao-senpai, I'm sorry."

Eiko’s face immediately fell into a frown seeing her and Airi smiled uncertainly.

Takao Eiko was a third year and was known in her grade for being an airhead. Ever since she had taken up the role of class president again this year, the upperclassman tended to keep her nose up in her direction whenever their paths crossed. She was nice last year though, so she had no idea why her senior began treating her like this.

Eiko resisted the urge to grimace. “Kimisawa-chan…” She twirled her side ponytail. “It’s OK.”

Airi smiled. She wasn’t a bad person though, so maybe she did something that irked her. “How are
you, Takao-senpai? Is everything all right?”

Jaw tightening at her question, Eiko chewed her gum and walked past her. “Fine. I have to like, go to work and stuff so I can’t chat. TTYN.”

Airi hesitantly waved at her retreating back. As soon as she asked about her well-being, the upperclassman would clam up and leave. Was she annoying her? And wasn’t there a rumor about her job? Something about a salon…

“Airi?”

She turned around, noticing Akira, Morgana, Ryuji, and Ann were all waiting for her near the stairs, bags already on their shoulders. “Ah, I’m coming!” She glanced back down the hallway, noticing the two students who were gossiping about her had already left. She frowned slightly. What was their concern? She’d have to keep an ear out. She didn’t know which students they were.

“For real?!” Ryuji complained, throwing himself back on the plush sofa. “We didn’t get anything?!"

They were sat in a private karaoke room on Central Street, a few non-alcoholic drinks in front of them. They left the singing machine off so they could talk, but the sound proofing that the establishment advertised seemed to be false since the next room’s music seeped through their walls and into their room.

They winced as the person tried to hit a high pitch and failing. “Jeez, they suck…” Ann glared at the wall that separated them from the offender.

Flinching as the person screeched into their microphone, Airi got up from her seat and moved to the opposite side with the rest of them. “Ugh…Talk about tone deaf…”

“Man,” Ryuji sighed. “We’re goin’ nowhere with this…” He looked up at them. “Hey, can’t we ask Miss President to change it up?”

Ann looked at him in surprise. “You mean…change our target?”

He nodded dejectedly. “We just gotta show our justice to satisfy her, right? There are tons of shitty adults in this world. It’s not like it matters who we’re goin’ after. She says this is for the students, but I bet it’s just so she can go brag about it on college apps.”

Airi glared at him. “Are you forgetting that our classmates are victims of our target? You want us to leave them to suffer when we could help?”

Ann nodded in agreement, also glaring daggers at his suggestion. “We can’t just accept that! It doesn’t matter who the target came from anymore. People are in danger and we can do something about it!”

He wilted under their fiery gazes. “R-Right…”

Yusuke crossed his arms. “They’re right. We want to give courage to the weak. Isn’t this the
perfect target to accomplish that goal?”

Akira nodded. “Exactly. We should do this, whether or not we’re being blackmailed-” He winced and covered his ears as the horrible singing rose up a couple more octaves, piercing their ear drums with this torture.

Yusuke furrowed his brow. “They really have no talent…”

Ryuji sighed. “I never thought it’d be this noisy if you weren’t singin’…” He idly scratched his chest. “Anyways, I’m sure we’ll shut Akechi up if we pull this off, but-”

“That’s exactly why we should do it.” Yusuke snapped quietly.

Morgana groomed his whiskers. “It all comes down to intel in the end…” He looked up at his teammates with a firm gaze. “If we don’t start finding tips on that front, we’ll never get any further than this…”

Yusuke sat up in his seat. “There has to be someone who has what we need.”

Airi blinked. “Intel…? Why did that ring a bell in her mind?…

Ohya shrugged. “No one knows where the rumor originated from, but I hear all of them, sooner or later.”

She shot up from her seat, startling the others. “Ohya!” She gasped with realization and pulled her phone from her pocket.

Sitting back in his seat, Akira perked up. “You’re right..! She’s a reporter, so she has to know something, right?”

“Ahh…” Yusuke curled a sly smile. “A woman such as her would surely hear the rumors that circulate in this city.”

Ryuji oohed with realization. “Oh yeaahhh. I completely forgot about her!”

Ann tapped her chin. “Me and Ryuji only met her once, but you guys worked with her, right? Do you think she could help?”

Morgana purred. “If I remember correctly, she mentioned that she hears every rumor that goes around. If anyone knows anything, it’s her. We have no other lead.”

“One way to find out…” Airi answered distractedly as she typed in a text.

Ai: Ohya, I need a favor.
Ai: I need the name of the person who controls Shibuya’s underground.

The phone in their room rang and Ann stood up to pick it up, listening to the receptionist. “Oh, yes. Thank you…” She covered the receiver and turned back to them. “He says our time’s up. Should we extend it?”

Ryuji shook his head. “Happy hour’s over, yeah? C’mon, let’s just go.”

Yusuke gave him a shocked look and grabbed his cup. “How wasteful!” He quickly downed the rest of his drink, coughing a bit at the end.

Airi sweatdropped, placing her phone back in her pocket. Maybe her lecture about the importance
of money rubbed too much. “She didn’t respond yet, so she might be sleeping. I’ll let you guys know when I’ve gotten a reply.”

Ryuji stretched his arms in the air. “Guess we just gotta wait for her to text us back. Let’s go home.” He yawned, standing up from his seat.

Taking their belongings, they left the room and checked out at the counter to go home for the day. Riding the train back to Yongenjaya, Yusuke, Airi, and Akira all took out their umbrellas once they left the station, the rain still falling on and off throughout the month.

Akira split off from them and entered the cafe, shaking his umbrella of any moisture.

“You’ve been coming home late.” Sojiro remarked, narrowing his eyes from behind the bar. “Hope you’re not sticking your nose into other people’s business.”

Morgana winced. “The chief’s as sharp as ever...But it’s more like we’re the ones being dragged into things…”

His phone buzzed and he checked it, noticing it was from Kawakami. Again? He furrowed his brow. She was always eager to be requested for her “sister”’s hospital bills. He took his wallet out of his pocket. He had more than enough left over to do it...

Shrugging, he walked over to the yellow telephone on the bar and dialed her number.

“Hiiii, this is Becky, thanks for calling me on this rainy da- Ah, hold on, it’s you.” Kawakami sighed. “I barely get any customers on rainy days...I’ll provide my services for ¥5000, request fee included! So you’ll request me, right?...right?”

He bit back a sigh. “Yeah, please come over.”

“Yayyy! I love you, Masterrr~! OK, I’ll come over there right awayyy!”

He sweatdropped, hanging up the phone. Why did he keep doing this..?

Throwing the rag into the sink, Sojiro took off his apron and put on his white blazer and fedora. “All right, I’m off for the night. Remember to lock the door when you’re done with...whatever you’re doing.” He gave his ward another weird look before leaving.

Akira closed his eyes and slumped over the counter. Now even his guardian was thinking he was up to weird things…

“Masterrr~!”

He shot up from his chair, seeing Kawakami standing at the entrance in her usual maid uniform. That was fast. “Hey…” Resting his hands in his pockets, he walked upstairs, hearing her footsteps following him up.

She did her usual halfhearted cleaning of his room before sitting down next to him on the couch. “So, Master…” She leaned in closer, placing a hand on his thigh and he sweatied. What was going on?! “I want to provide more services for you…”

He blinked, and blinked again. Did she mean more time in class? “...That would be great.”

Perking up at his answer, she pouted her lips and widened her eyes, seeming more doll like and cutesy. “I’m really good at giving massages. Meow! I’ll massage you aaanywhere you like~.”
Letting her face morph back to her normal expression, she looked up at him expectantly. “Well? How was that?”

He tilted his head. It was kind of cute but oh man, he could never forget that this woman was his teacher and at least a decade older. “…Huh?”

She sighed. “The thing is, I talked to my boss about picking up more shifts…But he said that he prioritizes “younger” women!”

He raised his brows. “How rude of him.”

She nodded in agreement, sneering as she remembered her boss brushing her off. “Seriously…He didn’t have to say that right to my face. I mean, age has nothing to do with cleaning a room!” She smirked. “And I look damn good for my age, if I do say so myself. Airi says I look like her sister instead of a guardian, the girls in my neighborhood always tell me I’m pretty, and the latchkey kid who lives next door always asks me to tie up her hair. Thanks to that, I’m an expert with these pigtails now. See?”

She gestured at her bouncy waves. “So I’m damn good for-” She paused, furrowing her brow. “…Wait, don’t tell me I’m the only one who thinks this way?” Pulling her cutesy face again, she coyly leaned up toward him. “Master…would you please give me your honest opinion? I look pretty good as a maid, don’t I?”

Feeling more and more uncomfortable with every second passing with that face directed toward him, he nodded. “Yes, you do.” But Airi would be cuter. He could just imagine her in a maid outfit…

Her eyes sparkled with glee. “Really?!…I’m going to take your word for it!…” Biting her lip, her face fell and she stood up, facing away from him.

He looked at her questioningly. Why did she change moods so quickly?

“…You go out of your way to request me, and all I do is sit here and vent to you. What the heck am I saying…? You’re my student and my adopted daughter’s friend…” She sighed. “My double life as both a teacher and a maid is so exhausting. Maybe I let my guard down because you know both sides of me.”

She looked around, her eyes soft with fondness. “The more I come here, the more I feel like I can relax. As a maid, I’m supposed to help my master relax…but instead, I’m the one who’s being helped.” She laughed pitifully. “…Sorry I’m such a terrible maid.”

Akira frowned sympathetically. He was surprised to see she was being so open about this, but hearing all that made him think…maybe she was just as lonely as everyone else. She worked two jobs for her “sister” which probably meant she didn’t have much time for anything else. ‘I can feel her kindness…’

She hugged herself and looked away. “I have to confess something…” She began quietly. “I lied about the reason why I need to make more money…I don’t have a sick sister.” She confessed. “All that stuff about the fees and charges was all a lie too.”

He pursed his lips. “I already knew that…Airi would’ve told me if you had a sick relative.”

She sighed. “Yeah, she would, wouldn’t she…I can’t get requested unless I make up those types of stories. See, you understand now, right?” She turned to him. “Nothing good will come from involving yourself with a terrible person like me. It’s a good lesson learned.” She sighed and
looked away. “Let’s just put an end to this.”

He furrowed his brow, taken aback by the sudden change. “Don’t you need the money? The sister thing might be a lie but you’re still working two jobs.”

She regarded him for a moment before turning away. “I can’t tell you that. I’m sorry for wasting our time like this.” She voiced demurely, keeping her head down. “Thank you for using our service…”

She was about to walk down the stairs when the bell on the front door jingled and footsteps charged into the cafe. Alarmed at the potential break-in, Akira shot up from his seat and grabbed Kawakami’s arm, tugging her behind him. Who?...

“-kira, I got a reply and we need to go now!”

Running up the stairs, Airi stopped and stared, pausing on the last step. She had changed into her summer dress, and her eyes darted between them with something akin to disbelief.

Kawakami paled, seeing her pseudo-daughter while dressed as a maid. Shifting in her mary janes, she hid behind her student, failing miserably since her petticoat was so poofy.

Akira sweated, caught between his friend and his teacher-turned-maid. This must look so wrong…

”What…” Airi began, opening her mouth, closing it, then opening it again. “…is this?”

“W-Wait, Airi…” Akira held up his hands nervously. “I- We can explain.”

She raised her brows, still in shock. “”We”? So this is a mutual thing…?” Her eyes darted from him to her teacher. “Sensei…Are you..?”

Wincing as she was found out, Kawakami ducked her head. “Guess the cat’s out of the bag…” She muttered. “Yes, I’m-”

“Fucking your own student?”

Her head shot up. “Wait, what?! No!” She gave her ward a scowl, a hint of red staining her cheeks. “I would never!”

“Then what is this?” Airi gestured to her and her leader, her eyes demanding an explanation. “You told me you got a second job to help pay the bills, but you wouldn’t tell me anything! You...You lied to me!” Her voice grew louder the longer the situation sunk in. She had lied to her. “You think I don’t hear the other teachers talking about how you’re always trying to skip meetings?! How you're barely doing your job?!...” She quieted her voice. "Why won’t you just tell me...”

Her mind was fraying underneathe the stress of being stalked, her lack of sleep, Makoto’s weird hot and cold treatment of her, and now this. She didn’t tell her about her job but told Akira? Her own guardian had been lying to her all this time. What could she believe anymore? She was going to snap at this rate.

She was so tired.

“I thought...I thought you trusted me…” Her lips twisted into a bitter frown. “But why would you? I’m just someone you signed a paper for.” She wasn't anyone special to her. Only Takase's little sister, not that that meant much now.
She shook her head, trying to grasp a semblance of patience. Calm down. “...Whatever, you don’t have to tell me. Akira, I’ll wait at the train station for you. Ohya messaged me back and said to come today. I’ve already taken too long…” Ignoring her guardian with a heavy heart, Airi left the cafe, the bell jingling at her departure.

Staring at where she just was, Kawakami bit back a sob, hiding her face in her hands. “I’m sorry...Airi…”

Akira hesitantly placed a hand on her shoulder, silently comforting her. He had no idea what to say. It was really out of character for the cellist to have lashed out like that, and he was definitely worried for both her and his teacher. “Sensei…”

Wiping her eyes, she shrugged off his hand. “It’s fine...I knew she would find out sooner or later…” She sighed quietly. “Truth be told, I never felt worthy of being her guardian. I never even check in with her. She told me the agents came a few days ago and she lied, just like I told her to…” She frowned bitterly at herself. “I didn’t deserve her or him…”

He blinked. “Him?”

Tensing at her slip up, she shook her head. “Never mind. I’ve stayed too long as it is. I’ll go now…” Quietly padding down the steps, she left the cafe with nary a sound aside from the bell, leaving the phantom thieves leader by himself.

Chapter End Notes

TTYN - Talk to you never

Kawakami rank 4
Akira slowly exhaled, feeling drained from today’s events. How much else could go wrong? He had to go after Airi and see if she was OK. She wasn’t being herself lately and it worried him. Was it because of Hisoka? Or because of her strained relationship with Makoto?

About to head out, Morgana stopped him by jumping out of the bag. “Wait, are you going to go in your school uniform? It would be bad for you to stand out.” He advised firmly. “Mom changed too, so you should change before you go meet up with her. I’m sure she's waiting.”

He reluctantly nodded, changing into his casual clothes before grabbing his bag with Morgana in it and leaving the cafe, making sure to lock the door. It stopped raining while he was indoors so he kept his umbrella in its tiny case.

“We’re meeting with this reporter at Shinjuku, right?” Morgana whispered. “According to mom, it’s a nightlife district full of temptation. Prepare yourself. You should let everyone else know, too. It sounded like she rushed over here as soon as she received a reply.”

Akira nodded, taking out his phone.

Ak: We got a reply. We’re meeting her at Shinjuku.
Y: So that’s where she rushed off to in such a hurry.
R: Shinjuku at night, eh?
Y: That sounds rather dangerous.
An: Where should we meet up?
Ai: Don’t come, Ann. I’m being hypocritical but you’d be approached by every host in the district.
R: Yeah, it’d be dangerous for you.
An: But Airi’s going and she’s pretty, too!
R: We need her to introduce us to the reporter.
R: Plus, it’d be easier to move around with less of us.
Y: I shall stay behind as well then.
Y: Akira, I relinquish watch over to you.
 Ak: Got it.
An: ...All right. We’ll leave it to you three then.
An: Stay safe, OK?
An: Especially you, Airi.
Ai: I will.

Airi waited at the entrance of the train station, leaning against the wall while she stared up at the murky and dark sky. She couldn’t believe what just happened. Was Kawakami really in a maid costume? In Akira’s room? And he mentioned that they could explain, meaning he was in on it. She wasn’t doubling as an escort, right?
Then again, she didn’t really know much about her guardian, did she, Airi thought bitterly. The older woman had kept her distance even when she signed her name as her guardian. She thought because Kawakami had done it, it would mean that she was wanted. That the teacher liked her for herself. That she trusted her.

But really, she only signed on because of her connection with Takase, which she still never elaborated on. Yet, Airi still thought she was closer to Kawakami than Akira, but the teacher told him about the maid thing before she told her, if she ever planned on telling her. Was she jealous? Maybe...

He must’ve made a deal with her to be hanging out with the teach-maid in his room. What did they agree on? Was there some sort of sexual undertone to all this?

Airi sighed heavily, closing her eyes as she rubbed her temples. Maybe she felt a little betrayed that they both kept this from her, but she was just too tired to be jealous. She wanted answers, she wanted quiet, she wanted a peace that wouldn’t come because her parents’ killer was stalking and taunting her with cryptic messages-

“Airi?...”

Her eyes fluttered open and she gave Akira a small smile as he hesitantly walked up to her, dressed in casual clothes. “Hey. Sorry about earlier. I’m just...a little on edge.” She confessed quietly, straightening up from the wall. “We have to meet up with Ryuji, right?”

He nodded, taking out his wallet to swipe at the turnstile.

They walked down to the platform to wait for the train. “Um…” Akira began awkwardly, rubbing the back of his neck. “A-About earlier, there’s...there’s nothing sexual about it. Just so you know.”

Airi huffed, smiling slightly at his shy answer. He was pretty innocent and it was cute of him to try to reassure her. “That’s good. I never thought of you as a person who’d do stuff like that, well…” She paused, looking away as a blush tinted her cheeks. “Aside from that time you went out with Ryuji and Yuuki-kun.” Unlike him, she wasn’t innocent at all. She still sometimes found herself thinking about how Mishima would be the bottom while Akira and Ryuji took turns on top. Those were things she’d never tell anyone, though.

Akira winced. “Right...That was when we met Sensei as a maid. Ryuji wanted to see what a maid service included, and he and Mishima roped me into it.”

Taken back, she stared up at him in surprise. “Wait, so it really was a maid service? I actually thought…” She shook her head. Don’t be a pervert. “Never mind. So...you ordered a maid and got Sensei on accident?”

He nodded sheepishly, blushing from embarrassment. “She made me swear not to say anything about it, and in exchange, I get to get away with stuff in class.”

Airi furrowed her brow before blinking with realization. “That time when you were making lockpicks in class...She did a whole lesson change which she never does.”

He nodded.

“...But then, why are you still requesting her over? You said there’s nothing sexual about it, but…” Airi pouted, crossing her arms as she narrowed her eyes. “Do you like seeing Sensei in a maid uniform or something? She’s pretty busty in it...”
Akira quickly held up his hands in objection. “N-No! I don’t like her like that at all! She can be cute, yeah, but, I mean…” He stammered nervously. “She’s not my type...or age.”

Scrutinizing him for a moment, she nodded. “OK, I believe you. It’d be pedophilia on her part if you really were doing something.”

He let out a sigh of relief. She believed him.

The station rumbled and the train slowly pulled into the platform, opening its doors. They walked in, grabbing a seat.

“...Did she ever tell you why she got a second job?” Airi asked quietly, leaning back in her seat as she hugged her bag.

Akira glanced over at her before shaking his head, placing his bag on his lap. Morgana was being quiet again. “She said she needed the money for her sister’s hospital bills, but she told me tonight that was just a lie so she could get more clients…”

Closing her eyes, she sighed. “I see…” So she was desperate for money, but why? Kawakami only lived in an apartment. There was no way her expenses went above her teacher pay grade. Why was she having trouble paying the bills?

He watched her for a moment. “…She said she signed as your guardian for you and 'him.' Who was this 'he' that she mentioned?”

The train rumbled as it sped down the tracks, filling the quiet of the half empty cart with its noise.

“...His name was Takase.” Airi began inaudibly. She didn’t know why, but she trusted him enough to hear every part of her life. “I don’t know his first name, but...he was an orphan at San’ya with me. He taught me how to make lockpicks, how to pick locks, and how to run from storekeeps and the occasional police officer, even though he hated it. He wanted an honest living, he wanted to work but he was too young then. Even though he was so conflicted, he always looked out for me and everyone younger, acting as one of our big brothers.”

She smiled softly at the memory. “After a year or two of living there, he was suddenly picked up by his relatives. He didn’t really know them, but he told me that he remembered that his parents argued with them a lot. I…” She paused. “I told him he should go because then he’d have a real roof over his head, food, a chance to get a better education. He didn’t really want to leave us, but in the end, he went with them.” She stared ahead through the dark windows as they sped through the tunnel. “I didn’t hear from him again until I got to Shujin, and I found out one of the teachers used to teach him.”

“Kawakami-sensei.” Akira concluded.

She nodded. “Yeah. I asked about him and…” She clenched her hands around her bag. “She told me he died. Almost five years ago.”

His eyes widened. “He’s dead...?”

Airi nodded despondently. “He would be turning twenty-one this year...He died on December 24th.” And she hadn't known until last year. She had held onto that fragile hope that she would be able to see him or Nishiki again, but everyone seemed to die around her. Was she cursed? Did her existence come with bad luck? Maybe she wasn’t human…

Frowning sympathetically, he placed a hand on top of hers. “Do you want to visit him?”
Letting their fingers entwine, she nodded. “I want to. I want to tell him so many things...but I don’t even know where his grave is. Kawakami-sensei never told me and without his first name, who knows how many Takases there are?”

He smiled softly at her. “Then we’ll just have to wear her down, right?” He winked.

She looked up at him in surprise. Wear her down?

“I could tell you weren’t really angry earlier, just hurt and on edge with everything that’s been going on...If I keep requesting her, she might open up a little more and tell us.”

Airi gave him an amused smile. “Aren’t maid services usually expensive? You’re probably blowing a ton of money on this…” She softened. Even though they had kept this from her, it didn’t mean she had to know every little thing they did in their lives. She was being selfish and irrational. If he wanted to find out for her, then she wouldn’t stop him. “But...thank you. I should apologize to her…”

“This is Shibuya. I repeat, this is Shibuya. The time is now 9:35PM, the next stop is…”

The train pulled to a stop and they got out, walking over to the hideout where Ryuji was waiting. He was checking his phone for updates, still in his school uniform.

Nuzzling his face out of the bag, Morgana pulled a face. “You’re still in your uniform?!?”

Ryuji crossed his arms. “Huh? No choice.” He shrugged. “I didn’t have time to go home and change. People aren’t gonna notice anyways with this t-shirt over it.”


Morgana hissed. “That’s not the issue!”

Airi sweatdropped. “Err...You do know there are cops out there, right?”

Ryuji waved her away. “Don’t worry so much about it. It ain’t that different from Shibuya. More importantly,” He frowned at her, eyeing her up and down. “You sure you’ll be OK there? You’re dressed pretty nicely…”

She raised a brow. “How sweet of you to worry.” Leaning into Akira’s side, she hugged his arm. “Why wouldn’t I be OK when I have three strong men with me?” She teased, giving them a wink.

Heating up when he felt something soft press up against his bicep, Akira lightly coughed and adjusted his glasses almost nervously. “L-Let’s go then.”

Morgana sweatdropped. “Is this really going to be OK..?”

They walked down the stairs and into the station square, turning back into the next building. Taking their wallets out, they swiped them at the turnstile at the JL line and took the train to Shinjuku.

They walked out of the station and into Sin City, adults in suits and cocktail dresses walking past them as advertisers littered the streets trying to solicit pedestrians. Ryuji stretched his arms in the air and sighed, grinning at all the neon signs that lit up the streets. “Whoa...Even at night this place is bright as hell! I guess that’s Shinjuku for ya.”

Morgana watched him exasperatedly. “Stop looking around so much. You look like a tourist.”
Taken aback, Ryuji stammered. “I-I was just tryin’ to find that place we’re lookin’ for.”

Airi stifled a laugh and pointed to the street ahead of them. “It’s this way. I’ve been there before so I’ll lead you guys.”

He scrunched up his face. “Wait, what? When’d you go?”

She looked away awkwardly. “Um...Like two weeks ago? Oh ya drinks there every night.”

He squinted his eyes at her. “...Did you come alone?” He asked, suspicious.

Tensing up, she walked ahead. “L-Let’s go before we’re late!” She laughed nervously, walking down the street.

Watching her for a moment, he furiously ruffled his hair. “Man...Her and Ann can be so reckless.”

He muttered.

Akira snorted, resting his hands in his pockets as he began walking after her. “Lucky us, huh?”

Ryuji glanced over at him before huffing fondly. “Yeah...Lucky us.”

They walked past the movie theater and into the heart of Shinjuku; advertisers littered the streets for host and hostess clubs, as well as for restaurants. Akira looked around curiously, this being his first time in the seedy part of Tokyo. His modest town of Mishima had nothing like this.

Trying to follow Airi as she walked ahead, he was stopped by a promoter holding business cards. “Welcome to our izakaya!” He greeted, gesturing to the bar and grill on his left, tired businessmen sat at the counter. “How ‘bout some all-you-can-drink booze on the cheap? Wait…” He narrowed his eyes, eyeing him up and down. “You underage?”

Akira blinked. “Nope.” He lied.

The smile came back on like a light switch. “Oh? In that case come in for an hour or two!”

“Akira!”

He perked up, noticing that Airi was calling for him, giving him a worried frown with Ryuji. “Er...sorry, but I have a date to get back to.” He lied, moving past the advertiser. That was awkward.

“How’d you get caught up like that?” Morgana scolded from within the bag. “Try to ignore anyone else who tries to lure you into their-”

“Hey, man...You wanna come play?” A suspicious salesman stopped him in the streets, wiggling his brows. “Touch all you want, no added fees. We have the cutest girls in town too.”

He sweated. Was there something about him that made people want to advertise these things to him? “Uh...” His eyes darted to his friends and an idea came to him. He already lied earlier and this wouldn’t really be a lie... “I already have the cutest girl, so no thanks.”

Grumbling, the salesman ignored him and went for another person to prey on. Letting out a sigh of relief, he finally caught up with Ryuji and Airi.

Airi blinked, having observed the entire debacle. “What’d you say to him? They’re usually pretty relentless.”
He looked away awkwardly. “Uh...Nothing.”

Ryuji snorted, not really believing him, and laced his hands behind his head. “C’mon man, we gotta keep moving!”

They continued walking down the street, passing by a certain S&M club. Seeing the same host was standing outside, business card in hand, Airi moved closer to Akira and Ryuji to hide behind them.

Noticing her shying away, they glanced at each other and nodded. Squaring their shoulders, they escorted her past that establishment without an incident, the host never noticing his once almost-victim.

Airi let out a sigh of relief as they increased the distance between them and the host, giving them a grateful smile. “Thanks.”

“That was the guy who tried to drag you in last time, right?” Akira asked quietly, now more on guard. No matter how pretty this town seemed, it was dangerous, especially for the lady with them.

She nodded. “Yeah...I got away when I stomped on his foot, but…” She shrugged. “At least I’m learning aikido now.”

Ryuji gave her an odd look. “You are? I don’t remember you ever doin’ any sort of martial arts.”

She tried to smile but failed. “I asked Makoto-senpai for advice and she gave me a booklet to help, but...At this point, I should probably just return it. I don’t think she wants me to use it anymore.” She didn’t even know if they were still friends.

Akira gave her a worried frown. There was some sort of tension between the two, ever since Makoto had confronted them. Was it all from the council president's side?

“Well…” Ryuji eyed around the shops, stopping on a bookstore. “There’s a bookstore here!” He walked up to it, sticking out like an alien next to the bright pink shop. “Whoa, why do I feel weird about goin’ in there? Maybe they got some cool stuff to read, like another aikido guide. Wanna check it out a bit?”

Airi gave them an exasperated smile. “Can you buy porn some other time? We still have to meet with Ohya. Besides, ero manga is cheaper online.”

He sputtered, face as red as a beet. “That-That’s not why I wanted to go in! I mean…” Grumbling at being teased, he stomped out the store, the three Yongenjaya residents following him down the road. They were almost at the bar now, just a few more steps and-

“Excuse me, you guys have a moment?”

They turned around, blanching at the sight of a patrol officer. He crossed his arms as he scrutinized them. “Are you students? You shouldn’t be out this late.”

Airi smiled politely, hugging Akira’s arm again. “We just got out of class at University!”

Akira nodded in agreement, tugging her into his side. “We’re college students.”

Ryuji grinned, catching onto their lie. “Class was such a drag, too! We’re adults, so of course we’d come to relax!”
Furrowing his brow, the officer turned to the ex-runner. “Hm? Are you tagging along on their date? Wait a second…” He narrowed his eyes at his outfit. “I’ve seen the pattern on those pants before. Maybe on the news…” His eyes widened. “Oh yeah, it was on that segment about the teacher who was harassing kids!” He glared. “Is that a school uniform.??”

They paled. “...Shit.” Ryuji whispered, taking a slow step back.

“You kids have got to be high schoolers! Come with me!” The officer demanded, stepping forward to drag them to the police station.

“Shoot!” Morgana cursed. “This is why I said uniforms were a bad idea! Let’s run!”

As soon as he said that, the three thieves sped back a street, hearing the cop call out for them. Dodging left, they disappeared into a crowd of party goers, going around a building to avoid him. Stopping once they’ve made some good distance, they panted.

“...How much longer until we get there?” Morgana asked bleakly, a little shaken inside the bag from the impromptu sprint.

Straightening her dress, Airi pointed ahead. “We’ll have to go around him. He was standing right in front of the bar.”

She gave the ex-runner a look and he sputtered. “Hey, it ain’t my fault we had to deal with that detour! Our school’s gettin’ real famous!”

“E-Excuse me!”

Sighing at another interruption, they turned around to see who called out to them and blinked.

It was a pretty woman sitting at a purple draped table, tarot cards placed on top. Her long blonde hair draped down her back, held back from her face with a blue headband. She wore a purple strappy dress over a long sleeved shirt, complimenting her purple eyes and pretty pink cheeks.

“For the blond one, I can sense impending woman troubles.” She spoke, focusing on Ryuji with a frown. “Or...perhaps it’s something else?” She straightened up with a firm pout. “In any case, horrible disaster is coming for you! Please let me examine your future further!”

Ryuji took a step back in shock. “What?! Me?”

The fortune teller nodded. “Yes, I suggest you get your fortune told! What I say will surely come to pass!”

He groaned. “More of this shit.?”


He paused, giving her an odd look before shaking his head. “Sorry, but we’re in a hurry. I don’t really believe in that stuff anyway.”

The fortune teller wilted. “I see. My apologies.” She murmured before turning her gaze to Airi and gasped. “Oh..!”

Airi blinked. “Yes?”

She shot up from her seat, eyes wide. “Miss, your future..!” She covered her mouth in horror. “Please, you must let me read your fortune! Something terrible will happen to you soon if you
don’t take action..!”

Airi stilled. If she didn’t take action? That almost sounded like she knew about her predicament. Were her powers real? Could she help...

Clenching her fists, she fought with herself before shaking her head. “I’m sorry, we don’t have time right now. Maybe next time.”

The fortune teller bit her lip. “...All right, but please come back soon. I’ll be waiting here in this spot at night.” She clasped her hands together. “May your fortunes be well...Please be careful.”

Shaken at the premonition, Airi hesitantly walked away, Akira and Ryuji following after. If that fortune teller was the real deal, then it meant something was going to happen soon that could be dangerous. Like him losing his patience with this little game and killing her.

Her nails bit into her palms at the thought. He hadn’t approached her yet, she could still have a chance to resolve this before Yusuke or Akira found out. She knew he wouldn’t target Yusuke because he was only interested in her, but who knew how long that would last. She had to protect her family from him, she wasn’t letting him take them away again-

Akira placed a hand on her shoulder. “Do you think she was talking about him?” He asked quietly, making sure the ex-runner wouldn’t overhear.

She bit her lip and sighed. “Maybe...What, you think she wasn’t lying?” She gave him a small teasing smile. She probably wasn’t.

He shrugged. “At this point? I’m ready to believe anything.”

They walked down the street, making sure to avoid any more advertisers and the occasional patrolmen, and finally made it to the bar. Ryuji stopped and stared at it, taking in the flashy light bulbs that lined the store sign and the intensely pink mood lighting. “Whoa, man...We ain’t old enough to hang out here. You sure this is the place?”

Morgana eyed the menu from his spot inside the bag. “Beer, whiskey, wine...Looks like nighttime is bar time.”

Airi nodded. “Yeah. Don’t worry, they don’t sell alcohol to minors.”

Ryuji scrunched up his face. “Goin’ in our uniforms is probably a bad idea...We got caught last time too...”

Akira turned to him. “You wanna wait for us then?”

He rubbed the back of his head. “I came all the way to Shinjuku and can’t even go in...?”

Airi gave them a weird look. “What are you talking about? Just go inside. We’ll make sure Lala doesn’t report us.” She opened the door and the boys hesitantly followed her, looking around the unfamiliar surroundings with wide eyes.

There were rows and rows of alcohol behind the well polished bar, pink mood lighting shining from the ceiling. Sparkly gold fabrics obscured the doors to the private booth, and a flirty sign saying “Welcome” was attached to the wall, beckoning any customers in. A pink disco light slowly rotated, giving the establishment a more retro feel. The reporter was waiting for them at the bar with a scotch on the rocks in hand, leaning her cheek against her palm.
Behind the counter was Lala who turned to greet them, wearing her usual purple kimono. “Welcome, welcome! Kimisawa-chan, welcome back!” She eyed the two male thieves under her strong eyeshadow, giving them a sultry smile. “How old are these boys?”

Sweatdropping, Airi smiled sheepishly. “Hi Lala. They’re my age.”

Ohya grinned. “Sorry, Lala-chan, but they’re with me.”

The bartender raised a thick brow. “Ooh, you’re picking them real young...Just don’t let them drink alcohol either, OK? And you,” She looked over at Ryuji. “I can tell you’re in a school uniform, but if you’re with Ohya, I won’t report you. Just make sure to hide if other customers come in. I can’t let them think I’m giving minors alcohol.”

Ryuji nodded hesitantly, intimidated by the larger woman. “R-Right, thanks…”

Downing the rest of her drink, Ohya stood up from the bar. “Lala-chan, I’m going to borrow the seats in the back. C’mon kids, this way.” She gestured behind the golden curtains where there was a booth, large enough for all of them to take a seat. Grabbing another scotch on the rocks, she took a sip, eyeing them with sharp eyes.

Morgana scrunched up his nose inside the bag. “Ugh, she reeks of booze…”

Fidgeting with his leg, Ryuji looked around nervously. “Man, I feel so uncomfortable being in here...You sure we’ll be OK?”

Airi gave him a reassuring look. “Of course. Lala already said she won’t report us, so just sit still for a while.”

Sitting up in his seat, Akira stared directly at the reporter with a cool gaze. It was time for his work as the leader.

She laughed, cheeks already red from ingesting so much alcohol. “What a surprise. I thought you were joking, yet here you guys are. So,” She took another sip of her scotch. “Why are you asking about who’s controlling Shibuya?”

Akira took charge of the negotiations. “I need intel on their boss.” He demanded quietly.

Ohya hummed thoughtfully. “Well, I do happen to know something about that. I could tell you, but…” She trailed off, finishing the rest of her drink before gesturing for a refill. Grumbling, Lala did as told before moving back behind the bar.

Nursing a new drink, she began. “Do you know the Phantom Thieves of Hearts? You know, that case the public has been focused on lately. I was pursuing the issue of people randomly entering into a shut-down state, but I’m lacking intel…” She smiled. “That’s why I’m currently looking for new material to write about. So, do you have any info on these Phantom Thieves?”

They glanced at each other. Airi furrowed her brow. “You’re not going to tell us unless we have info? But you helped out with the apprentices…”

Ohya gave her an amused smile. “That’s because it was for my job. Helping you was a side benefit, remember? Asking for the boss of Shibuya’s underworld is a lot more serious than framing an old coot.”

Gray eyes slid back to her and an idea hit him. “Are those your terms?” Akira asked smoothly. Could this be a deal? It would be advantageous to have a reporter like her on their side. She could
be a source of names as well.

She nodded. “Hm...Something like that. You’re Shujin kids, right? I see your friend there is still in his uniform.” She jerked her chin toward Ryuji who sputtered. “I thought maybe you might have some insider knowledge on the Phantom Thieves because of it.” She slowly grinned. “Their first incident was that of Kamoshida, you know? Ideally, I’d like to get some exclusive coverage from a student who suffered Kamoshida’s abuse.”

Ryuji tensed and his leg started twitching underneath the table. Airi placed a hand on his knee, trying to help him calm down. It didn’t have to be him.

“I would love an introduction if you know of someone who fits the bill.” Ohya hinted, taking another sip. “After all, it seems like handling this matter in the open would be an inconvenience to us both…”

“Hm, a student who suffered from abuse…” Morgana mused quietly in the bag. “Oh! What about that Mishima guy? He always seems to be on the side of the Phantom Thieves.”

Airi gave him a look of disbelief. “You want to throw Yuuki-kun to the wolf like that?”

Akira snorted. “We can say he’s helping us, right?” He turned back to the reporter. “I accept your offer.” He said firmly.

Ohya grinned. “It’s a deal then. Send me your friend’s contact info later.”

Morgana purred. “You’d better be thankful. My quick wit is the only reason we’re getting this far.”

Frowning, Airi gently tapped his head. “Shush you.”

“...Now that I think about it,” Ohya began thoughtfully to herself. “Those mental shutdowns and the Phantom Thieves both seem supernatural...Could they be related...? Or am I just hoping for a coincidence..?” Shaking her head, she gave them an apologetic smile. “Oh, sorry. I have a tendency to talk to myself on occasion. Well then, you can’t exactly consider this an upfront payment, but…” She took another sip of her scotch, letting the liquid burn her throat. “Kaneshiro Junya. I think he’s probably the guy you’re looking for.”

They perked up at the full name. This was what they wanted!

“You should check him out further if you’re curious...but I’m not responsible for what happens next!” Ohya gestured to the bartender. “Lala-chan, can I get a refill for us? We need to make a toast to our new acquaintances!”

Ryuji eyed the entrance, feeling even more nervous now that they fulfilled their objective. “We got what we came for, so we should prolly go now…”

After doing an impromptu toast and the exchanging of numbers, the teenagers left the bar and headed back out to the streets of Shinjuku, walking toward the train station.

Unable to hold it in anymore, Ryuji jumped up in glee. “Awright!” He grinned, turning to his friends. “Can’t believe we actually got somethin’! High five!” He held out his hands. Happy as well, both Airi and Akira high fived him, the latter holding his phone out to text the reporter a certain Phan boy’s number.

Morgana stretched out his paw and Ryuji tapped his with a grin as well before rubbing his nose. “Kaneshiro Junya, huh?”
“Not so loud!” Morgana hissed, taking his paw back.

Taking her phone out, Airi opened the app and inputted the name into the search bar. “Kaneshiro Junya…Here he is. That confirms it then!”

Ryuji pumped his fist. “Now we just gotta get some info on the distortion. Once we know that, it’s Palace time!”

Akira nodded with a smile. They were finally making progress. “Let’s do it tomorrow when we have Yusuke and Ann with us.”

The ex-runner nodded, taking out his phone. “Right, I’ll tell everyone to meet up in Shibuya. This is totally crazy though…” He grinned to himself as he thumbed in the group message. “It’s a huge catch! I’m pumped.”

“Oooh, a real huge catch, you say? I’m getting pumped too!”

Two men dressed in flashy and flamboyant clothes sashayed up to the ex-runner and marveled at him, grasping his biceps. “What a cutie!” One of them cooed. “And so muscular too. I give you an 85 out of 100!”

Akira and Airi stood in shock, slowly taking a step back. Ryuji sputtered, trying to take his arm back from their vice grip. “Gah! Wh-Who are you?!”

Ryuji scowled disbelievingly. “You just gonna leave me here like this?! C’mon, your best friend’s in trouble here!”

“Hehehe…” The muscular man giggled pervertedly. “What an energetic studmuffin, playing hard to get. I’ll give you all the freebies you could ever desire!”

His friend nodded in agreement. “The night is young, and so are we! Let’s party it up! We’ll buy your drinks!”

“Oh my gosh, OK…” Rolling her eyes, Airi stepped up, wrapping an arm around the ex-runner’s shoulders and tearing him away from the predators. “Sorry, fellas!” She smiled apologetically. “This one’s not for you guys.”

They pouted, eyeing her up and down with disdain. “Oh, honey, that dress with that hair color?” The first man tsked. “What, are you trying to blend in at a retirement home with that flower pattern?”

Her eyebrow twitched, trying to hold back her anger. That was uncalled for. “Oh, look!” She gasped, pointing behind them and into the crowd. “That guy is way hotter!”
They swerved their heads. “Where?!” Not finding another target, their eyes wound up over to Akira and he sweated. Oh no.

“Oooh?” They sashayed over to him, eyeing him up and down as he stood there, frozen stiff like cardboard. “That black hair is just so fluffy!” The muscular man marveled, eyes shining with infatuation. “And those glasses, hiding those gorgeous gray eyes..!”

His friend nodded. “He’s quite tall, and his arms are nice and muscular. He seems way more mature too...OK, forget the blondie, we’ll take this one!”

Akira gaped, trying to take a step back. No way..! This had to be punishment for something! “Oh no…” Morgana covered his eyes with his paws, hiding inside the bag to avoid the two men. “Please stay alive…”

Watching as they basically sexually harassed her friend, Airi narrowed her eyes at them and snapped. “Hey! Hands off!” Stomping up to them, she pushed them away with a surprising amount of force. They weren’t going to touch her leader while she was here! He was hers- theirs!

They stumbled back, about to yell at her, but she linked her hands with Akira and Ryuji and tugged them behind her. "We're teenagers!" She blurted, the two male thieves cowering behind her for safety. "Underage!"

They immediately slumped in disappointment. "Whaaaat?" One of them whined, already turning away with a pout. "What a bummer...Why are all the cute guys so young?!"

"Ugh, I thought they were legal because we're in Shinjuku..." The muscular one sighed and pointed to a young hip bar. "C'mon, maybe we'll find a fine stud in there that's as cute as Akechi-kun..."

Taking the opportunity, Airi tugged them toward the train station.

Catching onto her idea, they ran all the way there, swiping their wallets at the turnstile, and dashing into the train just as the doors were about to close. They stopped as soon as they made it, panting from the run. The other passengers stared at them before returning to their own business, ignoring the teens.

“Th-Thanks, Airi…” Ryuji coughed, shaking his head as he straightened up. “That was scary…”

Adjusting his glasses shakily, Akira nodded as well. “Yeah, thanks...I almost got devoured out there.”

Straightening out her dress from the run, she placed her hands on her hips and gave them a worried frown. “You guys have to be more careful. I thought I was going to be targeted, but it turned out to be you two.”

Slowly exhaling, Akira gave her a small smirk and ran a hand through his messy locks. “We’re just too hot.” He bragged as a joke.

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, you’re both really good looking which is why you guys need to stand up for yourselves next time!”

He blushed, his earlier bravado disappearing. Was he really?

Ryuji shuddered, rubbing his arms. “I’m never goin’ back...I dun wanna risk it…”

“This is Shibuya. I repeat, this is Shibuya. The time is now 11:24PM, the next stop is...”
Coming to a stop, the doors slid open and they walked out onto the platform, swiping out of the JL Line. Stretching his arms in the air, Ryuji yawned, tears gathering in the corners of his eyes. “I’m goin’ home…” He slumped. “I need to sleep off that nightmare…”

Akira nodded in agreement. “Same. See you tomorrow, man.”

They separated to their own train lines and went home. Akira walked Airi back to her house, waiting for her to open the door. The door opened before she could even insert the key, with Yusuke greeting them at the entrance. “Welcome back, Aneki. Good evening, Akira. Any news?”

She gave him a thumbs-up. “We got a name!”

A smile spread on his lips. “That is indeed good news.”

Their phones buzzed in their pockets.

An: **Did you find anything?**
Ak: **We got a name.**
An: **You guys really did it!**
An: **Well then, let’s meet up tomorrow at the hideout!**
R: **Yep, right after school.**
Y: **Understood.**
Ai: **Should I tell them what happened?**
R: **NO.**
Ak: **NO.**
An: **Something happened?**
Ai: **Oh man...I’ll tell you later.**
R: **DON’T YOU DO IT.**
Y: **I will have to hear this for myself.**
Ak: **No.**

“Seriously, you really need to stand up for yourself…” Morgana shook his head. “You’re supposed to be our leader, but you were being harassed left and right!”

Yusuke lifted a brow at hearing that. “Is that so? Care to share your experiences?”


She sweatdropped, holding her hands up in a surrender. “OK, OK...Well, at least we got a name tonight. We’ll be in the Palace soon enough.” She’ll keep the story for another time.

Yusuke nodded before making his way back inside the house, leaving them outside. Morgana flicked his ears. “Shinjuku sure was crazy, huh…”

His phone buzzed again, and Akira took it out.

M: **Hey, some girl just messaged me saying you told her about me?**
M: **She said she’s interested in me! What’s this about?!**
M: **And what kinda girl is Ohya-san? Is she cute, or is she hot?**

Airi huffed in amusement, reading the texts over his shoulder. “Does he have a crush already?”

Akira grinned slyly, thumbing down his next message.
Ak: Definitely hot.
M: For real?! You’re not pulling my leg, right?
M: Ohya-san…
M: She said she wanted to talk. How much more forward can a girl get?
M: Is this really what I think it is? Could it be?

Akira snickered at his responses. Now maybe he’d back off if he had a crush on the reporter.

Ak: Yup. Good for you.
M: Looks like my time in the female limelight has finally arrived…
M: This is all thanks to you.
M: To be honest, I really only liked you because of the Phantom Thieves.
M: But now, I’m so grateful to you. You’re a really good guy.
M: I feel like starting the Phan-Site has really changed me.
M: Anyway, I can handle this.
M: You introduced me, so I’ll make sure I don’t embarrass you.
M: And I’ll totally let you know if we end up hooking up!

He burst out laughing, putting his phone back in his pocket. Truly the highlight of his day. Aside from being able to say he was on a date with Airi earlier.

Airi sweatdropped, being able to read the rest of those texts. “You’re really teasing him, huh…” She shook her head. “Anyway, it’s late now and you’ve done a lot today.” She gave him a smile. “Get home safe.”

He smiled back and nodded. “Yeah, good night, Airi.” He turned around, walking back to the cafe.

She stared after him before closing the door, turning the lock in place. Heading upstairs to take a bath, she stripped off all her clothes before wading into the steaming waters, staring up at the vent in the ceiling with a blank frown.

What that fortune teller said really stuck out in her mind. She said something was going to happen soon. But what? What did he want? If he wanted to kill her, he would’ve done so already. Unless he was giving her enough time to say goodbye…
Once the bell rang, they stood up and shouldered their bags. They were going to infiltrate a new Palace today. Their phones buzzed.

Y: I realize we are meeting in a few minutes.
Y: However, do you remember that thread about the group of burglars in Shibuya?
Y: It seems the one who posted about his brother is a student at my school.
Y: And so after some prodding, I was able to pry a few more details out of him.
An: Oh, right! I was wondering about that.
An: It didn’t sound like they had anything to do with the mafia we’ve been chasing.
Ai: Did you get a name?
Y: Makigami Kazuya.
R: Dude, it’s freakin’ crazy that someone involved in that shit goes to your school.
R: Nice going, Yusuke!
Ai: That was really smooth of you!
An: That was super awesome!
R: All we gotta do now is punish him in Mementos.
R: This burglar guy isn’t gonna be near as scary as the mafia. He’s just a plain dude, right?
R: We’ll show him what being a phantom thief’s really about!
Ak: We’ll add him to the list.
Y: It seems we are unanimous then.
Y: We can further discuss the details later.

They put their phones back in their pockets. “We have another target in Mementos…” Airi sighed. She wasn’t looking forward to it. “It should wait until we’re done with the Palace, at least.”

Ann nodded in agreement. “Yeah, this mafia is way more important. Plus, we’re still being blackmailed.”

Akira shouldered his bag. “Let’s go then?”

Meeting up with Ryuji in the hallway, they took the train over to Shibuya. They decided to meet up at the Hachiko Statue instead of the station passageway. It was a better way to listen into all the gossip from the people who lingered in the area.

Yusuke was already there, fiddling with his phone. He looked up at their arrival and inclined his head as a greeting, holding up his phone. “I entered Kaneshiro’s name into the Nav. And as expected, it’s a hit.”

Darting out of the bag, Morgana stood up on a ledge next to him, basking in the fresh air for once. “All we need now are the two other keywords: what he thinks of as his Palace, and where it is. But we don’t have any clues other than people falling victim around here…We’ll just have to try whatever keywords we can come up with.”

Ryuji groaned. “Urgh, that’s gonna be impossible...How many buildings do you think there are in Shibuya?”
“No complaining,” Ann scolded, bumping shoulders with him.

Yusuke stared down at his screen. “If we can figure out what the Palace is, we may be able to guess where it is by association.”

Ryuji hummed. “It’s prolly somewhere he’s got complete control over...Maybe a garden?”

“No Candidates Found.”

“He likes money, so...” Ann winked. “What about a money bath? I’ve seen people online with things like that!”

“No Candidates Found.”

Yusuke scoffed. “No, not even close.”

Airi idly grasped her arm. “Let’s think back...This gang has been extorting people, so...A broker's office? A bank?” Her own bank sure did love reminding her that she only had three more years until they started taxing her property again.

The air pulsed red. “Candidate Found.”

Their eyes widened with shock. “OK...That’s a hit!” Yusuke confirmed. “So, he thinks of somewhere in this city as his own bank!”

Ann tapped her chin. “I thought it’d be something less realistic,” She pursed her lips, disappointed. "That’s all it is, huh?"

Akira snorted. “You really wanted that money bath idea, huh.”

Morgana waved his tail back and forth. “Now then, what location would Kaneshiro think of as his bank?”

Ryuji straightened up. “If we’re talkin’ about a place where he keeps his cash, maybe his own hideout?”

Ann shifted her balance. “How about...a real bank?”

Morgana shook his head, stretching his body. “His cognition wouldn’t be distorted in that case.”

Airi tapped her foot. “…A high school? Since he gets a lot of money from high schoolers.”

Yusuke shook his head. “No, not that either.”

Ryuji cursed. “Dammit, we ain’t gettin’ anywhere…”

The artist furrowed his brow. “This may be difficult to explain...but doesn’t it seem we’re thinking a little too inside the box?” He held a closed hand to his chest. “Palaces emanate a passionate madness...It feels as though we’re missing that aspect.”

The ex-runner scrunched up his face in confusion. “The hell’re you talkin’ about..?”

“This Palace is a bank for someone who extorts money with criminal acts.” Yusuke explained gravely. “It’s something more…”

Ann bit her lip. “But what other ways can we think about it..?” She perked up. “Oh, could it mean
a place you withdraw money?"

Morgana stood up. “Hold on! Do you think it might have something to do with the victims? He’s taking money from his victims’ wallets, right? That means his bank is wherever they are!”

“That’s terrible…” Ann paused. “But you may just be right.”

Ryuji furiously ruffled his hair. “Oh, come on!” He complained. “How many people do you think Kaneshiro’s taken advantage of in all of Shibuya..?”

“Target Found.”

“Wait a second..!” Yusuke called out as the app registered the information. “…I have a hit.”

Taken aback, Ryuji gawked. “Huh..? Wait, what?! D-Did I say something right..?”

“All of Shibuya.” Akira confirmed grimly. “That’s where he thinks of as a bank.”

“What?!” Ann gasped. “Like...the entire city?”

Morgana hummed thoughtfully. “I see.” He furrowed his brow. “That’s certainly where his victims are...It turns out he really is a terrible criminal.”

Airi eyed the large amounts of people walking around, none of them giving the teenagers a glance. “There’s a lot of people around...Should we go in now?”

Ryuji shrugged, rubbing his nose. “Eh, nobody notices if a piece of trash disappears from a trash can. This ain’t any different.”

Ann scowled. “Way to call us trash.”

He sputtered. “That’s not what I really meant! I-”

“In that case…” Yusuke began grimly. “Let’s go.” He looked to Akira for approval.

The leader nodded and the artist tapped to confirm. “Beginning Navigation…”

The air wavered in front of them, bleeding red and purple into the atmosphere. They felt their stomachs flip as if they were in the air before the ground reappeared beneath their boots. Fox put his phone away and they looked around the dark cityscape.

Panther took a step back. “What are those..?!”

They turned around and their eyes widened. ATMs on legs walked around as if they were regular people, oblivious to the money occasionally flying up into the ominously dark green sky.

“Walking ATMS…” Fox breathed out. “That must be his cognition of people. So this is what Kaneshiro considers a “bank”…”

Elegant observed the people with a remorseful frown. “ATMs only have a limited amount of money, though...What happens to them?”

Joker exhaled, already feeling like he knew the answer. “Guess we’ll have to find out.”

Mona jumped down on his two feet. “I never thought it would be the entire district...Look around us.” He gestured to their surroundings. “…The distortion is affecting the whole of Shibuya.”
Skull tapped his foot. “Huh? Whaddya mean?”

Panther gasped with realization. “Ohhh, that’s right! Even when we were in the castle and the museum, the city outside looked normal.”

Fox crossed his arms. “He sees everyone in Shibuya as his patron.”

Skull tched. “No surprise for a mafia boss.”

Joker glanced around with his third eye ability, trying to find key points or Shadows. “We should get that Treasure as soon as we can. We’re not letting this go on for any longer.”

Elegant nodded in agreement. “Let’s look for where it might be. Even though we don’t know what he looks like, there’s no doubt his Shadow is here somewhere…”

They walked down to Central Street where most of the scams took place, glancing around the stores and business. Every window was plastered with bank notes, ATMs walking to and from places like it was normal.

“We should look for a bank.” Mona advised. “There should be a huge one around here somewhere…”

They cautiously walked down the street, noticing there were no Shadows around anywhere. Passing by a few regular ATMs, they noticed one was on the ground, muttering to itself. “I can’t anymore…”

Panther winced at the sight. “This is terrible...Just what happened to him..?”

Elegant stared at it. That could’ve been her two years ago.

Reluctantly, they moved further down the street, stopping when they noticed an ATM standing next to the crepe store, smoking and crackling with electricity. “Look at that person trembling over there…” Panther pointed out. “Do you think he’s a victim? We should talk to him!”

They approached it slowly, wary of the static emanating from its broken screen. “Uh, do these guys even have mouths..?” Skull asked hesitantly.

Elegant stepped forward. “Excuse me, do you know anything about-”

“Ah!” It screeched in terror, backing away from them. “P-Please forgive me!”

Joker furrowed his brow at their reaction. “Where’s Kaneshiro?” He got straight to the point.

“I-I don’t have any more, please!” It begged hysterically, not hearing his question. “I’m telling you, not even one yen!”

Skull held up his hands in a placating manner. “Whoa, cool it. We’re not tryin’ to mug you or anything.”

It trembled. “Please, I don’t want to end up like the others..!”

“Were you assaulted?” Fox asked calmly.

It shrieked, unable to answer their questions.

Panther sighed. “There’s no doubt he’s a victim, but there’s no way we can get him to say
anything…”

Joker frowned. “Let’s find someone else.”

They ran down the rest of the street, bypassing the pedestrians. “Are those..” Fox breathed in shock.

In front of them was a pile of ATMs stacked on top of each other, their screens shut off and their appendages as still as death.

Panther let out a pained sob. “This is terrible...All of these are real people, right..?”

Elegant nodded, grimacing at the sight in front of them. “They’re completely drained…” Biting her lip, she tore her eyes away.

Skull shook his head. “What the hell…”

Mona waddled up to one, observing its stillness. “I don’t think we can talk to any of the ones here…”

Moving on, they walked over to the movie theater, noticing that the streets ahead were completely blocked with piles and piles of dead ATMs. Skull snarled. “Tch...Are all these guys Kaneshiro’s victims?!?”

Elegant let out a shaky sigh. “How many of these are students..?”

They flinched at the question. Fox looked around. “There is nobody we can speak to, nor is there a bank anywhere...Perhaps we should try checking around the station once more. We may have overlooked something important.”

“I got conned…”

“I can’t pay anymore…”

“I’m completely dry…”

Every ATM they walked past had something to say about their situation, and all of them were bleak. Running back toward the station square, they stopped when they noticed another fried ATM in front of the rental store.

“Oh, look!” Panther gasped. “Do you think that person’s a victim too?”

They walked up to it. “Excuse me,” Fox voiced politely. “Can we have a word? We are-”

“It’s no use…” It whispered to itself. “It’s all over...I’ll end up just like them…”

“What happened?” Joker asked.

“Can’t you tell..?” It breathed shakily, hunching over in defeat. “I’ve fallen...fallen so far…From a place where Kaneshiro leaves no tracks…”

Elegant furrowed her brow. “Fallen?”

Fox crossed his arms. “What could that mean..?”

Skull took a step forward. “Hey, you gotta tell us a little more than-”
“I’m...too tired...” It whimpered. “Please...let me rest...” It crumpled onto the floor, landing in a heap. Its screen shut off and with one more crack, it died.

Mona winced. “...I don’t think he can speak anymore.” He tapped his chin with a paw. “Kaneshiro leaves no tracks...? Does he mean that literally, or could it be figurative?”

Panther crossed her arms. “Hey, why don’t we go over all the intel we have now?”

They regrouped together on the street, thinking back to what they’d learned since they stepped inside the Metaverse. “They have apparently fallen quite far...” Fox mused.

Elegant furrowed her brow as she idly watched bank notes flutter into the sky. “They said they fell...Have you guys noticed that the money is flying up into the sky..?”

They glanced around and indeed, there was money heading up into the ominous heavens above them. Mona looked up. “Could that mean...they were actually thrown down from somewhere high up?”

Skull scratched his head. “What, y’mean like a skyscraper? Uhhh...” He looked up at the tops of the buildings. “There ain’t any of them around here, I don’t think...”

Hearing a whirring noise in the sky, they looked up and took a step back in shock. “What the..?!?” Joker gaped. “Is that the Palace?”

A large flying disc hovered above the city, its stainless steel exterior reflecting the neon lights of the street. Money flew up into the vacuum, and the occasional ATM fell off the edge, hitting the ground with a crack.

“Up in the air...” Fox marveled. “No wonder we couldn’t find it.”

“‘Kaneshiro doesn’t leave any tracks,’ huh..?” Mona snarked. “Figures it’d be floating.”

“So,” Panther crossed her arms. “How do we get up there? Can you turn into a helicopter, Mona?”

He wilted, his ears pressed against his scalp. “No...just a car.”

Skull sighed. “You’re useless! C’mon, don’t you have some kinda secret gadget or something?!”

Glaring disapprovingly at the pirate, Elegant walked up and pinched his ear. “Don’t call him that for not being able to do something you can’t do either!”

He winced and leaned away. “Ow ow ow ow! OK! Sorry...”

Clearing her throat, she let go and idly grasped her arm. “How can we get up there?”

Joker sighed. They had no viable way to get up there and it wasn't stopping near them either. “I don’t think we can do much more. Let’s head back and think of another way...”

Mona nodded. “All right, we should get out of here for now! Run for it!”

Turning around, they quickly ran back to the station square, exiting the Metaverse. The darkening but still bright sun blinded them for a moment when they transitioned back into the real world, and the ATMs were replaced by regular people.

Splitting off at the station, they all went home for the day. Airi sighed as they walked down the streets of Yongenjaya. Those ATMs they saw earlier rattled something within her. There were
people out there who viewed others around them as nothing more than resources, throwing them away when they were no longer useful.

Kamoshida thought of the school as his own castle; the students his stress relief toys that he could abuse. Madarame thought of his apprentices as an easy pathway to wealth; using their artistic talents to cover his own. Now Kaneshiro thought of everyone around him as a walking ATM; throwing them away once they had no cash to give him.

She clenched her fists. How many others suffered under these selfish people? There were millions of people in Shibuya. At least the two previous Palace rulers kept their victim numbers under a certain amount; with Kaneshiro, anyone could be a victim. They could take his Treasure, but it wouldn’t solve the problem that his victims were bled dry of everything.

Turning the corner, they waved farewell to Akira as he made his way to the cafe, leaving her and Yusuke to walk home as usual. “What should we have for dinner tonight?” He asked calmly as they arrived at their abode.

Unlocking the door, she shrugged. “I’m fine with anything. What do you feel for?”

He pursed his lips as he took off his shoes at the entrance way, padding deeper into the house. “…Crab.”

She snorted, locking the door behind her and walking into the kitchen. “Are you saying that because Kaneshiro’s name sounds like Kani?”

He gave her an amused smile. “Are you saying it doesn’t for you?”

Her phone buzzed and she took it out.

Oh: You two free?
Ak: Yeah.
Ai: Is something wrong?
Oh: All right. I have a bit of advice for you guys.
Oh: It’s about that Kaneshiro guy. He’s a lot more dangerous than I thought!
Oh: The police haven’t tracked him down, so I dug a little deeper…
Oh: Turns out he has some real shady connections. I won’t say any more than that.

She blinked. Shady connections? He was a mafia boss, of course he’d be shady.

Oh: He’s not someone teenagers like you guys should mess with. You should really back off, OK?
Ai: Thanks for the warning, Ohya.
Oh: …Guess that means you’re going ahead anyway. Well, that’s all I wanted to say. See you!

She put her phone away. They had no other option. They had to steal his heart or else Iida and everyone else suffering under his distorted desires could end up in even worse condition. And she’d never forgive herself if she didn’t do anything.

After dinner, she went to take a bath before getting into bed. She had made sure her door and her window were both locked before she laid down, but even knowing that, her eyes continued to stay open. What if she closed them, and the next second, he would come in and slit her throat? Even though her eyes burned from lack of sleep, she had to fight it.

Turning in her bed, she grabbed the Mona plush to her, snuggling into its soft fabric. She was just
so tired. Maybe a few minutes wouldn’t hurt?...

“Ai-chan!” Her mother called out to her in the park. “Don’t go too far, OK?”

She grinned and waved, her dress billowing from the breeze. “OK!” She turned around only to see her father, crouched down with his arms held out.

“Hime-sama!” He cried out happily. “Come to your dad!”

Sticking her tongue out, she ran in the opposite direction. “Never!” She laughed as he chased after her.

She looked down, lifting up her foot, and saw red. So much red. It wasn’t water. It came from her mother who didn’t respond, who wasn’t blinking, her chest wasn’t moving. Her breathing began to tremble, and she didn’t know why. Mommy always got back up, playing her cello, smiling at dad-Dad!

She turned around, running up to her father. Just like mommy, he had red water around him too, soaking into his clothes. Why? Why was this happening? Her eyes blurred, and she blinked, feeling something wet falling down her cheek.

She hesitantly brought a hand up, and wiped the tears. Why was she crying? They were fine, right? Mommy and Daddy promised to be with her forever, right? They were going to have more cake tomorrow. They promised. They promised they promised they promised theypromisedtheywerefinetheywerefi-

"Um…” Tensing at the familiar voice, she turned around to see Go-kun fidgeting with his hands, holding something inside his fists.

She still remembered from two weeks ago how he punched her front teeth out in a tantrum and her tongue licked over the gap reflexively. The kind priest had said they would grow back since they were only baby teeth, but still. "...What.” She asked quietly, shying away. She didn’t liked to be hit, even though the bruises on her said otherwise.

His shaggy light brown hair covering his eyes, he was about to open his mouth when Rui ran up to her. “Ai-chan!” She greeted cheerfully, taking her hand. For some reason, the new orphan had attached herself to her. Something about how her hair reminded her of flowers. “The matron said I could room with you! Isn’t this great?” She turned to the other boy who took a step back. “Oh, Go-kun! Did you need something?”

Shoulders tensing up at the intensely bright smile, he pouted firmly and turned away, walking down the hall away from them. “...No. Never mind.”

Airi stared after him before sliding her eyes back to Rui, not noticing the two little white squares that he dropped from his hand, her baby teeth having left puncture marks in his palm from his tight grip.

“Airi, run!” Rui yelled, grabbing the scissors left on the desk from cutting the cake ribbons.

She couldn’t move, her body wouldn’t respond, why wouldn’t it move?! Her voice was stuck in her throat as she watched the priest tackle the other girl to the ground.
“You fucking bitch! I was gonna go easy on you 'cause you’re kids but now, I’ll definitely make it as painful as possible!” He growled, encircling his hands around her small neck. “I’ll kill you!”

Coughing from the pressure, Rui stabbed at his wrists, leaving red scars upon his flesh. “Airi...go...” She choked out, saliva sputtering out of her mouth as her fight grew weaker. She was too young, too small...

“You...Takase began, Airi looking at him curiously. “They told me that...my aunt and uncle are coming to take me soon.” He grimaced. “I don’t really remember them, but I know they argued with my parents a lot before...before they died. I dunno if I should go...”

She frowned. “But they’re your family, right? If they take you in, you won’t have to struggle with us. You can eat three meals a day, go to school, just...live.”

He clenched his jaw, turning away guiltily. “I wouldn’t forgive myself if I just abandoned you guys...”

Reaching out with her small arms, she hugged him from behind, her still chubby cheek against his spiny back. “You’re not abandoning us. You’ll always be our big brother, and it doesn’t mean you can’t come to visit...”

Smiling shyly, he lightly gripped her hands on his stomach. “Yeah...I’ll work hard to come back.”

“Don’t forget me, OK?”

Her eyes flew open, tears dampening her pillow. Was she going to see them all soon?

Did she have to say goodbye already?
Slipping into her heels, she left the house along with Yusuke. Since none of them had school today, they cleared their schedule to meet up. She was wearing her regular chiffon dress while the artist was in his blue-gray long sleeved shirt and black slacks. They met up with Akira and Morgana in front of the cafe and they traveled to Shibuya, walking over to the hideout. Ann and Ryuji were already there, the model in a black tanktop and jean shorts while the ex-runner was in a yellow tanktop and cargo shorts.

They perked up at their arrival and they began their meeting. “You guys think of anythin’..?” Ryuji asked dejectedly. They all shook their heads and sighed. “We ain’t got nothin’...” He cursed, slumping his shoulders.

“Are we out of luck...?” Ann asked hesitantly.

Morgana pouted on the railing. “It’s no fair his Palace is up in the sky...”

Yusuke sighed. “If only we could contact the real Kaneshiro...”

Airi idly grasped her arm. “But we don’t know where he is and it’s dangero-”

“I see you’re all gathered here once again.”

Furrowing their brows, they turned around to see Makoto walk up to them, dressed in a white button up dress, held with a black belt at her waist, and black leggings and low heeled shoes.

Ann scowled at the council president, crossing her arms. “What do you want?” She snapped.

Makoto calmly rested her hands on one hip. “Nothing in particular.”

Ryuji glared, shoulders tensing at the unwelcome presence. “That so?”

“You seem to be having quite a bit of trouble.” She remarked coolly.

Airi frowned. “...Of course we are.” She replied defensively. ”You’re expecting too much with too little time.”

Makoto raised a brow. “Am I? I thought you were supposed to be just. Are you saying you don’t care anymore?”

Ann narrowed her eyes, reaching out one hand to hold Airi’s. “Can’t you mind your own business? You may be the student council president, but when it comes to what we do, you’re useless.”

Makoto took a step back. “Useless...?” She breathed, her eyes glazed over as she remembered every
derogatory comment that had been directed to her since this started. The principal forcing her to investigate this by comparing her to her sister, Akechi’s throwaway comment, her sister’s stinging remarks, their words.

“To be frank, yes.” Yusuke answered curtly. "You gave us an almost impossible task and have tried to impede us at every turn. You gave us no information that we hadn't figured out ourselves, yet you stand here as if you have the upper hand. You are useless to us, to say the least."

Airi gave them a warning glance, but didn’t open her mouth. They were right in this case. Makoto had nothing to offer to the situation and they shouldn’t drag her deeper as it could get dangerous. She didn’t want her to get hurt, no matter how she was treating her. “...Why don’t you just leave this to us, Makoto-senpai?” She began quietly. “There’s really no need for you to tag along. We’ll give you your results, so…”

“Yeah,” Ann nodded in agreement, sneering down at the slightly shorter upperclassman. “Just stay on your high horse and watch us do all your work for you. Or do you wanna eavesdrop since you’re so good at it?”

Clenching her fists, the council president let out a shaky sigh, face mired in pain. Squaring her shoulders, she narrowed her eyes, lit with a cold fury. “So you wish to get in contact with Kaneshiro. That is what you were discussing, weren’t you?” She asked coldly, neck tense with agitation. “That is his name, correct? It seemed you just needed to find out where he is.”

Akira furrowed his brow at her change in mood. “...Something like that.” He answered tensely after a moment.

Ryuji elbowed him in his side. “Hey, you don’t gotta answer her honestly!”

Taking another shaky breath, Makoto held her hands over her mouth. “I’m not…” A waste of space. A pushover. In the way. Useless. She needed to do this. To find him and avenge her-

Airi blinked, noticing her eyes glazing over again. “Are...you OK?” Was she in pain or something?

“Fine.” Makoto growled out, letting her hands fall to her sides. “I’ll help you meet Kaneshiro.”

Their eyes widened in shock as she walked away, back straight and determined. Yusuke crossed his arms. “What exactly is she planning on doing?”

Ryuji shrugged. “She had a dead-serious look in her eyes…”

“Does this mean she has an idea as to where Kaneshiro may be?” The artist pondered.

Ann shook her head. “I highly doubt that.”

Akira exhaled, shouldering his bag. “We should follow her just in case.”

Furrowing her brow worriedly, Airi ran after the council president. “Let’s go then!”

Balling her fists, Ann let out a frustrated groan before following her. “What is up with her?!?”

The guys followed after, Morgana darting out of the bag to run alongside them. They tried to follow her tracks but lost her once she entered Central Street, the crowds of people swallowing her up.

Morgana cursed as he stopped in the middle of the street. “There are way too many people here!”
Panting, they came to a stop. “We’re never gonna find her!” Ryuji gritted his teeth.

A phone rang out and Akira took his out, accepting the call. “Hello? It’s me...Niijima Makoto.” Makoto whispered gravely. “Just stay on the phone and listen. Make sure you record the call as well.”

Furrowing his brow, he stared at his phone before doing just that, hitting the record button in the settings. He gestured for the others to huddle around him and they listened in through the receiver.

“Do you guys know Kaneshiro?” Makoto asked loudly to who they assume to be the mafia scammers.

Airi sucked in a breath. “That idiot..!” She hissed, eyes wide with panic and anger as she realized what the council president was planning.

“What?” A rough man’s voice came through.

Ryuji gritted his teeth as he glared at the phone. “What the fuck does she think she’s doin’?!”

“I heard I could find someone named Kaneshiro if I came to Central Street.”

Ann gasped. “Central Street!”

Yusuke glared harshly at the phone. “She’s being too rash!”

Instead of listening to the rest of the conversation, they decided to search around, swerving into the alley next to Big Bang Burger where they saw Makoto confronting two gangsters, a nondescript black car parked with the door open. She got into the car, followed by the two mafia members, and it drove off into the main streets of Shibuya.

“Hey,” Ryuji breathed. “Wasn’t that-”

Morgana hissed, his fur bristling. “It’s the guys that messed with us the other day! So they were connected to Kaneshiro!”

Ann turned to Akira. “She still on?!” She gestured to his phone and he held it up, the call still connected. They huddled together and listened in on the conversation from within the car.

“Contact Kaneshiro-san. Tell him we got a good one.”

“Where are we going?” Makoto asked calmly.

“I guess we can’t do anythin’ to her if she’s Kaneshiro-san’s customer.”

Airi flinched. “That’s the only reason why she’s not being drugged and violated right now…”

“Hey, I asked a question here.” Makoto called out sharply. “Where are we going?”

Ann shook her head in frustration. “We gotta go after them!”

They ran down the alley, exiting on a bigger street. Cars zipped by in both directions, going to and from their destinations on the freeway. “Ryuji!” Yusuke called out, taking out a sketch book. “Get a taxi! I’ll-” With his impressive memory, he wrote down the license plate number onto the paper. “OK, I’ve got their license plate. My sketching skills have come in handy.”

Nodding, the ex-runner held up his hand to an incoming taxi, taking a few steps to try to catch it as
it sped past him. Clapping his hands in anger, he growled in frustration. “Agh, shit, he ignored me!” Turning his head, he noticed another taxi quickly approaching and he ran out into the street, arms out in a stop motion.

The others gasped in shock as he was almost run over, the taxi stopping just in time before it touched him. “Holy shit!” Airi held a hand to her fast pounding heart.

“Ryuji!” Ann gasped worriedly, scared out of her mind.

Noticing the taxi was empty of any passengers, the ex-runner gestured to the vehicle. “Hurry up and get in!”

They opened the doors, startling the driver. “What in the-?!?”

“Sorry for this!” Airi apologized hastily as she sat in Akira’s lap while Ann climbed on Ryuji’s, squishing into the back seats as they slammed their doors closed. Morgana jumped in between them, eyes narrowed with concentration as he tracked the car through the windshield, watching as it got further away the longer they delayed.

Yusuke took the front passenger seat and held out his notepad. “Follow the vehicle with this license plate number.” He demanded.

The driver sputtered. “But-”

“DO IT!” The teenagers and one feline all yelled at him and he panicked, slamming his foot on the pedal. They drove down the city freeway, tailing the nondescript black car as it weaved in and out of traffic.

Airi breathed out slowly, gripping the safety handle on the ceiling of the car. “She better be OK. Aikido won’t do much against gangsters…”

This was something she feared. They were strong in the Metaverse, but out here in the real world, they were powerless. While Makoto was an aikido black belt, that style of martial art was used for defense while protecting their attacker from serious injury. It wouldn't be good against thugs.

Gripping onto her waist so she wouldn’t fall or hit her head as the car sped down the freeway, Akira glanced up at her grimly. “You think they're armed?” He whispered.

She nodded. “No doubt. At least knives. May-Maybe handguns. You don’t run an operation as large as this without being willing to hurt people…”

Biting her lip, Ann leaned against the front seats. “Can’t you go any faster?!” She yelled at their driver.

The driver whimpered and his hands shook on the steering wheel. “This is as fast as we can go! The car’s right there!” He pointed ahead on the road. “Hey, am I being paid for this?!”

“Be quiet.” Yusuke commanded, eyes locked on the car as it turned at the next corner.

They followed it for a few minutes out of the freeway and down the local streets, everyone inside tense and ready to go. Noticing the nondescript car stopping in front of a seedy bar, Ryuji called out. “Hey! Stop here!”

The driver slammed his foot on the breaks and they screeched to a stop next to the sidewalk, just behind a building. They watched through the windows as the gangsters dragged Makoto out of the
car and into the joint, entering from a back door.

“All right, let’s go!” Akira commanded, opening his door and letting Airi get off first before he did.

The others got out as well and the driver sputtered. “Hey, I drove you guys, right? Don’t I get paid-”

Slapping some bills into his hand, Airi ran down the street to the bar and the other thieves followed her as she barged through the alleyway door. Running down the dark purple tinted hallway, they emerged into a VIP lounge where Makoto was pressed against the carpet, one of the gangsters from before holding her hands behind her back.

There were three other men and one woman sat on the plush velvet couch, surrounded by bottles of expensive alcohol as well as illegal drugs. One of them being the other gangster from earlier, and the other a man in his early twenties, his dark red hair falling against his face; he sat in an expensive suit, hands resting on his lap. The woman was dressed in a tiny black halter top and jean short shorts, her dyed brown hair permed into curls around her heavily made-up face.

The last man in the room was also the largest; his cheeks, chin, and neck all morphing together in one fat blob. His brown hair was slicked back, showing his small eyes and button nose, the tip turned up like a pig’s. His purple blazer was barely able to stretch over his shoulders, and his black shirt underneath strained under his immense gut. He held Makoto’s phone as well as her school ID in his hand as he watched them dispassionately.

“Who the fuck are you?!” The guy holding Makoto shouted at them.

“Niijima-san!” Yusuke called out, warily eyeing the mobsters.

Ryuji gritted his teeth and held a fist up. “What the hell’d you do to her?!”

The large man, Kaneshiro, glanced at them impassively. “Ohh, I get it.” He glared at the two minions. “You got followed, you dumb shits!” He straightened up from his seat and opened the briefcase sitting on a table in front of him, showing stacks and stacks of cash.

Morgana gaped at the sight. “Holy moly..!”

Airi grimaced. If he had that much money on hand, then this was definitely a man with power.

“Oh..?” One of the gangsters sat up, tilting his head as his eyes roamed over her.

Giving him a cursory glance, she ignored him, focusing on the council president who was still struggling within the steel tight grip. “Senpai…”

Kaneshiro turned to the woman beside him. “That bag you saw the other day- the crocodile one. How much was it?”

She hummed, her voice screeching as she did so. “About three million?” She squealed as he flippantly handed her the amount from the briefcase, taking it with her manicured hands. “For reals?!”

He sat back on his seat, letting his arms rest against the top of the couch. “Better thank those guys.” He jerked his chin toward the thieves.

Ryuji scrunched up his face, shoulders tense at the confrontation. “What..?”
“I’m royally pissed right now.” Kaneshiro stated calmly, smirking slightly. “Can you tell? You know how spending money relieves stress?” He glared at them. “It’s you goddamn brats sniffing around like dogs and barging in here like you own the joint!..!” He pointed to the briefcase. “See this empty space? I’m so pissed that now there’s a three million yen gap here. It pisses me off even more if I don’t fill it up. I’m a perfectionist. So, good luck.”

Yusuke narrowed his eyes. “What is that supposed to mean?”

Smirking as he took out his phone, he quickly snapped a photo of all of them, blinding them with the flash for a second.

Airi’s heart stopped. Oh no…

“Come on,” Kaneshiro smirked. “You all look so tense. I think I’ll call it “Debauchery of Minors at a club.” So, can I send this to your school?” He threw the student ID onto the table. “You all must be from Shujin like Miss Council President here.”

Makoto gasped, struggling against her bond. “That’s-”

“Oh, damn,” He chuckled. “I got booze and cigs in the shot! Maybe some drugs too?” He sighed, leaning back against his seat. “Ahh...This is so hilarious. I feed on dumbshits like you...Understand, pretty little student council president?” He taunted her with a knowing look in his eyes, making her sick to her stomach.

He smirked coldly. “Now listen up. Run your mouth to the police, and I’ll break all of you, starting with your families. I want to give you the usual month, but well,” He eyed them with amusement. “You have such a large group here...Two weeks.” He smiled cruelly. “Bring three million yen by then. No less. Summer bonuses are around the corner, you know? It’ll be easy if you beg your mommies and daddies.”

Narrowing her eyes, Airi took a deep breath and stepped forward, gaining the attention of everyone in the room. “Two weeks wouldn’t be enough time to amass such a large amount of money.” She refuted calmly, her heart thundering in her chest. If she played this right... “Three weeks.”

“Airi!” Akira hissed in alarm, placing a hand on her shoulder. His other hand had been slowly creeping into his back pocket where he kept a switch knife.

“About…” Kaneshiro pretended to tap his chin. “No, you dumb bitch. Now get out of my sight. I’m about to have some fun.”

Ryuji gritted his teeth. “What?! To hell with that!”

Morgana growled, muzzle pulled back to show his fangs. “Don’t bother with him.” He whispered. "Makoto’s safety is more important right now. Mom knows what she’s doing.”

Kaneshiro narrowed his eyes at them as they continued to bicker quietly to themselves. “Didn’t I tell you to get out?!" He snapped.

Exhaling, the only silent gang member thus far stood up and turned to him. “C’mon, boss, why not go easy on ’em?” He drawled. “I mean, look at ‘em! They’d probably fuck up within the first couple of days and blab about us. Then we’d have to deal with those shit stain police investigations while extorting the shit out of their families.”

Kaneshiro narrowed his eyes at him. “What are you saying? Are you telling me to feel sorry for these idiots?”
He shrugged. “No, but it’d be easier for us if they had three weeks. They’d probably make more ’cuz they’re desperate to erase that photo.” He smirked. “And that’s the goal, innit?”

The mob boss regarded him for a moment before nodding. “...Fine. Three weeks for three million yen. Now, escort them out of our fine establishment.”

The man inclined his head. “Right away.” He turned to the teens and gestured with his hands toward the back door they came out of. “C’mon kiddies.” He smirked in their direction.

The gangster that held Makoto loosened his grip, and she slowly stood up, nursing her red wrists timidly. Her eyes slid to the side where she knew Kaneshiro was sitting, and with her face out of his view, a murderous rage flashed through the red of her irises.

Watching the gangsters warily, Airi stepped forward, grabbing the student council president by her shoulders and guiding her out with her reclaimed belongings.

They cautiously walked out of the establishment, squinting their eyes from the change in lighting as the sun shone down compared to the darkly lit club. Closing the door with a bang, the gangster turned to them, taking a cigarette out of his back pocket and lighting it. Taking a long drag, he sighed, exhaling the carcinogens. “Man...What the fuck is with you now?”

They glanced at each other in confusion. What? “What do you mean?” Akira asked cautiously, still on guard from their earlier encounter. His hand grazed the handle of his knife.

The gangster rolled his eyes. “C’mon, I totally saved your asses back there. The least you could do is thank me.”

Ann scowled. “And why should we?! We’re still being blackmailed.”

He gave her a warning glance. “Be thankful you’re not being sold off as a whore right now, foreigner.” He snapped and she shut up, closing her mouth with a click at the thought. "We could prolly get a good bid on you."

Outraged, Ryuji took a step in front of her, tugging her behind him. “What’d you say to her?! You threatenin’ us too?!”

He rolled his eyes again. “Calm down. Jeez, these’re your friends now?” He asked Airi.

Airi furrowed her brow in confusion. “What? Of course they’re my friends...” Why was he talking to her like he knew her? He was a mafia lackey...

He stared at her before huffing in amusement. “Don’t even remember, do you...Lil sis? I’d recognize that cotton candy you call hair anywhere.”

Her eyes widened and she took a step back. “Lil sis?! You...” She took in his appearance. That dark red hair, those slanted and lazy eyes, the nickname. Only one person ever called her that and he disappeared five years ago. “Nishiki..?”

“You know this guy?!” Morgana squawked. The others stared at her in shock.

Nishiki smirked satisfactorily, taking another drag. “There ya go. Took you a while to remember me, huh?”

“You...” She began, hesitantly reaching out with one hand. Was she dreaming? He was alive and in front of her? He didn’t die like Takase? “You’re really Nishiki?” She asked shakily. “You’re not
lying, right?”

Dropping his cigarette, he crushed it with the heel of his snake leather loafer. “Why would I?”

Staring at him for a moment, she rushed forward and enveloped him in a hug. “Is it really you..?” She asked, voice muffled by his suit jacket. Someone from her past was alive. He didn’t die like all the others.

Softening, he wrapped his arms around her as well. “Yeah, Lil sis. It’s me.”

The others watched, stupefied by what was going on. Nails dug into his palms as he clenched his fists and Akira watched behind his glasses with narrowed eyes, jaw clenched as he tried to contain his ire. Who was this man? How did he know Airi? And why were they so familiar with one another? He was a gangster, which meant he was dangerous. Would he do something to her?

Sniffing, Airi took a step back, bringing a hand up to wipe her eyes. “What...Where did you go? You disappeared…”

Nishiki glanced around their surroundings, noting how open it was and the occasional pedestrian walking past on the sidewalk. “Not here. Listen, gimme your phone number and I’ll contact you, K?”

“Wait, hold the fuck up!” Ryuji stomped his foot, fed up with being ignored. “Your boss just threatened us!”

Nishiki glared at the ex-runner. “And it’ll get worse if you don’t listen to what I hafta say, punk.” He spat before turning to the cellist. “I got a shit ton to tell ya, and I know I should’ve sent ya somethin’, but you listen to me.” He leaned in closer, almost nose to nose with her and she blinked trustingly. “You do as he says for now, OK? Get that three million somehow, or look like ya are. I’ll try ‘ta make him change his mind, though that fatso ain’t gonna budge so easily.”

She slowly nodded, still in shock. “O-OK…”

A hand shot out, pushing the older man back and Nishiki stumbled a step. “The fuck..?”

Akira glared fiercely at him, letting his arm fall but kept it tense. “Take a step back.” He commanded in a low but firm voice.

Raising a brow, Nishiki let out a low whistle. “Wow...That look in yer eye’s pretty familiar.” He smirked, dusting off his suit. “Seen it all the time with the higher-ups...I ain’t interested in her like that.”

Akira’s brow furrowed deeply as he glared harder, blood pulsing faster underneath his skin as he was about to take a step forward, but stopped as a hand was placed on his arm.

“Don’t,” Airi pleaded quietly, gripping onto the sleeve of his white shirt jacket. “I know him.”

Grimacing, he acquiesced. He’d listen but the instant something happened, he was stepping in. This man was still a mobster and he didn’t trust him anywhere near her. Nothing would happen to her under his watch.

She took out her phone and the two exchanged numbers, the others watching tensely.

Putting his phone back in his pocket, Nishiki jerked his head in the direction of the main street. “Now get outta here. Don’t stick your nose into anyone else’s business, ya hear?” Patting her on
the head, he turned back inside, closing the door behind him.

Looking at each other, they slowly walked out of the alley and into the darkening streets of Tokyo, a few miles away from Shibuya in a more desolate part. Airi just couldn’t think clearly at this point. Nishiki was alive? Or was he just a hallucination, made from her exhausted head?

“Aneki…” Yusuke asked quietly, walking beside her. “Who was that man? What is your connection to him?”

She stopped and sighed. So she wasn’t dreaming. “...That was Nishiki. I used to live with him back in San’ya. I...never thought he was serious about becoming a mobster, though.” When did he become part of a gang? And under their next target of all people.

Ann hesitated, intimidated by the older man. “He was an orphan, too?”

Airi nodded. “Yeah, he was the other big brother. Always asking us to call him “Aniki”...” She huffed, holding a hand to her temple as she shook her head at the absurdity. “What the fuck…”

Akira relaxed minutely. So he was another brother figure then. One that was alive at least. If his offer was real, they’d have an insider with Kaneshiro and that could be beneficial in finding a way into his Palace.

“Um…”

They turned with tired eyes to Makoto who was twiddling her fingers. “I’m so sorry…” She voiced guiltily. “I didn’t mean for this to happen…”

Ryuji snorted resting his thumbs in his pockets. “For real…”

She ducked her head in shame, unable to keep eye contact with them. “I was stupid…”

Yusuke narrowed his eyes. “I must agree.” He said curtly. “You should’ve easily imagined this happening. What did you think would happen when you confronted a gang with no plan?”

Ann gave him a warning look. “Hey, Yusuke…”

Makoto flinched, hugging herself. “I was so caught up in trying to be useful and trying to find out who he was...”

Sighing, Airi walked up to her and placed her hands on her shoulders. “You were stupid, yes. That situation could’ve easily been much worse. We could’ve been sold off into prostitution while they extorted the guys out of every last cent.”

Makoto winced and closed her eyes in resignation. "I'm sorry..."

“We got lucky, though. Nishiki got us an extra week, which means we’ll have more time…” Airi gave the others a knowing look and they all nodded. She had extended their deadline by another week, giving them ample enough time to steal his Treasure. "We'll solve this, OK?"

Ryuji rolled his shoulder and grimaced. “What’s done is done. We can't change the past. Just...y'know, don't do that again.”

Makoto sighed, defeated. “I’m going to cause trouble for Sis too…”

Akira furrowed his brow. “Sis?”
Makoto turned away, eyes cast downward. “My older sister has a commendable job, and she’s a much more remarkable person than me...A lot happened after we lost our father three years ago on one of his cases with the mafia, so it’s just us living together...” She bit back a sob. “But I’m still a child, so all I am is a burden to her. I’m a burden to everyone...”

Yusuke slowly blinked, observing her in a new light. “...And that’s why you were so reckless?”

“I just wanted to be useful in some way to someone...”

Ryuji pursed his lips awkwardly. “Y’know, I might not get your whole situation, but ain’t it a bit off saying that you’re useless?”

“It’s the truth, though...” Her voice cracked and she took a deep breath. “In particular, I have to apologize for what happened to you.” She stated sorrowfully to Ann.

The model blinked. “Eh..?”

“Now that I think on it,” Makoto bowed her head in shame. “The truth about Kamoshida must’ve been covered up by the whole school. I had my suspicions, especially when...” She glanced over at Airi. “When Airi-chan had went up on the roof for Suzui-san. But...I couldn’t do anything about it. No,” She shook her head. “I didn’t do anything. Had I cared enough, I could’ve done something...”

Ann looked away, but her shoulders slumped at the other girl’s confession.

“And...I’m sorry, Airi-chan.” Makoto turned her tearful red eyes to the cellist. “I’m sorry I’ve been treating you so harshly. You were only worried about my safety and I messed it up by handing myself over like that.”

Airi furrowed her brow at her apology, immediately forgiving her. Everyone had their own share of problems, and theirs only collided roughly because of the circumstances. She understood that. “Senpai...” She whispered dolefully. “It’s fine, I understand.”

Makoto shook her head. “...I felt inferior.” She confessed quietly. “People look up to you at school but they barely listen to me. After Suzui-san’s incident, you were out there, comforting the other students like Mishima-kun as well as the girls on the volleyball team...” She sighed heavily. “Then this all started escalating and I was frantically trying to keep things stable, but no one listened except you.”

She clenched her hands. "People began talking about you becoming council president, and I felt terrible about myself. No matter what I did, it was never enough. I was never enough. I felt betrayed when I found out you lied to me about being a phantom thief, but...you were doing what you knew was right while all I did was listen to the adults around me, doing as they told. I was just in the way like usual, no matter how hard I tried. Useless.” She whispered, clenching her eyes even as a tear escaped from a corner. “People like me...must really be what others call scum of the earth.”

Biting her lip at her confession, Airi wiped the tear away with her thumb before reaching out for her hand. “No, you’re not.” She soothed quietly. “Don’t say that.”

Ann nodded in agreement, stepping closer to them. “Real scum wouldn’t call themselves that.”

Makoto looked up at them in surprise. “...Huh?”

The model fiddled with a ponytail even as she ducked her head in shame. “I’m the same. It’s just like you said before: I was closest to Shiho, but I didn’t do anything...Airi tried to do it for me.
Besides,” Her eyes hardened. “Kamoshida’s the one to blame. Shiho understands that...and I do too.”

Airi nodded in agreement, taking a step back uncomfortably. She was doing that hero worship again and it left a bitter taste in her mouth. She didn’t deserve any sort of praise like that. “What Ann said. You’re putting in effort now, and isn’t that more important than dwelling on the past?”

Makoto frowned timidly. “Takamaki-san…Airi-chan...”

Yusuke crossed his arms. “You didn’t have a place to belong either...Is that right?” He murmured sympathetically.

“Me either...?”

Akira nodded, resting his hands in his pockets. “We’re all outcasts one way or another.”

“Even Airi-chan..?”

Airi huffed, idly grasping her arm. “I guess...I’m well liked, sure, but you don’t see people clamoring to be my friend, right? People don’t talk to me unless they need help.”

Makoto nodded slowly. “Right...I feel the same. I remember you were mostly by yourself last year, Takamaki-san being your only occasional companion.”

Airi smiled wryly. It was lonely, but only because she was busy and didn’t put in time to reach out to anyone. Ryuji had been busy with the track team, and Ann had stuck to Shiho. She didn’t have time to hang out when she had to study for school, go to her jobs, and attend her court dates. Other students just thought of her as nice and smart, but she was just that class president they went to for help. “Why do you think I hang out with these losers?” She joked, pointing her thumb to the other thieves.

“Low blow, mom.” Ryuji replied flatly and she snickered.

“We won’t let anyone fall victim again.” Ann stated determinedly, straightening her shoulders as she vowed this. “Including you.”

The Phantom Thieves nodded in agreement and Makoto watched them in surprise.

“So,” Akira crossed his legs as he leaned against a wall. “What should we do? Should we wait for Nishiki to contact us?”

Makoto shook her head. “I’ll do something about the money..! So can we please just drop the case with Kaneshiro?” She begged. “It should be my responsibility alone! He might be the one who...” She stopped herself. “It should be my responsibility.”

Ryuji scratched his chest. “No can do. We’re all caught up in this.”

“We can’t have you rushing things on your own anymore and making the situation worse.” Yusuke stated evenly.

The ex-runner sighed and crossed his arms. “If only we could do something about that bank-”

Ann slapped her hand on his mouth. “Ryuji..!”

Realizing his slip up, he took the model’s hand from his mouth and gave them an apologetic wince.
Makoto blinked. “Bank..?”

Morgana gasped with realization, padding over to them on the ground. “Oh, right, the bank..! She isn’t useless at all! She may be our key in!” He jumped up in glee. “Hear me out, you guys!”

Airi blinked. “Our key in? How?”

Watching them with an odd look, Makoto grasped her chin. “A cat..? Um, are you all OK..?” She slowly asked, befuddled.

Ignoring her, Morgana continued his explanation. “We’ve become Kaneshiro’s targets. That means we’ve become customers of Kaneshiro’s bank!”

The realization slowly lit up in their eyes. “I see…” Yusuke grasped his chin thoughtfully. “The reason why we couldn’t enter before was because we weren’t considered his customers…”

Morgana nodded, purring. “And wouldn’t you say that she in particular is a special customer?”

Akira tilted his head. “You want to use her as a special pass?”

The feline nodded again. “Let’s take her with us. She is responsible for our current situation.”

Airi held up her hands in a stop motion. “Whoa, guys. We shouldn’t just bring her in with us.” She argued quietly, mindful of any passerby. “We’d be putting her in danger!”

“We’re already in danger as it is!” Morgana refuted. “Besides, there’s six of us. We can protect her.”

Ryuji scratched his head. “I don’t follow this at all…”

Yusuke glanced over at them. “She risked her life doing something so reckless. At the very least, she has the right to know.” He turned to the council president. “Won’t you come with us?”

“What?” Makoto furrowed her brow in confusion. “…Wait. To where?”

“Yeah,” Ryuji piped up. “Where are we goin’?”

Ann shrugged, also not understanding. “Beats me…”

Airi rolled her eyes at their obliviousness and sighed. “We’re going to do our job.” She turned to her superior and smiled reassuringly. “Don’t freak out, OK? We’ll protect you.”

Makoto scrunched up her brow. “Huh..?”

Akira shouldered his bag and gestured to a nearby alley. “We’re all in favor of this? Let’s go then.”
Chapter 119

Chapter Notes

After reading some comments and talking with someone, I decided to change some of Makoto's dialogue from last chapter to better fit her character. Hopefully it's better now. The jealousy was written with a different side story in mind but I had been changing the future events and forgot I should've changed this too.

They walked into a nearby alley, and after making sure no one was around, he activated the app to Kaneshiro’s Palace. Makoto gasped in shock when their surroundings warped and bled into red and purple. The ground disappeared underneath them for a split second before solidifying, their outfits melting into their regular thieves outfits.

She took a step back in disbelief, seeing Fox’s mask. “A canine?!”

He shook his head. “It's Fox…” He answered despondently.

“Be quiet!” Mona shushed them, jumping up to gain their attention. “The Shadows are going to notice us.”

Makoto gasped again once she saw him. “A monster cat?!”

Pouting, he slumped over at her reaction. “I’m nooooot!”

Elegant sweatdropped. “This is Morgana, the cat that’s always in Akira’s bag.” She gestured to their outfits. “We look like this when we come to this world.”

She blinked. “That voice...Airi-chan?” She looked around the distorted Central street, befuddled by the walking ATMS. “Where are we..?”

Panther crossed her arms. “We’re inside Kaneshiro’s...well, the “world” inside his heart.”

“...What?”

“It’s another reality in which Kaneshiro’s distorted desires have materialized.” Fox explained evenly.

Makoto furrowed her brow at his explanation. “...Another reality?” Her eye caught a flying bank note and followed after it, taking a step back in shock as she saw the flying disc in the air, sucking up all the money from the streets. “It’s floating in the air?!” She gasped, holding her hands to her mouth. “Th-This is reality?! My goodness…”

She shook her head, trying to grasp the situation. “I’m sorry, it’s just…” She struggled with herself. “But since this really exists, I can’t doubt it…A reality that one’s heart shows…” She pondered. “Is it like the application of optical illusions in social cognitive psychology?”

Elegant nodded. “Something like that, but this is more definitive and of course, made physical.”

The others looked at each other in confusion. What?
Sighing, the noblewoman placed a hand on the student council president’s shoulder and guided her over to a corner. “Let’s explain this fully.”

After telling her about how this started and how they usually operated, Makoto nodded thoughtfully as she leaned against the wall. “Joker, Elegant, Panther, Skull, Fox, and Mona...I see, so “stealing one’s heart”...That may be like overwriting their cognition...I think I kind of get the logic behind it...”

Elegant hummed at her hypothesis. “It’s more of their immoral cognition made into a physical form that we remove, like a tumor basically. Once we steal it, their mind is left healthy again with a firmer grasp on their morality.”

Makoto nodded. “I see...”

Skull snorted, sat on the steps of the rental store. “I didn’t understand a thing.” He nudged Mona next to him with his elbow. “Ain’t they more amazing than you?”

The feline sputtered and pouted at the dig. “We-We’re about the same!”

Frowning, Elegant lightly rasped her knuckles over the pirate’s head. “Stop.”

“Then,” Makoto continued as she eyed some ATMs walking by them with nary a glance. “Does that mean there’s an ATM version of myself somewhere in this world too?”

Mona shrugged. “Perhaps. Regardless, we can change Kaneshiro’s heart and make him confess if we steal his Treasure...If it all goes well, that is.”

Standing up, Skull grinned. “We’ll make it go well. Everyone’ll notice us for sure if we take someone like Kaneshiro down!”

Fox nodded in agreement. “Our justice will also become resolute.”

Elegant smiled serenely. “It’s our way, after all. We can’t abandon this.”

Panther straightened up. “Think we’d be able to give courage to those in need if it happens?!”

Joker nodded, resting his hands in his pockets. “No doubt about it. We’re not letting this go any longer.”

Makoto stared at them before exhaling. “...You guys sound like my father.”

Elegant blinked. “Your father..?”

Makoto shook her head. “...No, don’t mind me. I’m just thinking out loud about some things.” Straightening up from the wall, she squared her shoulders, determination flashing in her eyes. “You want to go to that bank, right? Let’s go then. If I’ve become a customer of that bank, then they’ll have to let me in.” Her eyes flashed cold. “Then we can talk to Kaneshiro.”

They stared after her as she walked confidently out into the road. The floating Palace descended in the air, a pathway sliding out to the ground and stopping in front of the council president. The way was open.

“For real?!” Panther yelped, watching with wide eyes.

Joker snorted, noticing she was starting to say Skull’s catchphrase. “For real.”
Skull gaped. “It came to us!”

Mona jumped in glee. “It’s just as I calculated.” He purred triumphantly.

They ran up the ramp all the way onto the flying disc. Running past the iron wrought yen sign gates, they slowed to a stop in front of the large building that took up most of the space. There were literal money trees decorating the courtyard in front of the large rectangular building. A large golden piggy statue was erected in front, the words “The Golden Bank” stamped on multiple banners decorating its pillars. ATMs were scattered about, either sitting on ledges or walking in through the entrance.

Makoto turned to them. “You know how you can use your card to get into banks during after hours? I thought that I’d be able to get in since I have the same identity as such customers.” She grimaced. “I’m Kaneshiro’s source of revenue, after all.” She spat out.

Fox crossed his arms. “Ah, that makes sense.”

Joker eyed the ATMs that walked past them, their postures screaming defeat and despair. “You’re not the only one who’s a source of money.”

Panther gazed up at the building in wonder. “But wow...This place is huge.”

Skull grunted. “I rarely gotta go to the bank, so...this’s makin’ me kinda nervous.”

Elegant huffed in amusement. “You actually go?”

He grinned sheepishly. “With my Ma sometimes…”

Panther pursed her lips as she looked down at their outfits. “Being in a bank with costumes like these is so obvious- we’re totally robbers.”

Skull snorted. “You got that right…”

Mona crossed his paws, scanning the building and its security. “It seems there will be a lot of Shadows from here on.”

Makoto tilted her head. “Huh? What’s that about?”

Elegant idly grasped her arm. “Shadows are enemies, beings that emerge from the human subconscious. Since we’re intruders, we’re attacked by them if they spot us.”

She nodded. “I see. I’ve trained in aikido, as you know. Don’t worry; I can defend myself.”

Mona looked up to her. “Self-defense won’t do much good against Shadows, but then again, it’s better than nothing.”

Makoto idly brushed some hair behind an ear. “We have to go in from the front, don’t we? I’m an honorary customer, so I better act like one.” She squared her shoulders and looked at them determinedly. “...I will be useful for this.”

Observing her for a moment, Joker nodded. “All right then. If a fight happens, get behind us and stay with Elegant and Mona. They’re our team healers so it’ll be safest with them.” He jerked his head toward the building. “Let’s go.”

They walked up to the steps and opened the heavy steel doors. The inside of the bank was reminiscent of an old european civil court. The high ceilings made everything echo, the sounds of
money being counted in the machines radiating from the back of the hall. Rows and rows of benches filled the area, ATMs occupying some of them. The teller windows were gated with iron barriers, the employees just imitations of the real tellers in their world.

They were immediately greeted by security guards dressed in bulletproof vests, helmets, and wielding batons, the rest of the bank not noticing them. “What business do you have here?” One of the guards asked intimidatedly.

Panther sighed. “I had a feeling this would happen.” She muttered.

Clenching her fists, Makoto readied herself in a defensive stance. “Come at us!”

Taken aback by her aggression, Skull sputtered. “No no! Wait!”

“She’s one of Kaneshiro’s customers.” Fox explained coolly.

Glancing at her protection, Makoto slowly straightened up from her stance. “I’d like to speak with the bank president.” She requested.

The two guards looked each other before turning back to her. “Excuse me, but do you have an appointment?”

Scowling now, she took an asserting step forward. “I need to talk to him. Now let me through!”

“Let them pass.”

Kaneshiro’s voice blared over the intercom. The security guards stepped aside and let them through, going back to where they were originally stationed.

“That voice…” Makoto whispered, turning to them. “It’s Kaneshiro!”

Skull furrowed his brow. “You mean a bank has a president?”

Fox smirked languidly. “They make good money.”

They began walking forward, closer to the teller windows when one of the security guards stopped them. “Please wait. Reception is further in to the right. I strongly advise that you do not attempt to go elsewhere.” It warned, hand on its baton.

They nodded, looking around to see every other doorway was blocked off by a security guard. Walking to the right of the teller windows, another security guard gestured to another door toward the back. “Reception is just past this door.”

They walked down the hallway, greeted by yet another security guard. “Reception is just to the right. Don’t go anywhere.” It pointed to their right.

Growing warier the deeper they went in, they slowly walked down the hallway, a security guard in front of one of the meeting rooms. “This is the reception office. Hurry on inside.”

Joker opened the door to the room, empty of any persons. Leather chairs were littered around the expensive dark wooden table, and on top was a pyramid of cold hard cash. The door swung close behind them and they waited, observing the money with raised brows. “How many beef bowls could I eat with this..?” Skull breathed in awe.

“Unauthorized entry, property damage, and other disturbances. That comes to three million yen in total. You’re here regarding that, correct, Miss Beautiful President?”
Startled, they turned to the TV in the room as it automatically turned on, showing the wide back of a suit. They turned around to show it was Shadow Kaneshiro, his now black hair neatly coiffed to the side to show off his purple skin and his thin mustache, yellow eyes native to the Metaverse glowing coldly. To his sides were regular human goons, mimicking his minions from the real world. “It must be quite tough gathering so much money.” He remarked coolly. “I’d be willing to give you a loan, you know.”

Skull blinked. “You gonna call it off then?”

“No.” Kaneshiro replied flatly. “A loan. The interest rate is ten percent a day.”

Panther tried to calculate it with her fingers. “Ten percent interest a day...Um...Uhhh...That means...One day is...”

Elegant narrowed her eyes. “Three hundred thousand yen a day is ridiculous.”

“There’s no need to be alarmed.” He assured. “I have a more manageable option for people like you.”

Makoto glared at the screen. “That was your plan from the beginning, wasn’t it?” She clenched her hands tightly. "Your tactics are quite low."

He smirked in amusement. “Quite the impressive insight...Niijima-san. Or should I say, the younger sister of the beautiful prosecutor Niijima Sae?”

Their eyes widened with shock and she gasped in horror. “How do you know that..?!"

“Please don’t underestimate our intelligence network.” He smirked languidly. “My, what wonderful goods have come falling into my lap.”

Panther glared harshly at him. “Don’t be ridiculous!”

He hmphed. “Young women are so useful. They lack physical strength and are dumb. It’s as if they only exist to be devoured by the strong. That just might be the rule since the dawn of history.”

Elegant narrowed her eyes, hands clenching tightly at his statement. “Say that in person to our faces and we’ll see how fast we can change that...”

Fox glared at the screen, taking a step next to her. “You truly are despicable...”

“You better be ready, Kaneshiro!” Skull taunted. “We’re gonna snatch your Treasure from you!”

Vein pulsing in his temple, Kaneshiro crossed his legs. “Don’t make me laugh, you petty thieves.” He glowered. “My citadel has the highest security installed in it.”

In a flash, several security guards spawned from the floor, batons in their hands. The thieves took a step back, Elegant taking Makoto by her arm and putting her behind them. "Stay behind us." She advised quietly, her scythe appearing in her grip with a flash as did all their weapons. "You can't win with aikido."

Makoto stared wide eyed at the gleaming blade that the noblewoman handled with ease. "You're..."

“Anyone will do anything for money.” Kaneshiro smirked. “I’ll rob you of your lives as easily as I breathe air.” He laughed evilly before quieting. “...Get them.”
In a spur of black liquid, the guards merged and turned into two Oni, their large build towering over them as they wielded large blades. Their red skin was covered by a blue yukata, and their fangs protruded from their mouths just like their horns. “It’s Kaneshiro-sama’s orders!” An Oni growled. “Eliminate them at once!”

Narrowing his eyes, Joker jumped back. “Skull! Panther! Fox! With me!” He called out, brandishing his dagger. “Mona! Elegant! Protect Nijima!”

They nodded under his command and separated, the former thieves taking their spot on the front lines and the latter two guarding their normal companion.

An Oni stepped forward to strike at Panther but missed as she jumped back. “Carmen!” She called out, the beauteous dancer appearing behind her with the flutter of her skirts. “Maragi!” In an instant, she set the two Shadows on fire, damaging them.

“Goemon!” Fox held a hand to his mask as he summoned his Persona, the kabuki dancer clacking his geta. “Mabufu!” He sent a few ice shards at their enemies, piercing them with his power. They disintegrated with a cry, and the thieves relaxed for a few seconds.

“The first squad’s been taken down! Send in backup! The target is still alive! We must deal with them at any cost!”

With a rumble, two more Oni spawn from the floor, baring their fangs at them. “Captain Kidd!” Skull growled, the undead pirate riding his ship appearing. “Mazio!” With a crack, two lightning bolts zapped the Shadows, sending them to their knees. Quickly running up to them, they surrounded them with their firearms, safety off. Joker flipped back and commenced an all-out, every thief attacking and slicing with their weapons.

One died but the other remained, shakily getting back on its feet. Twirling its blade, the Oni Rampaged, hitting all of them but not enough to seriously harm them. Narrowing his eyes as shallow cuts covered their outfits, Fox ran up and unsheathed his katana. With a flurry of his blade, he destroyed the enemy, dashing back to his comrades.

Another Shadow spawned right next to the backup team and Makoto gasped in fear, taking a step back from the Oni. Eyes sharpening, both Elegant and Mona jumped and with a flourish of their blades, took down the enemy with a cry. Landing in front of the council president with a crouch, they straightened up and backed her within a corner, the safest spot in the room.

“Ai- Elegant…” Makoto whimpered quietly, eyes darting from their weapons to their comrades still in the middle of the room, and clenched her fists tightly in distress. "What..?"

“The target is currently stuck here! We need more backup! Don’t let them escape! We must take them down!”

The ground cracked as black liquid pooled out, forming into two Oni and a Sui-ki. Joker cursed, his breathing slightly labored from continuous fighting. They couldn't keep doing this, especially in such a small room. They were trapped here unless they retreated.

“What the-!” Mona gasped as more enemies surrounded them and he took a step back, still guarding Makoto. “There’s no end to them. Have they really been hired with money..?! We’re in trouble at this rate! Let’s run!”

Putting their weapons away, they bashed open the doors, the Shadows too large to get through. Makoto panted, heart rate thundering in her chest as she tried to process what happened. “Why did
the security guards turn into monsters?! And what were those supernatural powers..?! Could those have been the Personas you mentioned..?!”

Elegant grabbed her hand. “No time to explain! We have to leave!” She shouted urgently. “Hold on tight, OK?!”

Makoto stared at their hands hesitantly but a loud growl from inside the meeting room convinced her to tighten her grip, and they ran out of the hallway and back where they came in from.

“Hurry, Joker!” Mona urged, pointing his paw to the gate separating the teller windows from the waiting room. “The exit’s just over there!”

They ran through the open gate and into the empty hall. Just as they were about to make it to the front doors, security guards spawned in front of them, impeding their progress.

Panther cursed, panting slightly from the exertion. “There’s no end to them..!”

They backed up a bit, making sure to keep Makoto in the middle. “Guys!” She bit her lip worriedly, holding her hands near her chest in an effort to protect herself.

“You seem to be in quite the pickle.”

They turned around, seeing Kaneshiro casually waddled up to them in an expensive gray three piece suit, holding a hand on his hip.

Morgana winced at being caught by the Palace ruler. “How dare you sneak around, Kaneshiro..!”

The distorted mafia boss scoffed. “Those would be my words. However, I do thank you for providing me with such wonderful goods…” He regarded them coolly. “It’s time you disappear.”

He raised his arms and clapped his hands, two more security guards spawning behind him.

The Phantom Thieves were now completely surrounded. Makoto whimpered and they boxed her in, making sure she was where she could be protected.

“Managing a bank is tough,” Kaneshiro drawled. “That’s why I make it a case to kill troublesome customers. Having one impertinent brat disappear is enough to set an example in that other world.”

Makoto took a step forward. “Please stop!” She pleaded desperately. "This isn't about them!"

“I’ll eliminate others besides my goods. You’ve no need to worry.” He tilted his head. “Your sister is quite a beauty though. I’ll make sure to make her my personal slave. Once I get bored, I’ll just sell her off like the rest. Oh, poor Sis…” He mocked dispassionately. “She could’ve been successful, if only her younger sister wasn’t so dumb.”

She sharply sucked in a breath at the threat. “My sister has nothing to do with this!”

Kaneshiro only chuckled. "My, such tenacity. Hm, now where have I seen this reaction before?"

The other thieves looked at each other in alarm. Elegant bit her lip. She knew Makoto's father had
died three years ago, and knowing he was a police officer, it was most likely during the line of duty. Could this mean that...Kaneshiro had been the reason why?

Makoto trembled in her spot, her eyes taking in the person standing before her. "No...Don't..." He had just confirmed himself as the reason for her father's death. The reason for her broken family. The reason for her sister's stress, for the pressure placed on her to do well, to listen to adults, to-

"Then you better start taking customers tomorrow." He told her calmly. "All you gotta do is endure it and do as you're told."

She let out a shaky sigh, eyes closed in pain. "Endure it..." She whispered, her hands falling limply to her side. "Do as I'm told..." Her sister's scathing words about being a parasite, Akechi's throwaway remark of being a pushover, the principal forcing her to investigate something he should've done himself, her unsuccessful efforts compared to Airi's, her *uselessness* in that meeting room as the thieves fought to protect her. Kaneshiro's callous and degrading words. Her father. The person who killed him. All of this piling up and up and up until it *all fell down with a crash*.

Not noticing her hands beginning to clench, Kaneshiro continued his tirade. "You'll earn three million yen in no time. Although, your life and everything along with it will be a complete wreck by then!" Unable to hold it in, he began laughing at his triumph over them. "Gwahahahahaha! You and your sister will belong to me as property to do as I please! I'll traffic you all over the country!"

"I've been listening to you go on and on..." Makoto whispered as she ducked her head, her bangs covering her eyes. Clenching her fists, she snarled at him. "Shut your damn mouth, you money-grubbing asshole!"

The thieves watched her in shock, seeing the usually calm and polite student council president shed her facade, showing the raw anger that was burning in her eyes.

Taken aback, Kaneshiro stopped laughing. "Huh?"

"*Have you decided to tread the path of strife..?*"

"Yes..." Makoto answered quietly, shoulders heaving in rage. "Come to me."

"*Very well. Let us proceed with our contract at once.*"

With a pulse, she gasped, grasping her head as something tore within her. She clenched her eyes at the pain, grinding her teeth as she struggled with the ringing that increased inside her mind.

"*I am thou, thou art I...You have finally found your own justice...*"

She cried, sweat and tears mingling as they tread down her cheeks. Her own justice...

"*Please...Never lose sight of it again.*"

With a growl, she stomped her foot into the ground, breaking the tiles as she panted. Her eyes glowed yellow with untapped power, and she took another step as something cold and dense appeared on her face.

"*This memorable day marks your graduation from your false self...*"

With a snarl, she grasped the iron mask on her face and pulled, screaming as a shower of blood sprayed once it separated from her flesh. A blue vortex of power appeared, engulfing her and blowing the enemies away from the sheer force.
“Another one..?” Elegant breathed in shock and awe as she witnessed a fourth awakening.

“Looks like it…” Joker murmured as they continued to watch with wide eyes.

An engine revved as the power died down, revealing a steel plated motorcycle, jangling chains breaking around it as if it was set free. It was coupled with translucent surfaces, a sleeping mask crystallized on the helm of the bike. Dressed in a skin tight gray and blue battle suit, her shoulders and knees covered by spiked pauldrons, and a blue scarf billowing from her neck, Makoto revved the engine once more as she glared defiantly at her blackmailer.

“A Persona..?” Fox murmured in surprise.

Skull shook his head distractedly, eyes glued to the sight. “No, dude...That’s a bike…”

“I can feel it…” Makoto murmured, closing her eyes as the bike rumbled beneath her. “My “self”...Me...!” Lips pulled into a snarl, she snapped her eyes open and revved. “Gun it!” With a rumble, she drove the Persona bike straight toward the enemies. With a flick of her wrist, she swerved and hit them with the side of her motorcycle, sending them back into a heap.

“Wow…” Panther marveled. “Nice!”

Mona took a step back in shock. “W-What is that?!” He shook his head. “I’ve never seen anything like it…”

Sweating from the effortless takedown of his men, Kaneshiro coughed and straightened his suit, turning to the remaining guards. “You better earn your keep, or else I’ll kill you!”

Nodding nervously, they rushed forward with their batons raised. In a spew of black ooze, they transformed into two Oni and one Sui-ki.

“I will not lose heart again, ever.” Makoto promised to herself, glaring at the opposition. “I will go full speed, non-stop! Right? Johanna?!”

The others rushed to join her, Elegant replacing Panther and Fox as they switched out. “Don’t get all cocky just because I normally behave myself!” The biker snapped at the demons. “I am DONE playing nice, you murderer! Let’s go, Johanna! Full throttle!”

Elegant smirked as she twirled her scythe. She was finally seeing the real council president. All those times she caught her sitting in the council room in tired silence from days of her polite facade was coming to an end and she was glad for her. “I didn’t think you’d ever show your true feelings, Senpai. Glad you’re on our side!”

Makoto grinned viciously, her iron plated mask appearing over her eyes again. “You haven’t seen all of me yet. He’s going down.”

“The enemy’s agitated!” Mona advised from afar, backed by Fox and Panther. “Take them down and make an opening!”

Eyes flashing with a thirst for blood, Makoto revved the engine of her Persona. “Mafrei!” Spinning the vehicle, she sent three blasts of nuclear energy into the enemies, knocking the Sui-ki down. Letting her Persona fade, she ran up and with brand new knuckle dusters, pulverized the weakened Shadow before moving back.

“Let me!” Elegant called out, caressing a hand to her mask. “Jeanne!” The blindingly bright lady appeared, staff in hand as the chains on her arms jangled. “Makouga!” Spears of light penetrated
the enemies, damaging them further.

“Makami!” Joker called, the dog spirit floating behind him. “Frei!” With his own nuclear attack, the Sui-ki disintegrated into nothing, leaving the two Oni left.

One stomped forward, slicing Skull with its blade. Skull cried out in pain but gritted his teeth. “Captain Kidd! Mazio!” Lightning struck down on the last two Shadows and they disappeared with a cry.

“Now!” Mona yelled, regrouping with them. “Let’s get outta here! We know how to get in now. Our objective’s been accomplished!”

Panther looked down at him as more enemies swarmed in. “But how are we getting out?”

“There’s only one exit, right?” Makoto asked curtly, her scarf billowing behind her. "If we have to leave this scum of the earth, then we'll leave my way."

Skull grinned at her newfound confidence. “‘Sup, Miss Post-Apocalyptic Raider.”

She glared at him. “Do you want to get smacked?”

Panther covered her mouth as she stifled a laugh. “Burn, Skull..!”

“I’m going on ahead, so follow me!” The biker commanded before summoning Johanna again. Taking a seat, she revved the engine and collided with the security guards, knocking them down. Swerving her bike back, she ran through them before doing a wheelie, breaking through the doors with the front tire.

They watched in shock and slight fear as she disappeared down the ramp, having almost been run over if they hadn’t moved away fast enough. “Daaamn…” Skull whistled.

Mona jumped in glee. “OK, we have a path!” Running a few feet ahead, he jumped into the air and with a poof of smoke, transformed into his car form. “Get in!”

They ran into the vehicle, Joker stomping on the gas pedal and driving through the doors like Makoto did, leaving Kaneshiro in the lobby.

“So you’ll stand against me, no matter what.” He murmured. “Very well. I’ll wait for you all. There’s no escape in reality, nor will you break through the security system here.” He snarled. “There’s not a snowball’s chance in hell that a bright future lies ahead for you!”

Joker followed after the council president as she rode through the ATM filled streets of Shibuya, stopping when she stopped at the station square. Getting out of the bus, he tapped the app on his phone and transported them back into regular Shibuya.
Chapter 120

Stumbling from the sudden loss of energy, Makoto was about to fall if Airi hadn’t ran forward to catch her by her shoulders. “Careful!!” Airi fretted, helping the upperclassman regain her balance in the crowded station square, people milling about normally. “You’re probably really weak right now. I’ll go get you something…”

They walked her over to the hideout, letting her rest against the railing. Airi went over to a vending machine, getting a cold can of tea. Walking back, she snapped open the top and handed it over.

Grasping it with trembling arms, Makoto took a huge swig before sighing, taking a seat on the floor. “Thank you…”

“Man, talk about wild…” Ryuji remarked with awe. “That was no aikido- that was some hardcore ass whoopin’!!”

Ann nodded faintly. “I am SO not pissing her off…I feel like she’ll rip off my arm.”

Yusuke nodded in agreement, kneeling beside her. “She does exude that aura…”

Scrunching up her face, Makoto ducked her head in embarrassment. “...Oh, stop it!” She slowly got her breath back and stood up, drinking the rest of the cold tea. “This is the most exhausted I’ve ever gotten these past few years…”

Akira nodded as he rested his hands in his pockets. “Tearing your soul will do that.”

“But…” A small smile spread on her lips. “It felt pretty great.” She chuckled quietly. “I never thought I’d become part of the Phantom Thieves I was after. Sis might faint if she found out.”

“Don’t,” Airi advised. “We shouldn’t let any more people know than necessary.”

Makoto nodded in agreement. “Right…”

Yusuke straightened up as well, dusting his shirt. “You mentioned a “Sis” earlier as well.”

Makoto turned to him. “She’s a prosecutor for the district- and she’s investigating the Phantom Thieves alongside smaller cases.”

Their eyes widened. A public prosecutor was investing them?! “Wait,” Ryuji took a step back in shock. “Ain’t that bad??!”

Makoto shook her head. “No need to worry. A normal investigation would never lead them to a world like that. It would take improbable means.”

Airi bit her lip. "Earlier, when Kaneshiro mentioned a cop..."

Eyes darkening, Makoto turned away. "...Yes," She whispered. "My father was a police officer who was working on a case regarding human trafficking."

They all sucked in a breath at hearing that. Human trafficking?
"One day, he was suddenly hit by a truck and died on impact." Makoto clenched her fists. "The driver died from an overdose moments later, so the police couldn't figure out anything and left it unsolved. I knew it must have been someone he was investigating who had ordered it, but I never knew who it was until..."

"Until now," Akira finished quietly.

Makoto slowly nodded, shoulders tense and expression set in a firm frown. "I didn't know his name, and I didn't know where his headquarters was. I didn't know anything except that my father was murdered. Sis had told me she would bring whoever it was to justice, but with how busy she is, she slowly forgot..." She sighed deeply. "And now she thinks of our father as someone who was foolish for risking his life in the name of "justice." I thought to follow her example, to just let it go because my father was doing his duty. Yet, I just could not shake the feeling that the scams would lead me closer...Then today happened and now I know..." She smiled. "Then again, it must've been fate..."

Ann tilted her head. “What do you mean..?”

“I can’t be like my sister,” Makoto stated matter-a-factly. “I had a feeling that there’d come a time when we wouldn’t see eye to eye anymore.” She grimaced. “I’m thankful to have a sister who works so hard, but...there are times I feel sorry for her too. After hearing my Persona’s voice, I clearly understand how I feel now. About everything regarding my father and her.”

Yusuke raised a brow. “It appears you’re not as reserved as you make yourself seem.”

She looked down at her shoes. “I was just doing whatever the adults told me to.”

Airi frowned sympathetically. “You were caged in...”

Makoto nodded. “Yes. I didn’t go against any of them, even when I knew it was wrong. Principal Kobayakawa especially...” Her eyes darkened. “I was to do all the work with investigating the Phantom Thieves while he sat in his office...” She turned to the cellist. “I hear he wanted to drag you in as well.”

Airi blinked and looked away. “Well, he wanted to...but he didn’t hold much over me like he did to you. Only my job.”

“Your job?” Makoto questioned. “Oh right, you live alone, don’t you?” She smiled slightly. “You’re hardworking just like my sister.”

Airi laughed sheepishly. Being compared to a prosecutor? That was some high praise that she didn't deserve. “I don’t know about that...”

Yusuke crossed his arms. “To have gathered so much about us, you’re rather fearless with a sharp mind. It seems you're not much of a stickler for rules as we assumed.”

Makoto smiled slightly. "I've recently realized that some rules are meant to be broken." She took a deep breath. "If it's not too much trouble, I would like to help you all, especially when it comes to planning and tactics."  

"Funny coming from someone who rushed into a mobster's den without a plan," Akira quipped. The upperclassman's face was flushed with embarrassment. He raised a brow, amused. "But sure. It can't hurt to have a little more brains.”

Ryuji grinned. “Sounds good to me! Having the smartest student in school helpin' us out sounds
Makoto smiled and nodded. “Thank you. I’d be honored if I can help out with what advice I can give.”

“It’ll be great to have another girl around!” Ann beamed. “Me and Airi have been smothered by testosterone anyway, so.”

A phone rang, and Makoto took hers out, narrowing her eyes at the message. “...It’s from Kaneshiro. He’s reminding us of our debt. So the Kaneshiro over here doesn’t know what happened inside the Palace.”

Morgana nodded from within the bag. “That’s right, but his Palace will be affected if the real Kaneshiro’s cognition changes.” He warned. “We can’t be laxed.”

Makoto nodded, putting her phone back in her pocket. “It seems it’d be best to avoid unnecessary contact with him until then.”

Akira blinked and turned to the cellist. “Speaking of contact, did Nishiki come through?”

Gasping with realization, Airi quickly checked her phone for anything before deflating. “No…” She sighed, putting it back in her bag. “At least he got us three weeks instead of two.”

Yusuke grimaced. “There’s that security system too.”

“But if we pull this off,” Ann smiled. “It’ll definitely be great!”

Makoto raised a fist, her knuckles cracking from the pressure. “We’ll crush him like a fly,” She swore. “I’ll make him regret killing my father…”

They all took a step back from her as she quietly made threats to their blackmailer, a dark aura enveloping her. “Anyways,” Ryuji began, hesitantly glancing at the council president. “Let’s begin our operation tomorrow!”

Airi nodded. “First, we need to secure a route to the Treasure. Simple routine.”

Morgana purred at their initiative. “You guys are finally starting to get used to this.”

“I’ll be waiting for the call to meet up,” Makoto stated. “Should we all exchange numbers?”

They all nodded and took out their phones, adding the council president to their group chat.

Putting it away, Makoto shouldered her bag. “Well, I should get home.”

Airi furrowed her brow worriedly. “Will you be OK? Do you want us to escort you?”

She shook her head. “It’s all right. I know he won’t do anything to me until the three weeks are up.” She gave them a small smile. “Thank you again...I finally feel like I’m me. All this time, I was always being compared to my sister, to Akechi-kun, to Airi-chan...”

She glanced sheepishly over to Airi who smiled awkwardly. “I was trying so hard because I never felt like I was good enough in comparison...but I’m not them. My accomplishments are my own, and their accomplishments are theirs. Theirs don’t cancel mine out, and now with Johanna at my side, I truly feel like I understand that now. I can really do something to change and be...me.” She smiled somewhat shyly at her heartfelt confession. “I can see to the end of my father's case and finally lift the stain on my family...I’ll see you guys tomorrow.” Inclining her head, she walked
away to her train line.

They watched her leave with a smile before turning to each other. Ryuji stretched his arms in the air and sighed. “Well, I’m goin’ home. Ma promised to cook dinner tonight…” He ran toward his train line. “See ya tomorrow!”

Ann grabbed her bag as well. “I’m going home too. We’ll need the rest if we’re going into the Palace tomorrow. Good night!” She walked away toward the direction of her transfer, leaving the four Yongenjaya residents at the passageway.

Akira jerked his head toward their line. “Let’s go home?”

Riding the train back to their neighborhood, a phone rang out and Airi took hers from her bag, perking up when she noticed it was from a certain foster brother. She accepted the call. “Nishiki?”

“Yeah. Sorry I’m gettin’ back to ya so late, but Kaneshiro’s been holdin’ us up in a meeting. You guys figure out how to get that three million yet?”

Airi smiled slyly, winking to the other thieves as they walked down the back streets of Yongenjaya. They didn’t need three million if they were going to steal his Heart. “Don’t worry. What about you? I’m guessing you couldn’t convince him?”

“Didn’t have the chance to. He keeps that bimbo around all the time and if I piss him off, he’d just give her more money and addin’ it to your debt. I’ve got other methods though, so if you can’t get the money, I’ll figure somethin’ out for ya.”

She gripped her phone tighter. “…Why?”


“We haven’t seen each other in almost half a decade...And you’re…” She paused. “You’re a mafia member now. Your other buddies are extorting my classmates.” She sighed bitterly. “I shouldn’t even be talking to you right now…”

“…”

“...You still there?”

“Yeah. You’re right about one thing. I’m someone you probably shouldn’t get involved with, especially durin’ this time. If you don’t wanna talk to me no more, I gotcha-”

“No!” She shouted quickly, gaining the attention of the others.

She gave them a quick reassuring smile before returning to her call. “...No. It’s fine. I want to talk to you again. No one else...really gets it.” While Yusuke was an orphan, he had lived under Madarame who shielded him from the worst. She- They never had that. Nishiki was the only one who would understand that part of her, and she finally got him back...

He sighed. “Yeah. I’ll tell ya this though. If you need somethin’ done, I’ll see what I can get for you. Least I could do for disappearin’ on ya for five years.”

She blinked, an idea coming to her. “I...do actually have something to ask.”

“Oh?” He chuckled. “That was fast. Wassup?”

“Do you know anything about a man named Seto Hisoka?”
“Hm? Doesn’t ring a bell, but I could search up some shit.”

“Please…” She pleaded quietly, making sure the others wouldn’t hear. “I really need information on him. Specifically his location.”

“…Why? Is this guy dangerous?”

“Yeah…He.” She almost choked. Calm down. You can say it. You need to say it. “He killed my parents...he was let out almost a week ago.”

“…Shit. All right, I’ll see what I can find and I’ll let ya know. You need any bodyguards?”

She glanced over at Yusuke and Akira as they quietly discussed art, Morgana joining in occasionally, and smiled fondly. She already had three. “No, it’s OK.”

“Right, cuz you already got a bodyguard with ya.” He snickered. “What’s that kid’s name? He was real protective over ya. I swear his eyes started flashin’ red like some kinda satan!”

She sweatdropped, blushing at the mention of her leader being careful when it came to her. He made her feel special but she didn't know why. “He’s a friend…” She shook her head. “Anyway, let me know if you find anything, OK? I’ll be really grateful.”

“Show me grateful by cookin’ for me again! I miss your shitty omurice.”

She gasped, offended. “Hey, it’s not shitty anymore!”

“Anymore.” He snickered before the call clicked, indicating he hung up.

Sighing, she put her phone back in her bag before smiling slightly. He hadn’t changed at all. Could he really help out with her problem? He mentioned he had “other ways,” but if he was a regular mobster, he wouldn’t be offering that against his boss. Did that mean he was more powerful than he seemed?

“Everything OK, Airi?”

She blinked and looked up at Akira. “Oh, yeah. He said he couldn’t cancel the debt but he had “other” methods, whatever that meant…”

He nodded, closing his eyes tiredly. “All right…”

They arrived in front of the cafe, the rain just starting to fall. Quickly opening the door, they just missed the beginning onslaught of water, the raindrops splashing loudly against the asphalt.

Sojiro looked up at them from behind the counter before deflating. “Oh, it’s just you guys…” He sighed. “Thought you were actual customers…”

Raising a brow, Yusuke took a seat in the booth directly in front of the “Sayuri.” “A cup of your finest, if you please.”

“Sure, sure…” Sojiro waved him away, beginning to make a few cups for them.

They all sat down, Akira unzipping his bag for Morgana since there weren’t any patrons. Their phones rang out.

R: Damn, motorcycles are cool…
R: I wish my Persona was like that.
Y: Yours is on a ship though.
Ai: Yeah, can’t you sail with Captain Kidd?
R: But motorcycles are way cooler than dumb boats!
Ai: Way to hurt Kidd’s feelings…and your own because he's you.
R: Well I mean…He’s cool yeah, but motorcycles!
R: It’ll be just like the song! “I’m a phantom, on a steel horse I ride…”
Ma: Don’t say such things. And for the record, I am most certainly not “wanted.”
An: Honestly, I’m mostly just surprised you know how to ride a motorcycle at all, Nijima-
senpai.
R: Do you got a license?
Ma: A regular one, yes.
R: Niceee…I can’t wait to get my hands on one too.
An: I’m kind of shuddering at the thought.
R: HEY.
Ma: That aside, mind if I change the topic for a moment?
Y: What is the matter?
Ma: I’m sorry, everyone.
Ma: I know I’m not in any position to be saying that. I truly do…
Ma: However, I must apologize.
Ma: It was my actions that dragged all of you into this mess.
Ma: On top of that, I misunderstood your true intentions in this.
Ma: If only I could’ve realized what was happening to Suzui-san too…
Ma: Airi-chan had to take the brunt of it in my stead.

Airi grimaced. She didn’t do anything worthy of praise. She wasn’t able to pull up Shiho, and she had gotten hurt and was still in the hospital for it. Both her and Ann thought too highly of her, and it only made her feel sick of herself. They were only deluding themselves into thinking she was better...

Ai: It’s all right. It’s done and over with, remember?
Ai: I’m grateful you did drag us into this. I wouldn’t have found Nishiki otherwise.
Ai: Even though we’re now on a time limit, we’d be helping everyone else who's getting scammed.
An: Yeah, we don’t need to talk about that now.
An: At least one thing worked out.
Y: It seems there are still lingering issues on everyone’s minds.
R: Now’s not the time to be talking about that shit though!
R: Don’t we gotta be doing something about Kaneshiro?
An: He’s right.
Ma: Very well, I understand.
Ma: Airi-chan, any news from your contact?
Ai: He said he couldn’t persuade Kaneshiro to change his mind, but he’s working on something.
Ai: In the meantime, we should steal his Treasure.
Ma: I see. Anyway, I will do my best to make sure I don’t slow you all down.

“Well, we were at odds with each other until recently…” Morgana began quietly. “But Ryuji’s totally right! We need to work together to overcome this! I’m looking forward to seeing how things will go with our new member!”
They nodded in agreement. They couldn’t afford to mess up. It wasn’t just one person in danger at this point, there was so many that they couldn’t even hope to count.

Sojiro stepped from behind the counter with three cups of coffee, steaming hot from just being brewed. “Here.” He placed them on the table before eyeing them. “You kids look tense...Everything OK?”

Airi smiled, slightly tinged with nervousness. “Yeah, I think we’re just tired.”

Regarding her for a moment, concern flashed in his eyes before he shrugged and moved behind the counter, dismissing them.

She sighed, grasping the handle of her cup before taking a sip. It was hot, the murky liquid almost burning her lips, but she needed this. She needed to know if she wasn’t dreaming. So much had happened today, from being blackmailed to finding out Nishiki was still alive and kicking, and now Makoto joining them in the group as the newest Persona user.

With every Palace, they seemed to get a new member. How many people would they end up recruiting?

Waving bye to both Airi and Yusuke as they went home, Akira walked up to his room and changed for bed.

He was so tired from the multiple adrenaline rushes today. Being extorted by a mafia was not on his wishlist, but he got it anyway. Then finding Airi’s "older brother" as one of the men who worked under their next target...

Strange, and almost convenient.

At least one good thing came out of it and that was gaining a new member who could use nuclear attacks. He was beginning to notice a theme with his group. Each person had a different skill set, rounding them out nicely. Hopefully this meant he could use less energy. It was tiring to make up for weaknesses.

“A motorcycle-shaped Persona, huh…” Morgana meowed from the floor. “You know, I can turn into a car too, so it’s like...I feel a sense of familiarity?”

Akira tilted his head from his laid down position to look at him grinned slightly, fighting to keep his eyes open. “Maybe you could train to be a motorcycle too?”

Morgana glared up at him. “And let you ride me? No way! Motorcycles are nice, but it can’t carry large numbers of people.” He beamed. “I really am special after...all...huh?” He furrowed his brow as something flashed in his mind. “Carry...? No...Take somewhere?” His ears pressed against his scalp. “Something just crossed my mind…”

He plopped his bottom on the floor and sighed with defeat. “...It’s no use. I can’t remember at all... Eh.” He shrugged. “There’s nothing I can do about it if I can’t remember. I need to concentrate on Kaneshiro for now.” A smile curved on his muzzle. “Makoto will be a useful addition to the team, but we shouldn't baby her, either. Today's events prove that even though she's clever, she can also rush into things without thinking. Hopefully she won't do it as often as you guys.”

Akira mustered up enough energy to glare at him. “Thanks,” He said flatly. “I’ll make sure to let
Airi know you think we're bad thieves. You can deal with her look of disappointment.”

His tail stuck straight up at his threat. “W-Wait no!” Morgana stammered. “Don't tell mom that! I-I'm just saying since we have a new member, we can't let her learn any bad habits!”

Akira rolled his eyes. Better, but still.

Shaking his head, Morgana smiled slightly. “You really do have something special, though. Looks like I better step up my game too!”

‘I feel like my bond with Morgana is growing deeper…’ Akira idly thought as he closed his eyes. He can still listen but…sleep…

“I know!” Morgana beamed. “After we deal with Kaneshiro, I should consult her about Mementos too. I’m sure Makoto’s brain can figure out why mom gets so sick and why I’m-” His ears picked up the sound of soft breathing and jumped up on the bed, padding over to his leader’s sleeping face. “Helloooo…?”

Akira didn’t respond, having already slipped into nirvana.

Morgana sighed before frowning. “We got Yusuke, and now Makoto…” He whispered. “This guy has quite the luck…Could there be some reason for it?” He shook his head. “Nah, that can’t be…” Darting over to the light fixture, he pulled the string before curling up next to his leader.

Chapter End Notes

Morgana rank 4
Chapter 121

Chapter Notes

Whoa I hit past 400k words!!! holyshit i have no life LOL

Thank you for 24.5k hits and 682 kudos!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

----6/20, MONDAY, EARLY MORNING, YONGENJAYA.

Meeting up with Akira in front of Leblanc, Airi had decided to go inside for once, the bell ringing at her arrival. Sojiro looked up at the sound and raised a brow. “Mornin’, Airi. Need a cup?”

She smiled tiredly. “Please. Strongest brew.”

Both Akira and Yusuke followed her in, staring at her quizzically. “You’re that tired?” Akira asked concernedly. “The last time you got the strongest brew was during that week back in April.” The week where she worked herself into exhaustion and had fallen asleep in the cafe for five hours.

She sighed, not wanting to admit that she spent so little time sleeping that she’s usually up for eighteen hours a day. When was the last time she played her cello? Her fingers were starting to feel those phantom strings again.

Sojiro placed the freshly hot cup in front of her and she quickly downed it, not minding the scorching hot liquid burning her mouth. They stared at her as she didn’t even flinch.

Licking her lips of any spare caffeine, she placed the cup back on the counter and left a few bills to cover it. “Thank you, Ojisan.”

Sojiro only furrowed his brow. “Y’know...It’s bad for business if I say this, but too much coffee isn’t good for you. Make sure to rest a little, K?” He turned to Yusuke. “You still live together, right? Watch out for her caffeine intake.”

Yusuke nodded solemnly. “Understood. I will do the best of my ability to monitor her consumption.”

She only sighed. That meant she had to be more careful to not show her exhaustion. She could try buying espresso chocolate and munching them throughout the day, but it felt so underhanded to do so. She didn’t want to lie to them, but they didn’t need to worry so much.

Checking his phone, Akira opened the door. “We should go before we’re late.”

Waving bye to the barista, they left the cafe and walked to the station, taking the train to Shibuya. Transferring out of their line, they walked over to the Ginza Line, swiping their wallets at the turnstiles.

“Good morning.” Makoto greeted, walking up to them in her school uniform, bag at her shoulder.

“Morning, Makoto-senpai.” Airi smiled, giving her a small wave. Both Akira and Yusuke inclined
their heads as a greeting.

Morgana leaned out of the bag and raised a paw. “Good morning! How’re you feeling?”

“I’ve been thinking a lot about Personas and Palaces since yesterday…” Makoto murmured, narrowing her eyes. “That floating bank really reflects Kaneshiro’s personality. He’s flying around so no one can trace his steps...He doesn’t trust anyone.” She sighed. “I bet security’s tight in there too.”

Airi smiled slyly. “It’s in the job description to break through such security.”

Yusuke smiled, sweeping some of his bangs out of his vision. “Indeed. I hadn’t realized how exhilarating it is to dismantle through what is considered “high security” until I joined.”

Morgana preened, tail waving back and forth. “It’s the way of the Phantom Thieves!”

Raising a brow, Makoto nodded. “I suppose that’s how we operate, which is why we should get moving soon. Why don’t we go to the Palace today?”

Tilting his head, Akira pursed his lips. “...Maybe. I need to see if we’re properly stocked. We also need to get you a gun.”

She blinked, taken aback. “A-A gun?”

Airi oohed with realization. “You’re right! We all had to buy our guns, didn’t we?” Stepping forward, she grabbed the upperclassman’s hand. “We’ll take you to the shop before we head in, OK?”

Looking down at their joined hands, Makoto blushed slightly and nodded happily at her new "mentor." “O-OK. I’ll leave my schedule open after school…”

Akira blinked and narrowed his eyes, noticing how the council president stuttered and blushed as soon as Airi got closer to her. Did she...?

Getting to school, they separated and went to their own classrooms.

Airi flinched when she noticed Kawakami was already in the room, staring listlessly through the windows overlooking the outside while students slowly poured into the class. Putting her bag down, she walked up to her guardian. “Sensei?”

Shoulders tensing, Kawakami slowly turned around. She had the same tired expression as always, but from someone who also used heavy concealer, Airi could tell that she used multiple layers to cover the bruising underneath her eyes from crying.

She felt like even more of an asshole now. She didn’t have any right to yell at the teacher-turned-maid. It wasn’t any of her business what she did. “I’m sor-”

“I’m sorry.” Kawakami blurted out. “I know, I shouldn’t have kept it from you. I just…” She looked away uncomfortably, rubbing her arm. “No one wants to say their guardian is a night maid.
I didn’t want to embarrass you…But you had a right to know since Kurusu-kun found out, so I’m sorry.”

Airi blinked in surprise but held up her hands. “No…No, it’s OK. I’m sorry too…” She bit her lip. “I wasn’t being fair. You already told me you had problems with paying the bills, so I should’ve expected your second job to be lucrative. It’s really not my business to bug you about it…” She gave her a small smile. “…I think you look really pretty in your maid uniform.”

Shocked, Kawakami looked away, her cheeks heating up in embarrassment. “Th-Thanks, I guess…I had to wear two push-up bras to get that cleavage.” She took as step closer while covering her mouth from any onlookers. “Don’t tell anyone, OK? I don’t need any more grief over this, especially if Chouno-sensei finds out…”

Smiling, Airi nodded. “Only if you teach me how to do pigtails.”

Staring at her in surprise, Kawakami brightened, her smile lightening up her dark circles. “Sure! I’m really good at it now, you know…”

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Ann stood up from her seat once the lunch bell rang, grabbing her bag. “Hey Airi?”

The cellist looked up, taking out three bentos from her bag. “Yeah?”

She nervously fiddled with a ponytail. “Can you come with me to the student council room?”

She blinked. “Uh..sure.”

Handing the two bentos to Akira, she stood up and followed the model out of the room and up the stairs to the student council room. Makoto was already sat at the desk, looking just as lost as she did. Was something going on?

Ann closed the door behind them and sat down on a chair. “I’m sorry for asking you guys here like this.”

Makoto blinked. “Oh no, it isn’t a problem…I actually find it refreshing to be asked to the student council room. Although it’s somewhat nerve-racking as well.”

Airi took a seat as well, looking at her classmate. “Is there a reason you called for this? We were going to meet up later.”

Ann glanced away uncomfortably. “I’m a bit nervous, but…” She stood up in her seat. “I wanted to apologize to you, Niijima-senpai. I’m...really sorry for everything.”

Makoto gasped, surprised at her sudden apology. “What do you mean..?”

She twiddled her fingers nervously. “You know how I blamed you for Kamoshida’s sexual harassment?” She murmured. “Well, I wanted to apologize for that...I’ve honestly been meaning to this whole time since Airi yelled at me.”

“Takamaki-san…” Makoto whispered morosely.
“I realized later that Shiho was calling out for me…” Ann continued quietly, wincing as she remembered that specific week. “And I wasn’t there to help her…Airi was…” She clenched her fists. “I didn’t want to admit my own guilt...so I took it out on you, Nijima-senpai. I’m...very sorry.” Clasping her hands in front of her, she bowed at the waist.

Makoto stared for a moment before a small smile appeared on her lips. “…Hey, there is no need for that. In fact, I think the two of us are pretty similar.”

Ann straightened up and looked at her in surprise. “Huh..?”

Makoto bit her lip and looked down at her lap sorrowfully. “I was unable to save anyone. Not Suzuki-san, not any of Kaneshiro’s victims, not...my father. I kept telling myself I wasn’t at fault because I was simply following orders…” She grimaced. “But that was all a lie. It felt like I would be admitting my own worthlessness had I not shifted the blame off of myself. Seeing Airi-chan out in the hallways, comforting other students while also fighting out there...it made me feel like I was worthless by comparison. That I wasn’t meeting expectations. Fear of that worthlessness was probably why I acted so harshly toward you, Airi-chan, and everyone else in the group...I’m deeply sorry as well.”

Ann softened at her confession, taking a seat again. “I see…”

Glancing between them, Airi held out her hands over the table, gesturing for theirs. “Why don’t we call it even?”

Makoto looked up at her in surprise. “Even?”

Airi smiled softly. “If we’re here to confess our sins, then I have some things to say as well.”

Ann scrunched up her face. “You do..? But...you do everything right.” She argued. “You’re always taking care of us, and you even injured yourself to save Shiho…”

Makoto tilted her head. “You sound like you’re idolizing her, Takamaki-san.” She grimaced. “Matter of fact, I suppose I have been as well in a way… I’m sorry. I should know what it’s like to be pressured by praise.”

Ann furrowed her brow cluelessly. “I do..?”

Airi nodded. She had to tell her. She couldn’t let the model keep this up because she didn’t deserve the praise. She was only deluding herself at this point. “I’ve noticed for a while now, but anytime you mention Shiho, you always tell me you’re grateful I saved her even when I didn’t really.” She smiled bitterly. “...I couldn’t pull her up. I didn’t save anyone.”

It was true. Everyone had to save her instead, and almost all of them lost their lives for it. Her parents, Rui...Even Takase to some extent. Shiho was her own personal failure because she had her in her grasp. She could’ve pulled her up if her pain tolerance had been enough. But the reality was that Shiho was still in the hospital recovering because she failed. That wasn’t worthy of praise.

“One reason why you were so harsh with Makoto-senpai was probably because you couldn’t bring yourself to be harsh with me.” She theorized quietly. "If you blamed me for not being able to save Shiho, then you would never have forgiven yourself. Makoto-senpai was the ideal target to blame since she’s council president and my superior.”

Ann flinched and bowed her head, mulling the words over in her mind. After a moment of silence, she slowly nodded. “...You’re right. Now that I think back, I really am hero-worshiping you.” She whispered in horror and guilt. “I couldn’t blame you for not pulling her up, because then I would
never have forgiven myself for not being up there. I was so frustrated when I thought Niijimase- 
senpai was doing this just to get into universities, even when you told me she was being pressured, 
that I took all of it out on her.” She clenched her fists on her lap. “...You know Shiho doesn’t blame 
you, right?”

Airi sighed. “And she doesn’t blame you either. We know who to blame.” And they were glad he 
was behind bars where he would never be able to touch another girl again. “I think it’s about time 
we all stop blaming ourselves for things we couldn’t predict, right? Besides, everything turned out 
for the better. Shiho-chan isn’t suffering from Kamoshida anymore, the school doesn’t have to be 
secretly scared of a teacher, we became Phantom Thieves and friends.” She smiled. “We had to 
deal with Kamoshida ourselves, yeah, and we have to deal with Kaneshiro now, but that doesn’t 
mean we can’t keep moving past it, right?”

Ann nodded determinedly. “...You’re right, Airi. I’m sorry I’ve been putting you on a pedestal to 
be admired. You’re one of my best friends and our mom.”

She smiled fondly, giggling at the mom reference. “Same.”

Observing them for a moment, Makoto chuckled. “...How about we leave this conversation in the 
past?”

They all nodded and Airi grabbed their hands, linking them together to shake on it. They were 
finally able to come clean, baring their guilt and shame to face their true selves.

“Oh but,” Ann began, leaning forward in her seat. “One more thing. You’re not worthless, Niijima-
senpai.”

Makoto widened her eyes.

“You were a bit reckless, but you’re the reason we found a way into Kaneshiro’s Palace. You even 
obtained the power to change people’s hearts.” Ann smiled. “You did that all yourself, Niijima-
senpai.”

Airi nodded in agreement. “We had no way to predict this outcome, but it all turned out for the 
better.” She smiled softly. “You’re part of our team now, and we’re happy to have you with us. 
You even helped me find my foster brother, no matter how accidental. Thanks for that.” She bit her 
lip. "I'm sure your father would be proud of you."

Makoto stared at them both with wide eyes before she chuckled, a slight blush on her cheeks from 
their encouraging words. “That way of thinking is very much like you guys.” She crossed her arms, 
locking eyes with Ann. “When you confronted me about Suzui-san, I realized how dishonest and 
small I was. Your words were painful to hear, but it was what I needed. You’re always very 
direct...That’s what helped me finally realize the error of my ways. It turns out I’m a little slow on 
the uptake at times…”

Ann reddened and scratched her cheek, smiling sheepishly but didn’t deny it.

Makoto then turned to Airi. “And you were there to comfort me, even when I didn’t deserve it. 
You’re always so motherly and kind with people…”

Ann snorted. “Not with our enemies. I should tell you about that time she threatened to shoot 
Kamoshida’s dick off.”

Airi blushed and lightly smacked the model on the arm. “Sh-Shut up! You were about to roast him 
too!”
Makoto chuckled. “Didn’t you also threaten Kaneshiro yesterday? It seems you hold a violent streak.”

She pouted. “If I do, then you definitely do. It was really impressive to see you break the tiles with one stomp.” She smiled teasingly. “Did they teach that in aikido? If so, can I learn?”

Blushing, Makoto awkwardly tucked some hair behind an ear. “That was just a spur of the moment, especially after learning who he really is.” She gazed at them for a second. “Hey...Can I call you two by your first names? We’re...friends now,” She smiled shyly. “So there’s no need for honorifics.”

Ann perked up. “Um, yeah! I...I’m going to do the same, M-M-Makoto…” She stammered before groaning. “Rgh, that’s so embarrassing!”

Airi grinned. “Then...Makoto, call me Airi. I think we’re long past that, right?”

Chuckling Makoto nodded. “How about we get something to eat before we go into the Palace today? You said we had to do some shopping, right?”

“Shopping?” Ann beamed. “Then I know a place! There’s a sweets shop at Central Street that totally stuffs their crepes!”

Airi sweatdropped. “I thought you said you were going to stop with your addiction…”

Ann stuck her tongue out, giving her a wink. “Never!”

Makoto smiled at their interactions. “Then should we all share?”

“Mmmm,” She hummed happily. “Let’s each get a whole one with different flavors and then we can go half and half on those!”

Airi facepalmed even as the council president agreed. It was amazing that none of them were fat from all the sweets and food.

“Anyway,” Ann stood up. “I’m going to go get a soda. I’ll see you guys after school!” She waved before leaving the room.

Makoto turned to Airi. “Did Sakamoto-kun ask you about the next board meeting?”

Airi nodded, resting her hands in her lap. “Yes. It’s most likely about Yamauchi…”

“Yo!” Akira looked up from his finished bento, seeing Ryuji wave him over and out of the class. Letting Morgana nap inside the desk, he got up and followed the ex-runner down the steps and into the courtyard. There were a bunch of other students around the open area, but they bypassed all of them and stopped at a secluded corner.

“What’s up?” Akira asked curiously, resting his hands in his pockets.

Fidgeting with one leg, Ryuji turned to him. “I asked Nakaoka and Takeishi to meet here. It’s been
a while since we went to the Monjayaki shop but they’ve been avoidin’ me.” He sighed, frustrated as he messed up his hair. “Both Nijima and Airi told me the next board meeting’s soon, which means Yamauchi’s gonna get the spot if we don’t do somethin’.”

Akira furrowed his brow. “What if they start fighting?”

He snickered and held up his phone, showing a recording file. “You prolly didn’t realize, but I recorded Yamauchi’s whole convo back at the monja shop!” He preened. “I’m a genius, I know.”

He sweatdropped but nodded. “That was really smart.”

“Anyway, uh…” Ryuji grimaced. “I might need some backup here. Can you stick around?”

Akira nodded. “Of course. I got your back like you got mine.”

He grinned at his words and held up a hand, palm out. Smirking, Akira high fived him just like they did in battles. Just because there weren’t any Shadows and they weren’t thieves right now didn’t mean they couldn’t count on each other.

“What do you want, Sakamoto?” Takeishi walked up to them with a scowl, blue sweatband around his head like always.

Another set of footsteps approached them and Nakaoka walked up as well, turning to the other ex-track member. “...Takeishi?” He voiced quietly.

The scowl on his face deepened and Takeishi took a step back. “Nakaoka?! Wh-What the hell? Are you guys gonna gang up on me!”


Furrowing their brows, his ex-teammates turned to him. “Listen. This here is what’s really goin’ on with the track team.” He pressed play on the recording and let them listen in on what Yamauchi said.

Nakaoka only grimaced while Takeishi paled, eyes wide with shock as he heard the assistant gym teacher speak. “It’ll be the rebirth of a team that found themselves in the depths of despair...The public will love it. And the best part is, not only are Takeishi’s parents loaded, but his mother’s the president of the PTA. But until then, he can show others the value of obedience.”

The recording stopped and Ryuji put his phone back in his pocket, frowning sympathetically. Takeishi slowly shook his head. “This has to be a joke...” He whispered in disbelief. “Yamauchi said he’d make me the captain...”

“Is this true...?” Nakaoka asked uncertainly.

Ryuji nodded grimly. “It’s Yamauchi’s voice, ain’t it? And on top of that, shit’s gone down just like he said.”

Takeishi stayed silent, but directed his gaze to the grass underneath their feet, clenching his hands. “…Yamauchi’s right. I don’t have talent...I’m not like you guys.” He admitted in defeat. “I ran so damn hard, but you two were always so far ahead...How’s a guy like me supposed to succeed?” He clenched his eyes in self doubt. “How am I supposed to be proud of myself?!”

Furrowing his brow, Ryuji rested his thumbs in his pockets. “Proud...?”
“My dad always talks about how proud he is of his son…” He murmured morosely. “He told everyone I’d get a track scholarship like he did...That I’d follow in his footsteps as a second-generation Taisei grad…” Lips twisted bitterly. “That’s why I listened to Yamauchi. He said if I was the captain, he’d write me a great letter of rec…”

Ryuji stared at him in disbelief and slight anger. “...So you trusted what he was sayin’ about Nakaoka ‘cause of stupid crap like that?”

Offended, Takeishi took a few steps forward. “Sh-Shut up! What does a thug like you know?!” He shouted indignantly, glaring daggers at the blond thief. “You couldn’t know how I feel...Nobody does!”

Growling, he stomped his foot. “Like hell I don’t know! How long were we runnin’ together, huh?! I went through all sorts of shit with you!”

Taken aback, Takeishi bowed his head. “Sakamoto…”

The doors closest to them opened but they ignored it, except for Akira. He glanced over for a second but stilled when he noticed it was Ann. Wasn’t she supposed to be with Airi? She had exited into the courtyard but stood there watching them, eyes trained on her fellow blond.

“Who’re you livin’ your life for?” Ryuji pressed Takeishi. “Your parents? Teachers? Society?” He grimaced. “Maybe you should stop tryin’ to live for them, and just try livin’ for yourself. You think you gotta betray people to be proud?”

“W-Well, I…” He stammered.

“If that’s seriously what you think, you’re wrong!” Ryuji voiced firmly before turning to his other ex-teammate. “Nakaoka. You knew something was up with Yamauchi too, didn’t you? I mean, the bastard’s never been interested in track before…” His eyes hardened. “But you kept quiet. You knew he was walkin’ all over you, and you just let him do it.”

Staring at him for a moment, Nakaoka nodded submissively. “...Yeah.” He whispered. “I was afraid...Without Yamauchi, we still wouldn’t have a team...or a place to belong.”

Eyes widening, Ryuji frowned sympathetically. “...You missed runnin’ that bad?” He sighed quietly. “Y’know...it ain’t so scary not havin’ a place you belong. You can kinda be free that way.” He huffed. “If anything, I’m more scared of bein’ a crappy person. I mean, I used to be like you guys…” His eyes darkened at his old self. “Afraid, lyin’ to myself...That is, before I met this dude.” He pointed his thumb over to Akira.

The leader inclined his head and Ryuji nodded before turning back to his ex-teammates. “I don’t wanna insult you guys or nothin’, but I know you’re prolly real pissed about all this, so…” He straightened up, squaring his shoulders. “If you wanna hit me or something, go ahead. I’m ready.”

Akira glanced over to the side where Ann was watching and listening with wide eyes, hand covering her mouth. Should he call her over?

“Well, in that case…” Takeishi started.

“If you insist.” Nakaoka finished.

Taking a step, the sweatband wearing runner launched his fist into his ex-teammate’s face, landing his knuckles against his cheek.
Recoiling from the unexpected hit, Ryuji wiped the spit that had expelled from his mouth and stared at them with wide eyes. “Huh?! You’re really doin’ it?!”

Nakaoka stepped forward, raising a fist. “You said it’s OK, right?”

His eyes widened. “W-Wait...!” He coughed out a groan as he was punched again, falling onto the grass.

Akira sweatdropped, wondering if he should step in. Did this count as a battle?

Nursing his now red and pulsing jaw with a wince, Ryuji straightened up. “Owww...” He groaned. “Did you really hafta keep swingin’ so hard...?”

Flexing his stiff fingers, Nakaoka began laughing, quietly before gaining volume. “I’m actually starting to feel a little better already.”

Takeishi smiled slightly, looking lighter than he did before. “Me too. I think I can finally put all of this behind me.” He turned to his former victim. “Nakaoka...I’m sorry.” He apologized earnestly, rubbing the back of his head.

Nakaoka turned to him and nodded. “I’m sorry too. So...you wanna bring back the track team?”

He brightened. “Hell yeah! C’mon, let’s meet up with the others before lunch is over. I gotta let them know about this.” Nodding with a smile, they both walked away chatting animatedly, past grievances forgiven.

Now that they were alone, Ryuji slumped. “You saw that, right? That was some serious violence!”

Akira only smirked with amusement. “Everything turned out for the better though.”

The ex-runner rolled his eyes. “Naw, man. I’ve been takin’ good care of this face, and look what ended up happenin’ to it.”

“I don’t know if you’ve been taking good care of it…”

Ryuji stiffened at the unexpected voice and finally saw Ann, walking up to them with her bag. “A-Ann?!” He yelped, taking a step back. “You saw all that?!”

She smiled a bit shyly, idly scratching her cheek. “I saw most of it. I didn’t mean to, I was just going to go to the vending machines for a soda.” She stared at the bruise that was rapidly forming on his jaw. “...That looks like it hurts.” She whispered before digging into her bag, taking out her own tube of Recov-R gel.

Uncapping it, she squeezed out a generous amount and slathered it over the swelling before he could even get a word in. It rapidly disappeared, all traces of the blemish disappearing. “There.” She said satisfactorily, putting the medicine back inside her bag. “Now that’s some good care.”

She winked playfully.

Ryuji only stared at her with wide eyes before sputtering, cheeks burning at the admittedly soft touch. “Wh-What the hell...?! You’re never this nice to me!” He held a hand over his now vanished bruise, the skin still tingling from either the medicine or her gentle ministrations, he couldn’t tell. “What’s with you...?!”

She turned her head, staring off to where the ex-track members went. “...I never asked why the track team was disbanded. I was only happy that Shiho had a volleyball team to join.” She
confessed. “I didn’t know it was so harsh for you guys too…”

He fell silent at her admission, gazing at her pensively.

She bit her lip, ducking her head. “I already apologized to Nijjima-senpai, so I might as well apologized to you. I’m sorry I never asked.” She voiced sincerely. “We weren’t really friends, but I knew you well enough that I should’ve notice something was wrong, especially when you broke your leg.” She smiled teasingly. “You’re not THAT clumsy.”

He scrunched up his face. “Hey…”

“That’s…all I wanted to say.” Ann turned around, heading back inside the school building. “I’ll see you guys after school.”

Ryuji stood in his spot, watching her back before she disappeared behind a group of passing students, and sighed. “Man…” He furiously ruffled his hair. “I wasn’t expectin’ Ann of all people to be so nice. She takin’ lessons from Airi or somethin’?”

Having witnessed all that, Akira could only view the two in a different light. Was there something going on between them? “Maybe, or maybe Ann has always been a nice person, you guys just argue too much for you to see it.”

Ryuji only snorted. “Sure, whatever.” Shaking his head, he rubbed his nose. “Well, with all the apologies today, I think we’re all feelin’ better about ourselves.” He grinned. “I’m sure Takeishi and Nakaoka are gonna be just fine together...Thanks.”

Akira shrugged. “All I did was watch.”

He groaned. “You’re tellin’ me. You just sat around while I got my ass beat…” His jaw tingled again and his gaze unknowingly softened, a hand coming up to touch the spot.

Akira raised a brow. What was up with him now? Was he that dazzled by the model’s new side?

“For real though…” Ryuji continued. “You were a big help. You were pushin’ me to be cool that whole time.” He grinned. “It’s kinda like I was doin’ a sprint...and you were runnin’ next to me.”

Akira snickered. “But you weren’t cool at all. You got your ass beat.”

He stared at him in disbelief. “Brutal!” He held a hand to his chest dramatically. “Just forget about the beatin’ I took, OK?!”

They both burst into laughter.

Chapter End Notes

Ryuji rank 8
Thank you to LetPlayer for letting me know. Someone is plagiarizing my fic on, of course, FFNET. LOL. Literal word for word copy and paste. I'm flattered that someone thinks this story is good enough to plagiarize, but of course, I'm also angry.

Just to make it clear, I do not post this story on any other platform other than AO3. You DO NOT have permission to repost this story. I didn't think I'd ever have to write this because this is such self indulgent trash, but I do now. This won't stop me from writing, but I just have to put in these precautions now. I'm really sorry this one person is trying to ruin it. (I'll be editing this in in the first chapter as well)

If you could do me a favor, please go to https://www.fanfiction.net/s/12677886/1/The-world-is-ours and report abuse.

EDIT: Story has been taken down! Thanks so much for your help! Hopefully this doesn't happen again, but tbh, I don't know. I've now posted this story on FFNET under the same name, but this is still the preferred platform.

In the middle of one of Ushimaru-sensei’s lectures, three phones buzzed in their pockets.

Y: I realize this is a mite late, but how shall I refer to you, Niijima-san?
Y: I believe some courtesy should be shown to those who are our senior.
R: Oh yeah...Should we call you Niijima-san, or like, Niijima-senpai?
Ma: No need to be formal. Just treat me the same way you would anyone else.
Ak: All right, Makoto.
R: Ain’t that too informal?
An: I already just call her by name.
Ai: Same.
R: For real? Did something happen?
An: That’s a secret between us girls!
R: Dammit, that sounds like fun…
Ai: It wasn’t a threesome.
R: Oh...Still. Sounds like fun.
Ma: Um...Moving on, all of you may call me by my first name. No need to hesitate.
Y: Very well. I shall do just that.
Y: Ryuji, Akira, should we have our own threesome as men?
Ai: HA!
An: Uh, wow.
R: NO. Do you even know what you’re saying?!
Ak: No thanks. You two have fun.
Ak: Airi, stop being a pervert.
Ma: I was unaware Airi was so...indecent.
Ai: Hey! It’s a perfectly normal part of life.
Y: Is a threesome a perverted activity then? I assumed it entailed bonding between three persons. The ladies already had theirs, so we should follow their example.
R: Dude...Just no.

Once the bell rang, they packed their bags. “Our next target is a criminal,” Morgana whispered grimly to them. “One that even the police can’t handle. We’ll take care of him ourselves and leave the world speechless!”

The three teenagers nodded, leaving the classroom. Ryuji was already waiting for them near the staircase, leaning against the wall. “So, we goin’ to the Palace today?”

Akira nodded. “Not yet. We have to prep Makoto, so we’re making a quick stop at Central.”

He grinned, straightening up from the wall. “Roger that!”

They headed down the stairs, meeting Makoto near the snack store. She gave them a nervous smile as a greeting, this being the first time they were meeting up with both side’s consent. “Hello. You mentioned this morning about guns?”

Airi nodded. “We all have a different firearm. Like your knuckle dusters, they become a part of your thief outfit once you bring it in with you.”

They left the school and began walking to the station, swiping their wallets at the turnstile. “I see…” Makoto grasped her chin thoughtfully. “What sort of firearms do you currently use?”

Ann shrugged as they got on the train to Shibuya. “Well, I have a submachine gun. Ryuji has a shotgun, Yusuke has an assault rifle, Akira has a classic pistol, Morgana has a slingshot, and Airi has a sniper rifle.”

She blinked in surprise and looked at the cellist. “A sniper rifle?”

Airi smiled sheepishly. “Yeah, it’s a little heavy but I like it. Makes me feel powerful, having all that control from a distance.”

Blood rushed to his cheeks as he heard her confess that and Akira subtly swallowed, his throat suddenly parched. Why did that sound dirty? Maybe he was a masochist…

“This is Shibuya. I repeat, this is Shibuya. The time is now 3:18PM, the next stop is…”

The train came to a stop and the doors slid open, the group of teenagers leaving the platform and heading into the heart of Shibuya. Ann stopped in the middle of the busy road, pointing excitedly at the crepe store on Central Street that was crowded with other students and customers. “Oh! Can we get one now?!”

Makoto brightened. “Sure. I’m a little hungry, but maybe we should just split it?”

Morgana leaned against Akira’s shoulder. “Should we really be eating sweets at a time like this?” He criticized. “We have a Palace to infiltrate.”
Ann turned to him with a frown, resting her hands on her hips. “We’re on a time limit, sure, but there’s never a bad time for crepes!”

He sweatdropped. “Well, if you’re sure…”

Ryuji snorted before getting in line, taking his wallet out. “Dunno ‘bout you guys, but I’m gettin’ one for myself.”

Scrunching his nose, Morgana jumped out of the bag and onto the ex-runner’s shoulder. “I demand the tuna one!”

He sputtered, tilting his head away from the tufts of fur in his face. “No way! That’s gross!”

Airi took out her phone, messaging Yusuke to meet them at Central street. She received a confirmation and put her mobile away, him saying he’d arrive in a few minutes.

Seeing the others get in line, Akira turned back to her. “Want to share?” He asked, slightly nervous. He was basically offering indirect kisses. “I’m not a big fan, but if everyone’s getting one…”

She blinked and perused the plastic displays, getting in line with him. “OK. What do you like then?”

He shrugged. “Not too sweet. Maybe matcha?”

“OK!” She smiled. “How about with some mochi cubes? I really like them and they’re not too sugary.”

He smiled, taking out his wallet. “Sure.” Ann, Makoto, and Ryuji having already ordered, he walked up to the counter. “A matcha mochi crepe please.”

The employee nodded, inputting it in the register. “Sure! That’ll be ¥390.”

Handing over the cash, he received his confectionary a minute later before turning to the cellist. Taking a small bite, he offered it to her, munching on a mix of crepe, ice cream, and mochi. It was sweet, but at least it wasn’t tooth rottingly so like Ann’s.

Taking it, Airi took a bite as well, humming happily. “I haven’t had a crepe in a while. Thank you for the treat.” She beamed as she held it back to him, feeling like all her worries were gone, just for a moment. There was something so utterly normal about getting sweets with friends after school that she never knew she wanted. She hoped they could do this more often.

He smiled, taking the dessert. “No problem. Everyone’s sharing anyway.”

It was true. Ann was off to the side, moaning about how delicious it was to eat a strawberry chocolate waffle crepe with caramel drizzle as Makoto feebly tried to get a bite in. Ryuji had ended up getting a tuna cheese crepe anyway due to Morgana’s incessant yowling in his ear, and sighed dejectedly as he fed it to the purring cat on his shoulder.

Feeling a little courageous, he took a bite exactly where Airi did, his mouth enveloping the edges left over from her teeth. That was definitely an indirect kiss and he’d relish in it.

She blinked, feeling her cheeks redden as Akira kept eye contact with her as he ate the crepe. Why was he being so intense with this? It was as if he was trying to seduce her, but that’s not right, right? It was just a crepe.
“Am I late?”

They turned around to see Yusuke had arrived, his blue button up shirt slightly wrinkled from running here.

Airi gave him a smile. “Hey, you’re not late. We took a little snack break since Ann insisted.”

He raised a brow, observing their other teammates as they finished up their desserts. “I see. We have a matter of upgrading our equipment today, correct?”

Akira nodded, handing the rest of the crepe to Airi. He had enough sugar for today. “I can talk with our dealer to get us the good stuff.”

Yusuke smiled. “That is reassuring to hear. It would be wise to prepare as much as we can before infiltrating this Palace.”

“True.” Ann walked up to them, crumbling the wrapper and throwing it in the trash. “We don’t know what to expect aside from lots of security.”

Makoto grasped her chin thoughtfully, slightly disappointed she only got one bite in. “Are there any patterns you’ve notice when entering these Palaces? Security, Shadows, layout?”

Ryuji scratched his head, letting Morgana eat the rest of his crepe. “Uhh...When we were in Kamoshida’s castle, his Treasure was at the top.”

She blinked. “A castle?”

Airi nodded. “He thought of the school as his castle, and he the king.” Her lips tightened as she remembered how the girls were treated in there, how she and Ann were treated. “His Treasure manifested as a giant crown as a result.”

“I see...So the Treasure is at the safest location.”

Akira shouldered his bag. “Let’s get you a weapon.” He jerked his head in the direction of Untouchable.

As a group, they walked down the empty alley, entering the military-esque shop. Iwai was sat at the glass counter like usual, magazine in hand. Makoto, Ann, and Yusuke looked around hesitantly at the racks of weapons and equipment, this being the first time they were here.

Dark gray eyes slid over to them and Iwai raised a brow, throwing the magazine on the counter. “Hey. Bringin’ in all your little friends, huh?” He remarked callously.

Akira walked up to the counter, idly adjusting his glasses. “We need to do a little shopping.”

Airi waved from beside him, also walking up to the shopkeep. “Hello again. Do you have any new sniper rifle models?”

He stared at her before snorting. “Right. Thought you looked familiar last time but I remember you now that you’re in uniform. Cute girl like you walkin’ into a shop like this back in April and askin’ for the biggest gun model.” He crossed his arms. “You need a new one already? Did you wear out the casing?”

Akira blinked and turned to her. “Right. You had it after we met at the castle. You came here, too?”
She laughed sheepishly. “Yeah, I never told you, right? I went in with you guys that time and saw Ryuji hand you the gun. I thought I should get one too.” She turned back to the dealer. “I just want another one. Maybe based off of a more powerful rifle this time?”

Iwai smirked and unlocked the display, taking a sleek black firearm from the foam case. “This one’s based off of the Barett M99. Design’s pretty old but works like a charm.”

Ryuji oohed, looking at a new metal bat in a display, drooling as he eyed the spikes coming out of the top. “Hey, shopkeep! I’ll take this!”

Yusuke perused a rack of katanas, experimentally pulling one out of its sheath. “It slides smoothly…”

Ann tilted her head as she saw there was a new shipment of submachine gun models. “Could I get that one as well?”

“We should take this opportunity to supply us all with new weapons.” Morgana meowed quietly from his shoulder. “Don’t forget my slingshot!”

Akira glanced over at them before taking his wallet, counting the team budget. They had more than enough to upgrade everyone. “Guys, choose a thing. We’ll take them.”

Ann cheered. “Thanks, Akira!” She grabbed the submachine gun, testing out the trigger.

“Yes!” Ryuji pumped a fist, pointing to the bat he was eyeing. “Gimme gimme gimme…”

Rolling his eyes, Iwai went over to them. “Hold yer horses, kid. I ain’t lettin’ you bludgeon someone to death…”

Makoto bit her lip nervously as she glanced around the shop, nervous in the unfamiliar and dubiously legal surroundings. “Should we really be here? We’re still in our uniforms.”

Akira smirked slyly, a hint of mischief glinting in his eyes as he adjusted his glasses. “Don’t worry, he won’t tell the cops.” They had a deal. Iwai would sell them whatever they wanted, and in turn, he would sell him all they got from within the Palaces as well as do some errands. It seemed a little unlawful, but he would do whatever to help out his group.

She nodded hesitantly, eyeing a revolver with interest and longing. “I think I’d like that one then.” She pointed at it. “My father used to own one like that…It stays with our outfits in that world, correct?”

Airi nodded, picking up the Barett M99 model with a grunt. It was a lot heavier than her current one, but this one came with a scope, meaning more accurate and powerful shots. She turned to Akira, pointing the tip in his face and winked playfully as she pulled the trigger. “I’ll take it.”

He stared down the barrel, feeling heat creep up his neck from his “death.” That was hot…

They exited the store, making sure to hide their firearms in the paper bags Iwai had supplied them with. Akira promised the older man he was up for an errand soon, though not today. Iwai only smirked in his direction before picking up his magazine again, ignoring them.

Makoto glanced around nervously as they walked through Central Street to their hideout, her hand gripping tightly against the straps of her bag that held her brand new revolver as people passed by. “So this is what being a phantom thief is about…”
Airi grinned, shouldering her own hefty bag. Hers was more of an instrument case what with how large her gun was. “Don’t worry, you get used to it. We’ll teach you everything we know.”

She smiled and nodded. “OK…”

Entering the station, they walked up to their hideout and leaned against the railings, grouping together away from the waves of pedestrians. “You know,” Makoto began. “I never imagined that I would end up helping the Phantom Thieves.” She bit her lip. “Things would get interesting if my sister ever found out…”

Morgana darted out of the bag and sat down on the metal bars. “There’s no time to be getting sentimental here.” He scolded.

She nodded. “Yes, I understand. Can you teach me now? Like...about the Metaverse for example.”

“Simply put,” Yusuke began, idly sweeping some hair out of his vision. “That world is formed of a person’s cognition. There, you can change people’s hearts.”

“Yeah, I’ve gathered that much just from going there once.” She confirmed. “But the method of transportation still eludes me…” She pursed her lips. “I mean, it’s a smartphone navigation app…”

“You only need a name, a location, and a distortion.” He explained. “After the first entry, the Palace is bookmarked.”

She blinked. “You really just make it sound like an ordinary app...Aren’t there any dangers associated with it?”

Ryuji grinned. “Don’t worry ‘bout that! We’ve already been a bunch of times and-”

“That’s not what I mean.” She sighed. “It’s a navigation app, right? Couldn’t someone easily access our history on the server?”

They stopped, staring at her in surprise. She was right. They had an app on their phone that obviously used a GPS system, meaning it tracked location. Their phone company, or a hacker even, could get that information from their devices.

Her eyes widened. “Wait, why are you looking at me like that..? Has nobody thought of this before?!?”

Yusuke hesitated. “I…”

Ryuji hunched his shoulders, wincing. “Now she’s catchin’ me off guard too…”

“Well…” Airi blinked, trying to piece it all together. “It’s not an app that shows up for other people. It doesn’t exist in the app store, so it’s harder to track.” She bit her lip. “Even if it does show information, they can’t prove that we’re the ones changing their hearts...right?” She ended very uncertainly. She wasn’t very tech savvy.

Makoto furrowed her brow. “I suppose...but where does it come from? It showed up on my phone without any input from me...Do you know anything about it, Akira-kun?”

Akira looked away. “A long nosed man…”

They stared at him in confusion, Morgana giving him an odd look. “What..?”

He pursed his lips. He wanted to tell them the truth, but it’s tough to explain that a magical man
with a long nose in his head was sending the app out to their devices. It’s not like he knew much about it either. He shook his head. “Never mind.”

Giving him another odd look, Morgana flicked an ear. “...I don’t fully understand, but I don’t think we have to worry about people accessing our data. From what I can tell, this app is incredibly special. It wasn’t made by any ordinary means.”

Makoto slowly nodded, digesting the information. “True...An app that allows you to enter another world isn’t exactly commonplace…” She sighed. “Well, Sis doesn’t know who the Phantom Thieves are, and she’s preoccupied with another case at the moment, so I suppose our information is safe for now.”

“We’re still learning things ourselves.” Morgana stated. “I hope your sharp wit can help us with that.”

She smiled and nodded. “Thank you. I’ll do my best.”

“So, what’s our time limit this time?” He asked grimly. “I doubt we have much time to spare at this point.”

“Nishiki said the deadline is in three weeks, so...” Airi replied, taking out her phone to check the calendar. “July 8th…”

Ann sighed glumly. “There’s no way high schoolers could really bring in three million yen…”

“And that’s why he’s threatening us.” Makoto stated calmly. “If we can’t pay, he’ll do much worse than just blackmail.” She scowled. “But for now, we need to stop him from releasing those photos. If the public got a hold of them…”

Ann bit her lip worriedly. “I could only imagine what would happen then…”

Airi frowned, glancing to her right at Akira who looked on grimly. He’d be taken away immediately and charged with substance abuse on top of his probation. The rest of them would be placed in juvenile hall with permanent marks on the records. She wouldn’t know what to do…

“C’mon,” Ryuji tightened his jaw. “We just gotta take care of him before the time limit. We’ll bounce back from this. Plus people’ll really start admirin’ us if we can manage to take this bastard down!”

Morgana nodded in agreement. “Yeah, this is the perfect opportunity. We have to succeed, no matter what!” He stated firmly. “Anything else we need to discuss?”

Akira took out his phone, checking the messages. “We have two requests in Mementos, but we could do them another time.”

His ears perked up. “Right. Apparently the Phantom Thieves inspired a larceny group that steals from shops in Shibuya.” He informed gravely. “On top of that, it seems their leader has been physically abusing his younger brother. We can’t let these people go around tarnishing the Phantom Thieves name.”

Airi narrowed her eyes. “Abusing his younger brother? That’s unacceptable.” How did an older sibling even think of mistreating their younger sibling like that? As someone with a younger brother now, and several younger siblings before him, it disgusted her to the core.

Yusuke nodded in agreement. “I must agree, even more so if we are being asked for help. Let us
put a stop to this madness after Kaneshiro’s Palace.”

Ann nodded as well. “I’m for doing this too! We need to trigger a change of heart in them.”

“There are still more.” Morgana interrupted. “This intel is on a cowardly kid who carries out atrocities using bullies under his control. He’s the one behind that guy Takanashi whose heart we changed before as well. Anyway, it seems like he’s been blackmailing people with videos they don’t want made public.”

Ryuji snarled, flexing his hands around his bag. “Sure thing. Let’s break that shitty bastard.”

Airi idly grasped her arm. “This is another person in our school, right?” She sighed. “Why is it always ours?”

Ann huffed. “It seems tough, but I think we can accomplish this if you say we can!”

Makoto grasped her chin thoughtfully. “If I understand what you’re saying, you can take the hearts of people that aren’t as distorted as Kaneshiro?”

Airi nodded. “It’s called Mementos, the public’s Palace. Anyone who’s even a little distorted could have a room in there. If we leave them, they could grow distorted enough to have their own Palaces.”

She hummed. “So it’s a preemptive measure. I understand. You take these requests when there isn’t a Palace to infiltrate?”

Ryuji grinned. “Yup! Helps us train and get stronger, plus it means we’re helpin’ out all the little people that post these requests on the Phan-site.”

Ann nodded. “We can give them courage by showing them the way out, and hopefully they’ll never end up like that again.”

Makoto stared at them for a moment before a smile grew on her lips. “You guys really are just. I’ll do what I can to help as well.”

They smiled at each other, knowing they had another person to watch their backs. Straightening up from the railing, Akira held out his phone. “We ready to go?”

Everyone nodded and he tapped the app, their surroundings warping around them.
Chapter 123

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everyone here and the prompt staff at FFNET, the fic was taken down!!! All their stories are gone as well, which means the other two under their name was also plagiarized. I couldn't have done it without you guys! <3

As a precaution, I've started posting this story on FFNET as well under the same title and username. However, AO3 will be where I will be updating regularly. The FFNET one will always be behind in chapters as I want to build an audience there as well. Shout out to AKAI34 for letting me use their artwork of Akira and Airi as the cover! Thanks again!

Thank you for 25k hits and 694 kudos!

Appearing in front of Kaneshiro’s bank, Joker put his phone away and replaced his old gun with his new one.

Everyone else upgraded their weapons, keeping the old ones to sell later. “So,” Makoto began. “What am I going to be called? You all have code names, so I should have one too.”

Skull rubbed the back of his head as he examined her outfit, focusing on the spikes and leather. “This time’s a hard one...Maybe somethin’ like ‘Shoulder Pads’?”

Mona scrunched up his face. “Why in the world did you focus on that..?”

Makoto grimaced in disgust. “I refuse to be called that.”

“What about ‘Rider’?” Fox suggested with a hum.

She shook her head. “Sounds too much like a smuggler. Next.”

Panther placed her hands on her hips. “‘Fixer’?”

“I’m not a mastermind, though. Won’t you give me something better to work with?”

Mona widened his eyes. “She reminds me of an Empress.”

Elegant idly grasped her arm, peering at the upperclassman’s outfit. If she was completely honest, it looked a lot like those outfits from BDSM clubs. All that leather, the laced straps, the skin tight body suit...She probably shouldn’t say that to her face. “She’s commanding, and the mask is like an iron throne plating...How about Queen?”

Joker gave her a look before nodding in agreement. “Queen fits.”

Panther grinned. “Whoa, I totally see it!”

Mona nodded slowly, sweatdropping. “It fits so well that I’m at a loss for words here.”

“Queen…” Makoto, now Queen, smiled. “It has a nice ring to it. I like it. Let’s go with that.” She
straightened up, replacing her smile with a stern frown as she got to business. “Now then, could you explain to me the strategy for this mission?”

Skull blinked, clueless. “...Strategy?”

Taken aback, she gaped. “...You don’t have one? Wait. The Phantom Thieves were acting without any plans?!?”

“Uhh…” Mona wiggled around nervously. “Well, our usual method is to scout the location. I sometimes offer guidance in sensing the Treasure, and we go from there.”

Skull rolled his shoulder. “If we run into Shadows, we beat the shit outta ‘em!” He grinned viciously.

Queen raised a brow. “Not...bad. However, it could do with some polishing. I will do my best to analyze Mona’s information and give out orders.” She narrowed her eyes. “Any objections?”

Skull sputtered and stood at attention. “N-None, Queen!”

Panther rolled her eyes at his reaction and crossed her arms. “I bet Skull’s definitely the type that’ll be under a girl’s thumb.”

Elegant chuckled, grabbing her coat to curtsy. From one courtly lady to another. “Of course, Queen.”

Appeased, Queen smiled. “Mona.” She looked down at the feline. “Will you begin navigating us?”

He stumbled, ears sticking straight up as he also stood at attention. “Y-Yes, Queen!”

Fox shook his head and sighed. “Him too, it seems…”

Joker smirked, resting his hands in his pockets. “Let’s go then.”

They walked into the courtyard, no Shadows spawning to stop them. “It seems we are still customers that can be extorted,” Fox remarked, eyeing the empty surroundings.

Queen clenched her fists. “...That’s fine. We can take advantage of his negligence.”

“Though I will say,” Panther murmured, “It’s a little scary every time.”

Elegant placed a hand on her shoulder. “Don’t worry,” She reassured, “We’ve got each other.”

They walked up to the entrance, pausing when they noticed it was completely blocked off, wooden boards nailed over the hole they left. “It seems as though they didn’t want to leave that gaping hole…” Fox murmured.

Panther bit her lip. “But...we can’t get in now…”

Queen winced, remembering that this was her fault. “Sorry...I...think I might have taken it a little too far…”

Exhaling, Joker turned around. “Maybe a bit, but we’ll find another entrance.”

Mona beamed. “That’s right. We would have been in serious danger had it not been for Queen’s actions.”
Queen blushed slightly from their compliments. “Th-Thank you…”

Elegant looked around. “Let’s find a new infiltration point. For a ridiculous bank like this, there’s probably another entrance just like in the movies.”

Joker nodded, turning on his third eye ability. Glancing around, he noticed one pig statue was knocked down, but the other one was still up, immaculate by comparison. He walked over to it and observed the golden monument with a frown.

“Wait.” Queen furrowed her brow, taking a step closer. The bottom of her scarf fluttered as if something was blowing it back. “I can feel a draft coming from underneath the statue…Could there be a secret entrance?”

Stepping forward, Joker slammed his fist against the plaque and it moved back with a rumble, revealing a steel plated passage that extended below.

Skull pumped his fist. “Oooh, a hidden passage!”

Panther stepped forward, peering into the dark. “We’re all ready, right? Let’s head inside.”

Joker jumped down first, landing in the small tunnel. There was only one way forward from this and he crawled through, the rest of the thieves following him. The tunnel seemed to lead them further into the center of the Palace. Hitting another ladder, he climbed up, pushing the manhole off. They came out from behind the dividers, eyeing the carpet and random pots of plants cluttered in the corners as well as the yellow lighting from the chandeliers.

Fox looked around the bare hall. “I would say given this interior design...we are inside the bank. It seems our plan went well.”

Queen furrowed her brow. “I don’t remember seeing this place last time...Just where exactly are we..?”

“There has to be a map somewhere,” Mona stated sternly. “For now, let’s try to explore and search for the Treasure.”

They turned the corner, seeing they were behind a large staircase reaching up to the second floor, as well as an open archway. Running up the steps, they were greeted with a steel shutter that extended from the ceiling to the floor, completely blocking their progress.

Skull groaned. “A dead end..?”

They turned back down to the first floor, hiding behind the corner of the doorway. “This is the same lobby from yesterday,” Elegant whispered as they eyed the security guards patrolling back and forth.

“We don’t got any business with reception anymore, right?” Skull grinned. “Let’s try attackin’ some new places!”

“That should be OK, but there will be a lot of enemies,” Mona reminded. “Try to be careful, OK?”

Joker nodded, taking out his dagger. It was time to get serious.

Hiding behind the benches, they ambushed the Shadows and made it to the other side past the waiting room. Taking a few cautious steps, they watched as a security guard entered an elevator with no buttons, then the lift closed and descended into the depths of the Palace.
“It looks like there are lower floors in here too…” Panther remarked quietly as they hid behind a divider.

Fox hummed. “But that elevator is lacking a control panel.”

“They probably control it from a security room,” Mona reasoned. “It’s a simple, but effective measure of screening.”

“That must mean they really don’t want anyone going down there…” Queen theorized.

“How far does it go, though?” Elegant pondered.

Leaving the elevator for some other time, they ambushed the other two Shadows patrolling a small waiting room, one of them spawning into three angels. They hovered in the air with their pure white wings, their slender and sensual bodies just barely covered by black belts.

Killing two of them, the last one panicked and flew over to Joker. “I’m sorry! Please let me live!”

Raising a brow, he nodded. “Lend me your power.”

The Angel perked up. “For real, thanks for saving me- Wait! Talking to you made me remember something!” She straightened up, showing her pale skin and slender curves. “…I’m so not a Shadow that belongs here. I used to be in the humans’ sea of souls. I’m Angel. I mean, I’m you after all, so let’s hope we get along!”

A faint glow emerged around her and she transformed into a replica of his mask before flying to his face, merging with his soul. He smirked, flexing his hands as he felt the new power. A Bless skill, huh?

Skull grumbled as he put his bat away. “You get all the hot Shadow ladies to be your Persona…”

Queen grasped her chin thoughtfully. “So Joker here can hold multiple Personas. That’s definitely a tactical advantage we should use against Kaneshiro.”

Clenching her fists, Elegant looked away. It was stupid to be jealous of a Shadow, but seeing that Angel flaunt her admittedly beautiful body like that to her leader irked her. Plus, it only knew Hama and she knew many more bless skills. Biting her lip, she cleared her tired mind of any dark thoughts. There was no point in being jealous, they had a Treasure to steal.

Running up the two flights of stairs, they caught sight of a new type of enemy and hid in the shadows. “H-Hold on a second!” Panther yelped. “What is that?!?”

It was some sort of great dane, outfitted with a bulletproof vest and glowing blue visors, patrolling the hallway with the click of its paws against the tiles.

Fox peered around the corner of the statue he was hiding behind. “A Shadow in the shape of a dog...It seems this place has its own watchdogs…”

Mona whimpered, ears pressing against his scalp. “I’m not sure I can handle that…”

Skull grinned down at him teasingly. “Y’mean ‘cause you’re a cat?”

He sputtered, tail sticking straight up in the air. “I meant ‘cause it might be quicker or smarter than other enemies!” He quickly refuted, though his ears announced his fear. “J-Just be careful, Joker!”

Joker smirked. “You stay with Elegant when we deal with these dogs.”
Running forward, he leaped up on the canine’s back and tore its mask off. “Show me your true
form!”

In a ooze of black Metaverse liquid, it turned into an Orthrus, the two headed lion creature roaring
in their direction. Stepping up, Queen ran up to it with her knuckle dusters, punching it once before
giving it a roundhouse kick in the face. Holding a hand to his face, Fox called out, “Goemon!” The
kabuki dancer waving his opium pipe. “Bufula!” Encasing the Shadow in ice, it shattered and
dissipated into nothing.

Killing the other security guard, they walked up to a gated elevator. “There are bars here…” Queen
observed, experimentally tugging on the metal gates. “We won’t be able to open the door like
this.”

A red glow caught her eye and Elegant walked up to what seemed to be a keycard reader. “This
looks like a keycard reader. Did we pick up anything like that?”

Joker shook his head. “It’s probably on another enemy nearby. Let’s keep moving for now.”

Smashing a piggy bank in the corner, they backtracked and killed another Shadow out on the
balcony. Walking to the end of the corridor, they noticed it was the same metal shutters they
encountered earlier. Joker smashed his fist against the button on the side and with a rumble, they
retracted into the ceiling, leaving them with a shortcut.

Turning back, he smashed another piggy bank before jumping back in shock as a large red gem
appeared, floating away. “Get it, Joker!” Mona yelled, and the phantom thieves leader quickly
catched up to it, swiping it with his dagger.

In a splash of black, the gem receded and turned into an ostentatious necklace, the same LED alien
like being floating out of it. Queen stared at it with wide eyes, readying her fists. “What is that?!”

“It’s a special Shadow!” Panther informed her from the back with Mona. “Knock it down for
Joker!”

An idea coming to her, Elegant took her brand new Barrett M99 out and got into position, aiming it
at the Shadow. Pulling the trigger, the much stronger bullet damaged it enough that it floated to the
ground in a slump, and they rushed up to surround it.

It chuckled. “To think you would coerce me into giving in...How brilliant. My name is Queen’s
Necklace...My existence shall become a new part of you.” In a flash of blue, it morphed into a
replica of Joker’s mask and flew to him, merging with his soul. He grinned at the new power,
knowing that he can use it to fuse support based magics to other Personas.

“Interesting…” Queen remarked quietly, eyeing the sniper rifle with respect and strategies formed
in her head.

Turning back into the hallway, they noticed a blocked off door and looked around for another way
in. Tilting his head up, Fox pointed to a ventilation shaft in the wall. “We can go in through there!”

Jumping up to the vent, they crawled through the small passageway. Panther groaned. “I hope
there aren’t any spiders in here...Gross…”

“We need to lay low,” Queen reminded quietly. “Let’s push through our fears and continue
onward.”

Crawling to the other side, Joker eyed the lone security guard that was standing in what seemed to
be a surveillance room. Jumping out of the vent, he landed on its back and tore its mask off. “I’ll reveal your true form!”

It jerked before transforming into four Orobas, the green maned horses standing on two legs intimidatingly. “Elegant, you’re up!” Joker smirked, letting the noblewoman step up with a bow.

Smiling serenely, she caressed her mask. “Jeanne!” The blindingly bright lady appeared, staff raised. Kissing the tips of her fingers, Elegant snapped them, sending beams of white light into the enemies. They disintegrated with a cry, leaving the room empty of any Shadows.

“Nice job, Elegant!” Mona cheered as they let their weapons disappear.

“Phew…” Queen breathed out. “We somehow managed. Being a phantom thief is a lot easier yet harder than I assumed.” She looked around, noting the monitors and locked door. “This appears to be some kind of monitoring room. I hope we can find clues in here…”

Walking up to the computers, Skull looked down at the table and blinked, picking an item up. “Hey guys, I think I found something!” He showed it to the others. “Ain’t this some kinda keycard?”

Fox turned around, spotting something on the wall and tearing it off. “And over here is a map. As expected, there seems to be quite a large basement floor.”

The group gathered around it, examining the piece of paper. Mona crossed his paws. “I’d bet that’s where the Treasure is…”

“However,” Fox interjected, “Only a portion of it is depicted here. Unless we can obtain another map, we won’t know for certain.”

Joker idly fixed his gloves. “Isn’t that how it usually is? We always have to find two maps.”

Mona nodded, tracing the hallways with a paw. “Exactly. A cursory glance shows this building alone has one underground level. It would probably make sense to head there first…”

“There’s probably several floors below it,” Elegant hypothesized. “Most banks have their vaults extending down several basements for better security. We’re only in the building proper, but the disc that it flies on is also part of the Palace.”

Folding the map, Fox handed it over to Joker. “Shall we go on that elevator we found earlier then?”

Queen shook her head. “That should be our last resort. First, let’s see if there is anywhere to use this keycard.”

“Oh!” Panther perked up. “Didn’t we pass by a door we couldn’t open on the way here?”

“Yeah!” Mona nodded. “Let’s go check it out!”

Taking the keycard from Skull, Joker inserted it into the reader next to the door. The screen flashed approved and the gates slid back to the sides, leaving the door unbarred.

“All right!” Skull grinned. “It’s open!”

Running back down the corridor to the first blocked door they found, Joker slid the keycard into the reader and the gates opened here as well. As soon as he opened the door, a rumbling occurred.
underneath their feet and they looked out to see a steel wire coiling up inside the dark room.

“Is that…” Queen furrowed her brow. “An elevator?”

“Yeah,” Mona confirmed. “It has to be the one they’re controlling externally. So this is right above it…”

“So, what…” Skull scratched the back of his head. “This is the control room or something? What’s the point of comin’ here?”

Elegant rolled her eyes. “I thought you told me you watched Mission Impossible? Look.” She pointed to the grate that separated the floor from the elevator. “There’s an open space right there…” She hinted.

“Meaning we can ride the top of the elevator down,” Joker affirmed.

Mona purred. “Perceptive as usual, Joker. We should be able to ride on top of the elevator.”

“I see.” Fox nodded in approval. “We sneak atop it, then wait for it to move on its own.”

“It does sound like that plan will take us further down.” Queen added.

“All right!” Mona smiled. “Let’s get on there!”

Running on the grate, they jumped down the open slot and onto the top of the elevator. With a rumble, it descended into the basement level and they balance themselves on their knees and hands. Once it stopped, they crawled through a ventilation shaft onto a few ceiling beams, overlooking an empty reception area.

They jumped down to the floor, warily eyeing their surroundings for any enemies. “So, is this the basement?” Skull asked quietly.

“ALL SECURITY, LISTEN UP!”

They looked up at the ceiling, the voice echoing around them from the intercom system that was installed within the walls. Queen snarled and held her fists up. “Is that Kaneshiro..?!?”

“It looks like some rats have infested this place! Under no circumstances let them further down! Strengthen security as much as you can! Understood?”

Fox hmphed. “It seems painfully obvious where the Treasure is now…”

“But the map from earlier doesn’t show that much…” Panther reminded glumly. “We need to find the second half to make sure.”

“In any case…” Mona rested his paws on his hips. “Heading down should be the best move. Let’s keep our eyes out for a map while we explore!”

Running out into the hallway, they headed right, noticing a door that wavered. “A safe room!” Elegant smiled, opening the door.

It appeared as a small office with a meeting desk in the middle of the area. Several roller chairs were pulled up as they took a seat, taking a break with a sigh. The MetaNav on their phones updated with the discovery of a new Safe Room, informing them that they could teleport here from the entrance.
“Hm.” Fox laced his hands on his lap. “Riding on the top of an elevator... We are truly acting as full-blown thieves now.”

Skull scrunched up his face. “Whoa, hold up. The real thief here’s that asshat Kaneshiro.”

Elegant huffed, crossing her legs and leaning back in her chair. “We’re phantom thieves stealing from a thief.”

Panther laughed. “It’s a little ironic, right? Then again, you really don’t get to experience things like this very often.”

Mona stood up on the table. “Either way, we’re still at the start. You’ll wear yourselves out if you let everything surprise you.”

Joker rested his hands in his pockets. “How are you guys feeling?”

Queen smiled, flexing a hand. “I believe we all have more than enough energy to spare.”

He nodded, jerking his head to the door. “Let’s keep going then. Time doesn’t pass like it does in the real world, but we shouldn’t take too long, either.”

Leaving the Safe Room, they walked past the elevator and was about to turn the corner when Mona pointed out the security cameras littering the hall, red lasers pointing to the carpeted floor. “Wait, that’s...!”

Queen observed them with a hum. “A security camera... They’ll probably tighten their guard if we show up on there...”

Elegant turned to her leader. “Can you see their range?”

He nodded, using his third eye ability to detect the spots it recorded. “We’ll do a zig zag pattern. Follow me.” He ran forward, dodging left before hugging the right wall, just barely avoiding the view of the second camera. Making past it, a metal panel at the end of the hall caught his eye. ‘...What is that?’

Noticing he stopped, Queen turned to him. “What’s wrong, Joker?”

He walked up to the panel, examining the bolts and plating. It seemed to be a power supply box...

"The word 'camera' is written on it...” Queen observed before her eyes brightened. “Is this for the surveillance cameras?”

Feeling a little mischievous, Joker raised a leg and smashed his heel into the box, breaking it easily.

“Nice kick!” Mona praised.

They turned around, noticing the cameras shut off one by one. “Ohhh.” Skull grinned. “I get it! We can break this shit to kill the cameras!”

Filing that information away, they opened the door and immediately ambushed the lone Shadow, killing it. There was another power supply box, which Skull immediately destroyed.

Elegant exhaled, looking around the area. “That probably turned off some cameras... somewhere.”

Killing a few more security guards, they entered a room that held a treasure chest as well as
another panel. Taking whatever was in the chest, Joker broke this panel as well. It was really satisfying to vandalize things.

Panther coiled her whip. “I think that must’ve turned off a few more cameras!”

Leaving the room, they headed up a flight of stairs that had disabled cameras, and they made it through safely without detection.

Skull whooped in joy. “That went perfectly!”

Running down the next set of stairs, they ambushed a Shadow before opening a door. In the middle of the barren room were three sacks of cash, three cameras trained on them. “Be careful!” Queen whispered from behind him. “They’re guarded by security cameras.”

Leaving it for later, they ran down the hallway, ending up at a gate that locked off the Safe Room from them. Noticing a keycard reader on the wall, Joker took the one they swiped and inserted it, watching the screen flash green. The gate receded into the wall, leaving them with a shortcut.

Ignoring the Safe Room since they didn’t need it, they opened the nearby door that led into another small hallway, most of it blocked off by another gate. Throwing a door open, Joker smashed the supply box, cutting off electricity to that small room.

Running back, they grabbed the treasures now that there was no threat of being discovered. Dashing back down the corridor, they ran up the short flight of stairs to another blocked off doorway, a keycard reader next to it. Sliding the card in, the screen approved his authorization and rescinded the gates, the doors opening to show they were back in the lobby.

“This is part of the first floor…” Queen marveled.

Fox hummed with satisfaction. “There is no longer any need for us to wait on top of an elevator to make it move now.”

Turning back down, they opened the other door which lead into a giant open hall. Looking around, Skull sputtered. “Whoa, what is this..?”

“It is an exceedingly spacious room…” Fox remarked.

Rummaging through Joker’s pocket, Mona checked the map. “According to the map, we should be able to head down from here.”

Panther bit her lip. “But nothing beyond this floor is on our map, right?”

He nodded. “Yeah. We’ll need to find another one soon…”

“Why don’t we focus on finding a way downstairs?” Queen suggested.

Elegant nodded in agreement, eyeing the room and focusing on the multiple security cameras. “It’s going to be hard…I don’t think we can get through here. We’ll have to go on a detour.”

Nodding in confirmation, Joker ran across the hall to the other side before jumping down the pipes to another floor. Ambushing the Shadow, they opened a treasure chest before turning the corner, stopping when they came face to face with a giant stainless steel vault door, reaching from the floor to the ceiling with several locking mechanisms.

Skull let out a low whistle. “Is this some kinda vault..?”
Queen checked their map. “According to the map, there’s a great deal more beyond here…”

“Then this is not a vault, but a partition of sorts,” Fox theorized. “The terminals there must be how you open it.” He gestured to the two machines that occupied the sides of the vault.

“B-But both of them have keyholes,” Panther reminded hesitantly.

Elegant idly grasped her arm. “Meaning we have two keys to find.”

Joker exhaled. “Probably some sort of special enemy, like always.”

Skull groaned. “For real..? Ugh, it’s a pain in the ass how secure this place is.”

Joker gave him a cursory glance. “It must lead further down into the disc.”

Panther nodded in agreement. “That must be where the Treasure is!”

The leader jerked his head toward the next flight of stairs. “Let’s go find those keys.”

Running up the steps, they opened another door, finding a treasure chest as well as two doors. Taking the treasure for themselves, they entered the room that wasn’t locked off and jumped onto a bookcase, crawling through a vent into the room adjacent. Jumping down to the floor, they opened yet another treasure chest before Joker smashed his heel into the two panels that were screwed into the wall, disabling the cameras in the large hall.

Now that the way was clear, they made their way back to the large hall, almost bypassing a gated doorway if Mona’s ears didn’t twitch. “Hm..? I hear voices! Hide!”

Ducking behind the doorway, they peered into the room where two security guards decked out in golden gear conversed with each other. “Hey, did you hear? It sounds like those intruders are wreaking havoc in here.”

“What’s wrong? Are you nervous? Don’t be. We have the keys they need, so things should be OK as long as we protect them.”

Hearing that, the thieves turned to each other, grins slowly spreading on their faces. “You think they’re talkin’ about those two keys we need?!” Skull whispered excitedly.

Fox nodded. “It’s highly likely those are the way by which the partition opens.”

“What’re we gonna do then?” The pirate asked as he rolled his shoulder. “Beat ‘em up and take the keys?”

Mona shook his head. “Didn’t you see those two? They’re obviously not ordinary Shadows. Anyone who’s been entrusted with a key that important would have to be extremely strong.”

“And there’s two of them,” Panther added. “It would be tough dealing with both. Plus they could sound the alarm…”

Elegant idly grasped her arm. “…if we shouldn’t fight both at the same time, we need to find a way to divide and conquer. Is there any way we could separate them?”

“Do you remember that monitoring room upstairs?” Queen asked. “The room we acquired our map from. There was some communication equipment there as well. We can use that to lure one away.”

Joker raised a brow, impressed by their quick thinking. The team’s nobility and royalty seemed to
work together quite well. “That’s a great idea.”

Panther smiled. “I agree. It sounds safer than fighting them at the same time!”

Mona purred. “OK, let’s leave this part to our intellectual!”

Queen smiled bashfully. “Thank you! First up, we need to head to the monitoring room!”

Since they opened the door leading into the lobby, they ran all the way there, dashing up the stairs and into the monitoring room. Queen walked up to the controls. “OK, I’ll give it a try. Are we ready?”

Everyone nodded and she cleared her throat. “OK, stay quiet during this…” She slammed her hand on the intercom button. “Come in, security room!” She yelled out. “This is the monitoring room! We’ve been ambushed by intruders! Requesting backup immediately! One person would be perfect!”

“Roger that! We’ll send someone your way at once!”

Lifting her hand from the intercom, she turned back to the team. “And there we go! All we need to do now is wait for the enemy.”

Joker nodded. “Let’s hide so we can ambush it.” Jumping up on the bookcases and shelves, they anticipated the incoming Shadow.

The doors banged open and one of the golden security guards stepped in, the doors closing behind it. “Hm?! There’s no one here..?”

“Not exactly,” Skull replied as he jumped down, spiked bat in hand.

The enemy quickly turned around and lifted his red taser baton. “Hm?! You’re…” It sputtered. “This was a trap?! You bastards!” Limbs twitching, it transformed into a Fuu-ki, its blue figure towering over them. It raised a golden double edged blade, matching its four tiny golden horns on its head and its white kimono jumpsuit.

Running forward, Joker slashed it a couple times with his dagger before back flipping, doing a little damage. “Goemon!” Fox called out, holding a hand to his mask. Raising its opium pipe, Goemon did a Rising Slash, cutting up the Shadow at the cost of his health.

With a roar, the Fuu-ki twirled its blade before jabbing it straight down into the ground, using a Magaru on them. They winced in pain, Skull screaming as he was knocked to the floor. Taking the opportunity, it used Garula on the pirate, the harsh winds ripping up his outfit and his face. He gritted his teeth as he was barely able to stay conscious, trying to stay upright on the floor.

Clapping her hands together, Elegant prayed. “Mediarama!” Golden light glittered around the party, healing them. Once she had finished that, she rushed forward with her scythe, pirouetting on the tip of her boots as she let the tip of her blade sink into its flesh.

It cried out in pain as it disintegrated, leaving behind ¥3250 as well as the Right Key. Putting his dagger away, Joker picked them up and pocketed it. Mona purred as he healed the rest of the party with another Mediarama, green sparkles dissolving on their wounds. “Ooh, he had a key!”

Skull grinned, rolling his shoulder as his cuts faded away, his leather jacket knitting back together as if time rewound. “Guess that went pretty well, huh?” He leaned down to pat the feline on his head. “Thanks, man.”
Automatically purring, Mona shook off the touch. “Don’t patronize me!” He pouted.

Ignoring them, Queen stepped toward the door. “That means there should only be one Shadow in the security room! Let’s snatch the other key from it while we can!”

Running back to the large and empty hall down below, they peered behind the corner at the lone gold security guard. “Why isn’t he coming back?! Could something have happened..?”

Twirling his dagger, Joker ran up to it, the others following him in. The Shadow turned to them in surprise. “Hm? Who are you?!”

“Give us the other key!” Panther shouted, cracking her whip.

“What?!” It sputtered. “Then that comm earlier...How dare you!” Its limbs twitched and convulse, letting the black Metaverse ooze consume its body to turn into Suu-ki. The large purple demon towered over them with its long black hair.

Clenching her hand near her mask, Queen called out. “Johanna!” The motorcycle sped to her and she jumped onto the seat. “Frei!” Swerving the bike, she sent a blast of nuclear energy at it, knocking it down.

Taking advantage of the opportunity, they ran up to surround it with their firearms, Queen testing her grip on the brand new revolver. Back flipping, Joker initiated the all-out, and the team commenced to obliterate their target. Landing from the attack, Queen straightened up before turning her back to it, eyes glowing red with justice behind her iron mask.

As the body dissipated back into the abyss, it dropped ¥2550 as well as the Left Key. Fox smiled. “Perfect, we’ve now obtained both keys!”

“Oh, one second!” Queen gasped as her eyes caught a familiar paper at the back of the room. She walked up to the bulletin where it was pinned to. “Doesn’t this map have a little more information than ours..?”

Taking it down from the board, Joker nodded as it showed several levels that weren’t shown in the first map.

“Ah, right you are!” Mona beamed. “Well done, Queen!”

Panther peered at it over Joker’s shoulder. “Maybe it can tell us what the bank is like further down.”

Skull rested his thumbs in his pockets. “How’s it look? You see where the Treasure is?”

Jumping up on his leader’s back, Mona examined the paper, tracing the path with his paw. “Well, the most suspicious area would be the deepest part...Look here.” He tapped the map. “There’s an elevator that leads down. The Treasure must be past there.”

Fox crossed his arms. “This map seems to indicate that the area beyond the partition is rather large as well…”

“Which means it’ll get more dangerous the closer we get to it,” Elegant concluded. “Is everyone healed up and good to go?”

Skull pointed to a cut on his face and grinned sheepishly. “Err...Can I get this taken care of?”
Smiling softly, she nodded, taking out an adhesive bandage from her pocket. Applying it to his wound, it melded his skin, healing him back to tip top shape. “How’s that?”

Puffing his cheeks experimentally, he nodded. “Yep! Let’s go then!”

Joker nodded, and they ran out of the room and down the steps to the large vault door. Taking the two keys out, he handed them over to the pirate and dominatrix, letting them insert the keys.

They walked up to the machine and Skull turned to her. “OK...Let’s try turnin’ it all at the same time.”

Panther nodded. “On three! One, two..!”

In sync, they inserted the keys into the keyholes and twisted. With a rumble, the vault door swung open, revealing a glass walkway that led deeper in, money raining down onto the floors.

Fox exhaled. “This took some time, but we managed to force it open.”

Joker smirked at their accomplishment. “Great teamwork, everyone.”

Queen smiled. “Yes, I agree. The cooperation of our whole team is what helped us through this particular ordeal.”

Elegant huffed in amusement. “You saying that reminds me of that one meeting a few months ago when the Principal tried to cancel the school trip.”

Blushing slightly, Queen glanced away. “Well, it was an unfair decision. Only when the entire council banded together did he change his mind. It was a group effort, just like now.”

They stepped onto the walkway, almost slipping from the countless bills that littered the see-through floor. “Dude…” Skull breathed in awe, looking down at the piles of bank notes. “There’s money all over the floor…”

Panther grimaced. “That he blackmailed people for…”

Queen clenched her fists. “...He’s going to pay for this,” She promised darkly. "All this dirty money is soiled with the blood of his victims..."

They walked down the catwalk, noticing that it was above a deep reservoir of money. Opening the door, they turned left down the short flight of stairs to another door, revealing a cramped hallway full of cubicles that overlooked the vault. Noticing there were two security guards patrolling the corridor, they darted behind a partition to hide.

“What, more cameras?” Skull whispered, pointing up to the walls where the monitoring equipment was installed.

Mona shook his head, watching as the light occasionally flickered. “No...These ones seem different from what we’ve seen before...They turn on and off.”

Queen hummed thoughtfully. “It might be a surveillance system that switches between multiple cameras for efficient coverage…”

Elegant knelt on one knee. “We’ll have to time it before running through.”

Mona nodded. “That should work...but there are guards to watch out for too. We should proceed with caution!”
Waiting for the Shadow to approach, they ambushed it quickly before dashing past the camera’s range before it turned back on. Doing the same to the next guard, they finally made it to the end of the hallway and opened the door. Breaking the piggy bank statue in the corner, they crouched down and scooted through a small ventilation opening, walking on the ledge.

Skull peered down at the bottom. “Dude, look at that sea of cash…”

“Some people are truly loaded, as they say…” Fox murmured.

“Don’t take any of it,” Elegant snapped quietly. “Dirty money like that should never be used.”

They used to belong to families; innocent men, women, and children that Kaneshiro heartlessly extorted. Even Makoto's father.

Jumping down to the next ledge, they crouched as security guards looked out the window in their direction. Sneaking to the vent opening, they straightened up and looked to their left where an elevator was. Riding it down, they sneaked through the corridor and ambushed the lone guard dog before opening a treasure chest.

Walking through the open doorway, they paused, hearing a murmuring somewhere. “Huh..?” Panther furrowed her brow as she tried to find the noise. “Do you...hear something coming from below?”

They walked over to the balcony and peered down. The high ceilings showed how massive this hall was, staircases leading several floors down into an open strip of floor.

“Isn’t that Kaneshiro?” Skull pointed out to the rotund man speaking to a security guard at the very bottom of the rotunda. “What’s he doin’ down there?”

Fox tilted his head in an attempt to eavesdrop but to no avail. “It is difficult to hear what he’s saying from where we are now…”

Joker exhaled, eyeing the two stairwell that led downward. “Let’s get closer.”

Running down the steps, they ambushed the patrolling guards and opened the treasure chests before descending down to the bottom level. “We may enter a battle if we get any closer.” Mona whispered. “Are we ready?”

Everyone nodded and they confronted the Palace ruler. “Kaneshiro!” Queen yelled sharply, gaining the attention of both their target and the golden security guard.
Wow thank you so much for 25.3k hits and 702 kudos!!! 702 people have looked at my trash and liked it?? That thought is so weird to me LOL

“Y-You bastards…” Kaneshiro sputtered angrily as he stood in front of another elevator. “How did you get this far?! What about my security?!”

“Sorry.” Skull replied sarcastically. “That shit was a piece of cake for us!”

Fox glanced at him. “…Well, I wouldn’t say it was that simple…”

Elegant shushed him, but inwardly laughed at how honest he was.

Kaneshiro trembled with anger and swerved his head to his employee. “H-Hey, finish off these vermin here! Keep them away from the elevator at all costs!”

Stepping forward, the security guard twitched and convulsed, melting into a Sui-ki, Fuu-ki, and a Kin-ki. The Kin-ki stood intimidatingly in its golden armor, red eyes staring down at them.

Heart pumping from the opposition, Joker took out his dagger. “Skull! Queen! Mona! With me!” They stepped forward, leaving Elegant, Panther, and Fox to observe from the back, ready to step in at any moment.

Clenching a hand to her mask, Queen yelled out. “Johanna!” The motorcycle rumbled beneath her, and she sent blasts of nuclear energy at their enemies, knocking the Sui-ki down. Taking the opportunity, Skull stepped forward. “Captain Kidd! Mazio!” Three bolts of lightning shot down, knocking down the Fuu-ki.

Now with two enemies down, Joker called out. “Makami! Frei!” Blasting the Sui-ki with another nuclear explosion, it disintegrated with a yell. “Zorro!” Mona called, the rapier wielding bandit appearing at his call. Sending a Lucky Punch, it knocked down the Kin-ki and they rushed up to surround them with firearms.

Back flipping away, Joker initiated the all-out before landing on the floor. Adjusting his gloves, he smirked as they died in a spray of black blood and dropping ¥9600. “The show’s over.”

Panting from the fight, Queen straightened up and looked around the now empty rotunda. “Where is Kaneshiro..?!” She growled, ready to tear apart the Shadow with her bare hands.

Skull gritted his teeth, not seeing the Palace ruler either. “Grr, he took off while we were busy fightin’…”

Stepping closer now that the fight was over, an object on the floor caught Elegant’s eye and she walked over to it, picking it up. “Did he drop this when he escaped?”

Fox peered down at the journal in her hands. “Let us see what lies inside…”
Elegant opened the book, showing one page and several ripped edges. “’R = C = 0, I = 1, H = 2’...” She read, furrowing her brow. “What? Is this some kind of code?”

Queen nodded. “Seems to be. The pages afterward have been torn out as well. Are there more..?”

Skull sighed. “If we’re not gonna figure this shit out now, we should just keep goin’ forward, yeah?”

Mona jumped in the air. “Considering Kaneshiro’s reaction, the elevator in front of us should lead us to the innermost part of the bank. If so, it’ll be the most secure area as well.” He frowned. “Let’s make sure we’re ready for whatever awaits!”

Joker glanced around, perking up when he noticed a door on the opposite end of the hall. “Is that a Safe Room?”

They dashed down the vestibule, opening the door to reveal a small but empty office. They all took a seat with a sigh, grateful for a break after that fight. Taking out the medical supply, Elegant did her rounds with everyone, making sure they were all healed up of any cuts or bruises.

Panther sighed as she leaned her elbows on the table. “I’m glad we managed to get past that partition.” She smiled happily. “Still…” Her face fell. “I’m a little disappointed the Treasure wasn’t behind it.”

Mona stood up on the table. “Don’t get hasty, Panther. We can’t expect to find it so quickly.”

Skull nodded in agreement. “Yeah, y’know what people say- haste makes wathe-” He winced. “C- Crap, bit my tongue…” He rolled the appendage in his mouth to ease the pain. “…And that’s like the only old sayin’ I actually know. Dammit…”

Queen sweatdropped. “Um, that’s just a regular proverb. There’s nothing “old” about it.”

Joker huffed in amusement. “If we’re all good, let’s keep going then.”

Standing up, the Phantom Thieves left the Safe Room and headed to the elevator, walking in once the doors slid open. With a start, it descended down into the depths of the Palace. Mona jumped up in shock. “Hey, look!”

Plunging down the tunnel, a bright light shone through the glass walls, showing a spiral pattern of safes, the stainless maximum security steel reflecting the harsh white light shown from above.

Skull sputtered. “Wh-What the hell?! Are these all vaults..?! How messed up is this guy?!”

Elegant winced, the design reminding her of something she read once. “Ah, Uzumaki…”

Fox turned to her in surprise. “You read that one? It was one of Ito Junji’s greatest works. The sheer amount of detail he drew was one of the strong points of that manga.” He turned back to the view and let out a noise of realization. “Ah, the never ending spiral. I see why you mentioned it...”

Joker furrowed his brow at the familiar name. “Isn’t Uzumaki from that one anime?”

Skull snorted. “Nah man, that’s “Naruto” you’re thinkin’ of.”

Queen grimaced. “Uzumaki is a critically acclaimed horror manga written and drawn by Ito Junji.” She explained uncomfortably. “I... found a copy hidden in the school library and lodged a complaint.”
Elegant glanced over at her and realization dawned. “Oh, you *did*, didn’t you? I remember you scream—”

A gloved hand was placed on top of her mouth and Queen glared indignantly, red staining her cheeks under her iron mask. “Don’t say it!”

Elegant smiled behind the hand. It was the beginning of last year after school had finished for the day and they were both assigned to clean up the library. Makoto had screamed bloody murder and dropped the book onto the floor, frantically backing away from it as it was open to a particularly gruesome image. She forgot that the upperclassman was scared of horror themed media.

Panther resisted the urge to shiver. “Horror? Uh...This part of the Palace won’t be like that, right? I don’t want to think about things like that when we have to check every vault...”

Fox shook his head. “No. If it is anything similar to the manga, there is only one place we must check.”

“The center.” Queen concluded, letting her hand drop.

Panther gasped. “For real?!”

Joker shifted his leg. “But that’s only if it’s similar, right?”

Mona slumped. “I hope we get there then...”

Slowing to a stop, the elevator doors slid open, letting them out in the farthest circle of the vaults. To the left and to the right were more steel walls, boxing them in this small section. There was a door that wavered as soon as they looked at it, and they entered yet another Safe Room right next to the elevator, the last if they guessed correctly.

“You think Kaneshiro’s waiting in the center then?” Panther asked as she took a seat.

Elegant nodded. “Probably. It’s the safest location. Remember how the money flew up into a funnel at the bottom of the Palace? This is probably where it all went.”

Queen frowned sharply and raised a clenched hand, knuckles cracking. “I’ll corner him no matter where he tries to hide, and make sure he tastes the fist of justice...!”

Skull gulped nervously and rolled his chair away from her. “Y-Yeah, totally...” He laughed weakly. “You’re real impressive, Queen...”

Mona purred. “Well put, Queen. Let’s keep our spirits high and push onward past this last hurdle!”

Joker smirked at the new dynamics of the team and jerked his head at the door. “Let’s go then.”

Exiting the Safe Room, there was only one thing in this small section that could be interacted with and it was a number key panel. “*The lock is currently engaged. Please enter the requisite PIN.*”

“Pin...?” Skull furrowed his brow. “So is this gonna open the way or...?”

Queen peered at the panel. “Hm, there’s something written above the number pad on here. *RICH*...” She sneered. “This is disgusting. How obsessed can one man be with his money?”

Panther perked up. “Wait, there might be something more than that! Do you think this is connected to that journal...?”
Fox grasped his chin thoughtfully. “Hm, let me think...If I remember correctly, it said $R = C = 0 I = 1 H = 2$."

Taking it out of her pack, Elegant opened the book to show the code. “Yep. Wow Fox, you have quite the memory.” She praised. “It has all the letters to make the word “RICH”...Should we try it out?”

Joker nodded, taking the book from her and entering the code into the keypad. “0102…”

The screen flashed green and the floor beneath them rumbled. Through the see-through glass in the floor, a large key was inserted into a lock, a jump of electricity running through it to power the engine. The wall in front of them shook and rotated, opening a passageway to the next layer of the maze.

“What the?!” Skull yelped. “The whole vault moved!?”

Queen smiled satisfactorily. “This confirms it. The Treasure must be in the center.”

“Money… I need more money…” Kaneshiro’s voice echoed above them nervously. “I must grow richer! As long as I’m rich, anything will be possible…”

“That voice…” Panther gasped as she looked up at where the sound reverberated from. “It’s Kaneshiro! Is he watching us?!”

Mona shook his head. “That doesn’t seem to be the case. It sounds more like the voice of his heart…” He frowned. “I guess all he really thinks about is money, after all.”

Skull grunted. “So he blackmails people outta their savings and that’s still not enough? What a douche…”

Joker frowned. “How greedy…”

Elegant stayed silent. She didn’t want to say it, but she could sympathize. Money meant food, a roof over your head, security. If she was being completely honest, she wanted money as well. But not at the expense of others like this.

Panther shook her head. “Forget that, the message in the journal was the PIN code!”

Fox nodded. “Yes, it seems so...but I doubt it will be that easy from this point forward. The rest of the pages were torn out of the journal. Who knows what clues they may hold…”

Mona hummed, wiggling around. “Well, let’s not get pessimistic. We should look around and try to find some other clues.” He pointed his paw forward. “Time to head further in and find those PINs!”

Walking into the second layer of the labyrinth, all sides were blocked off aside from a stairwell that led further down. Running down the steps, Joker slammed his fist against the lock and with a hiss, the doors open to reveal a sub-level. Taking care of the Shadows, they entered a surveillance office that was empty of any personnel.

Eyeing the large golden piggy bank, Joker walked up to it and tapped its nose. The front opened up to reveal a piece of paper inside, and he took it out, reading the message. “$P = 1$?”

Skull scrunched up his face. “...The hell’s that supposed to mean?”
Queen peered at it in Joker’s hand. “Wait, the edge of it is torn. Maybe it came from Kaneshiro's journal?”

Elegant took it out of her pack, and taking the new page, fitted it in, the edges matching up perfectly with the ripped up binding. “This confirms it. This must be the next part of the code.”

Mona purred. “This should be useful!”

Taking whatever was left inside the room, they exited the office and continued on, ambushing guards along the way. Turning at the corner, they found another giant gold piggy statue tucked away at a small nook.

Like before, Joker pressed the nose and with a hiss, it opened to show another torn page. “E = 9 A = 3.” He passed it over to Elegant so she could add it into the journal.

“We seem to be finding more of these pages.” Fox remarked quietly. “Perhaps this will be enough to unlock the next mechanism.”

Mona nodded. “There’s no doubt about it. The more hints we find, the closer we get to solving the code. Come on, let’s hurry over to the next input machine!”

They turned back from the small hideaway, they made their way up a flight of stairs and to an input machine. “Hm…” Fox hummed thoughtfully. “‘REAP’ is written on this one.”

“Reap?” Panther furrowed her brow. “Isn’t that like, to harvest? Why would he have that as a password..?”

Elegant slowly exhaled. “...Because he’s farming cash from people.” She stated quietly. “People are walking ATMs to him. It’s as simple as picking apples from a tree.”

Fox tightened his jaw. “Kaneshiro is truly rotten to the core…”

Panther pursed her lips. “If this is the same kind of thing as before, the journal should have the answer, right?”

Queen nodded. “Yes, it should be. Elegant?”

The noblewoman took the journal from her pack and handed it over to her leader. Reading the code, he quickly connected the dots and typed it into the keypad. “0931…”

The screen flashed green and the ceiling rumbled, the sound of wheels on tracks grinding through the thick metal. “That sound…” Queen smiled slightly. “It seems like the vault has moved again.”

Skull grinned. “All right, it worked!”

“Tch...This isn’t anywhere near your quota for this month.” Kaneshiro’s voice stated roughly from everywhere and nowhere. “Don’t gimme your excuses. Just go reap every last penny!”

“This voice again…” Fox murmured as he stared up at the ceiling from where the Palace ruler’s voice resonated from.

“I’ll make you understand if you don’t get it...People who can’t earn money are worthless to me!” Panther grimaced. “He’s completely distorted…”

“It looks like he really believes money is more important than human life…” Queen clenched her
fists. “My father's life meant nothing...What a pitiful man.”

“Yeah…” Skull sighed. “Let’s finish this quick. The door’s prolly opened up, so we should head back and check it out.”

Joker nodded and they ran back to the labyrinth of vaults, smiling with relief when they noticed the second layer had moved. “Oooh, it’s open!” Skull pumped his fist.

“This is the second one…” Queen murmured. “I wonder how many more there are…”

Elegant bit her lip. “I think I counted three more layers…”

Once again, the way forward was blocked and the only method of progression laid in yet another set of stairs, extending below. Dodging the cameras, Joker slammed his heel into the electricity panel, disabling the security.

Turning the corner, they smashed the tiny piggy statues before opening the door, showing rows and rows of electric fences. “Uhh…” Joker glanced around, trying to find another way. How would they get past these without alerting the security?

Turning her head, Elegant pointed up at a ledge behind the door they came through. “I think we can go up there?”

Pulling themselves up into the small corridor, they ran up the ramp and crouched down to crawl through a ventilation shaft, coming out on top of a shelving unit. Their footsteps clanged noisily on the grated metal as they jumped across to another one, making it to a locked treasure chest. “Huh? It’s locked…” Mona peered up at his leader. “Joker, you have lockpicks, right?”

He nodded, taking a thin piece of metal from his pocket. Working the lock for a second, he snapped it off and took what was inside.

Jumping to a shelving unit against the wall, they crawled through another vent before landing in a tight hallway. The doors slid open once Joker pressed the button, taking them back into the electrically guarded room as well as a golden piggy statue next to them.

Walking up to it, the leader pressed the nose, gaining a piece of paper in return. “U = A.” He passed it off to Elegant who pieced it inside the journal. “Let’s keep going.”

Running back through the door, they climbed up a flight of stairs and dodging more cameras, smashed the energy panel. Turning the corner, they arrived in a large room with a small inlet that housed a giant golden piggy statue. They cautiously walked up to it, glancing around in case any enemies showed up. Taking the piece of paper from within, the leader handed it off to the noblewoman.

“Aw yeah, another note.” Skull whooped. “If I’m readin’ it right, it says “G = P.””

“OK,” Panther grinned. “We have one more hint than before. Let’s keep it up!”

Turning around to continue onward, two security dogs spontaneously spawned within the room and they scrambled to hide in the shadows. Sneaking up on them, they took care of the enemy with little to no effort.

Fox dusted off his clothes. “Ha, they were nothing.”

Now that there were no other dangers around, they ran down the hallway, stopping once they
noticed another PIN machine. “Hey, it’s another one of them input things.” Skull stated, squinting his eyes at the sign. “This time the word’s, uh…”HUGE”?"

Panther nodded. “That’s right. I’m surprised you can even read that.”

He pouted. “Hey, I scored average in the midterms!”

She grinned, showing him she meant it lightheartedly. “I’m just kidding. I’m kind of proud that you learned even a little from those study sessions!”

Blushing slightly, he scratched his cheek and looked away. “Whatevs…”

Narrowing his eyes at the pirate, Mona turned away and focused on the machine. “So we’ll need to transpose this one into numbers too. I hope we can do it with the hints we have…”

Elegant wordlessly handed the journal over, and Joker worked out the code. “2319.”

The screen flashed green and the ceiling rumbled. “Great,” Panther beamed. “It looks like the vault opened up even more now.”

Mona purred. “Well then, we should-"

“This isn’t enough…” Kaneshiro whimpered. “I need to have a huge presence! I’m done having other people walk all over me…It’s my turn now…”

Fox resisted the urge to scowl. “He is beyond redemption…It seems he cares not for those he tramples upon himself.”

Elegant shook her head in disappointment. “There’s no excuse for his actions…”

Queen nodded in agreement. “Every step we take just keeps strengthening my resolve. Let’s push onward.”

Arriving back at the vault, they saw the next layer had opened up. “Check it out!” Skull grinned. “This one’s open for us now too!”

Queen narrowed her eyes. “It seems we were correct. This entire vault is a cylinder lock.”

Panther turned to her in confusion. “What do you mean? C-Could you explain that a bit more..?”

The biker straightened up. “Every vault we open is on the same path, meaning if you use the correct key and all the discs align, the lock opens.”

“Which is at the center of the spiral.” Elegant concluded. “Just like in Uzumaki.”

Mona wiggled around. “So you’re saying the whole floor is just one giant lock..?”

Queen nodded. “That’s right. All the smaller vaults in here aren’t important. The Treasure must be in an area further at the center, locked away by the room itself. It wouldn’t be on this floor.”

“Then we should hurry it up.” Joker smirked, invigorated now that the end was coming closer.

Walking through the opening, they paused when they noticed a golden security guard to their left, standing there stoically. Skull tched. “Another one of these jerks?! What’s it doin’ here?!”

Queen tilted her head, eyes locking on a certain mechanism. “Look, behind it!”
Fox narrowed his eyes. “Another button device...The Shadow must be protecting it…”

“It looks like we’ll have to take it down to move on…” Mona theorized sternly. “Are you all ready?”

A smirk grew on his lips and Joker nodded. “Hell yeah I am.”

Running out from behind the disc, they confronted the Shadow. It hmphed. “You guys must be the rats we’ve been hearing about...Well, Kaneshiro-sama ordered me to absolutely not let anyone past this point. Accept your death!” Convulsing, it turned into two Oni as well as a Take-Minakata, the armless demonic being kneeling down impassively.

‘Oni, huh…’ Joker pursed his lips as he readied his dagger. “Fox! Elegant! Mona! With me!” The thieves stepped forward, leaving Queen, Skull, and Panther to stand as backup.

Holding a hand to his mask, Joker called out, “Shiki-Ouji!” The origami warrior stood silently behind him. “Mapsio!” Reality warped around the Shadows as they were attacked with psychic waves, and the Take-Minakata fell to the ground in a slump.

Taking the opportunity, he sent yet another Psio at it, scrambling its mind. Rushing forward, Elegant pirouetted with her scythe, the curved edge of her blade sinking deep into the downed Shadow.

“Allow me!” Fox yelled as he too unsheathed his katana, slashing it several times until it disappeared with a cry. An Oni stepped up and twirled its blade, sending a Giant Slice at Fox. He grunted, a tear appearing in the front of his jumpsuit, but he was able to ignore it for the time being.

Mona stepped up with a determined pout. “Zorro!” The gentleman bandit appeared, mustache twitching. Raising a paw, he sent a Lucky Punch and knocked an Oni down. Using the extra time, he sent another to the other Shadow.

Now all the enemies were on the floor and they rushed up with their firearms. Gesturing with his gun, Joker initiated the all-out, destroying the two Oni. Landing from the attack, Mona sat back with a triumphant grin. “Mission accomplished!”

Now that there weren’t any Shadows, they relaxed and let their weapons fade away. Grunting, Fox knelt down on one knee as his wound tore open, red blood in tiny droplets hitting the tiled floor.

Elegant rushed to his side in a second. “Fox!” Clapping her hands together, she closed her eyes and concentrated. Jeanne appeared behind her for a split second, barely raising her staff as her arms were shackled to send a wave of golden healing energy over the samurai.

His wounds knitted up and he let out a content sigh. “Thank you. I…” He furrowed his brow. “Having experienced healing magic from Mona as well as Queen, I find that yours has a warmth to it...Akin to basking in the sun’s rays.”

She blinked as the magic faded, Jeanne returning to her soul. “Really? Huh...That’s interesting to note.” Straightening up from her crouch, she held out a hand to her pseudo brother and helped him stand. Maybe she should research that when she wasn't half exhausted out of her mind…

The thieves walked up to the machine but blinked when they noticed there was no keypad, only two arrow buttons. “Huh…” Skull tilted his head. “This one doesn’t have a password or anything…”
Panther crossed her arms. “I guess that’s why the Shadow was protecting it?”

Queen examined the machine. “Hm, it doesn’t seem to require any keys, but there are buttons on the left and right of the box…”

Mona hummed. “There must be a reason that thing was guarding it. Let’s try and figure out why.”

Joker pressed the right button and with a rumble, the next disc rotated until an opening showed, stopping behind them. They walked through the gap but it led to nowhere, no other machine nor pathways.

Furrowing their brows, they walked back to the machine and pressed the left button now. The opening rotated next to them and they walked through. To their delight, they found another machine situated on their left and they walked up to it. Like the previous one, it only had two buttons, and Joker pressed one of them. The fifth disc rotated and stopped, but the opening wasn’t in this area.

“Oh.” Elegant blinked when realization dawned on her. “We probably have to move back to the previous one and rotate the fourth layer to line it up.”

Joker nodded and they walked back to the previous machine, pressing the right button. The fourth vault rotated, aligning with the path.

They were finally at the second to last layer and the group of thieves descended down the staircase to the right, opening the door. A security guard walked into the room and they ambushed it, along with another security dog. Opening a nearby treasure chest, they avoided the cameras and Joker smashed his heel into the panel at the end of the hallway, breaking it with a vicious grin.

Running down the stairs, they ambushed yet another Shadow. Convulsing, it turned into a Take-Minakata, the armless demon kneeling down on the floor with one knee. Already knowing how to deal with this one, Joker held a hand to his mask. “Shiki-Ouji!” The origami warrior stood silently behind him. Using a Psio, he sent a wave of psychic energy at it, warping its mind and knocking it down. Surrounding it with their firearms, they all attacked together.

Running down the hallway, they arrived at an open room filled with shelving units, stacked full with bundles of cold hard cash. They sneaked through the room, taking care of the enemies without sounding the alarm. Leaving the storage, they opened a door with a keycard, dashing down the corridor and avoiding more cameras.

Killing another Shadow, they walked into a small open room that housed a gold piggy statue. Pressing the nose, Joker received a torn piece of paper in return. “0 + H = 10.” He raised a brow.

Mona scrunched up his face. “So now we’re getting into calculations...Good grief.”

Giving the paper over to Elegant, they continued down the hall, avoiding the cameras. Smashing his heel into a panel, Joker disabled the monitoring equipment before turning to what they hoped was the last giant gold piggy statue. He pressed its nose and it released the final piece of paper of the journal. “L= U + G, D = G…” He read before handing it over to Elegant. “It’s like algebra now.”

Panther messed with a ponytail. “Ugh, I hate algebra! I’m getting confused…”

Mona sweatdropped. “Panther...This is really just simple addition…”

Running back, they turned a corner to find a PIN Machine, the wall to their left overlooking out
into the storage with a one way mirror. Walking up to it, Elegant handed Joker the now complete journal and he stared at it. He hated math too...

Quickly doing the calculations, he entered in the pin. “1841.” The ceiling rumbled, indicating the last disc had rotated.

“Aw yeah!” Skull pumped his fist. “We got it right again!”

A maniacal laughter rang out overhead. “This gold sheen…”

Fox frowned in irritation. “Again?”

“This...This is the fruit of all my hard labor!”

Skull scoffed. “He thinks robbin’ people is something to celebrate? That guy needs to get his brain checked…”

“With this much, I will be invincible! Omnipotent! I’ve changed...I’m no longer the person I used to be…”

Panther blinked. “The person he used to be..? What could have happened to make him so distorted..?”

Elegant idly grasped her arm and frowned. “It sounds like something bad happened…”

Mona rested his paws on his hips. “I don’t know, but no matter what kind of past he had, his actions are unforgivable.”

Queen nodded in agreement, cold fury lit up behind her mask. “That’s right. Whoever he may be doesn't matter in the face of what he has done to people, including my father. I won't stop until I've taken his Treasure and brought him to justice.” She let out a sharp breath. "Now, if my deductions are accurate, that should’ve been the final mechanism.”

Joker nodded in understanding. “Got it. Let’s head back to check.”

Returning back to the vaults, the last disc has indeed rotated, leaving a path open from the Safe Room to the center of the spiral. An elevator had appeared, its walls and foundation completely made out of bank notes.

Skull took a step back in shock. “H-Hey, this is an elevator, yeah? So a way down really did show up…You guys are like some kinda prophet…”

Queen smiled slightly. “It’s mostly thanks to that notebook, as well as Elegant’s mention of Uzumaki. We wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for that. More importantly, remember all those things Shadow Kaneshiro was saying?”

Panther perked up. “Oh yeah, I was wondering about that! Didn’t he seem kinda...insecure or something?”

Queen nodded. “Exactly. He kept bringing up how rich and powerful he wants to be.”

“So if he’s insecure about that shit…” Skull began. “He thinks he’s really just some poor weakling, huh?”

Elegant adjusted her stance. “Well, being in the mafia, you have to climb the ranks for any power.” She explained quietly. “From how it sounded, he might’ve been someone who was bullied around
and fought his way to where he is now.” Not that it was a particularly high position. If he was a high ranking mobster, he wouldn’t be in charge of extorting teenagers. But even something as crude as this was too organized for a regular mafia. Was it actually yakuza?

“Maybe by thinking he was going to be a strong, wealthy man, he convinced himself it was true.” Queen theorized. "But we know the real truth, and that he's nothing but a pathetic fly to be squashed."

“I wonder…” Fox murmured. “Well, we will discover the truth for ourselves when we change his heart.” He turned to his leader. “Let us hurry, Joker.”

Joker nodded and they entered the elevator. The only option was to go down and the lift descended into the deepest pit of the Palace. The doors slid open and they ran out into the dark cellar of safes, money flying in the air as it was suctioned up from the streets of Shibuya. The only light that shined was a formless ball that floated in the middle of the room.

Mona brightened. “Found it. It’s right here..!”

Queen furrowed her brow, her eyes darting around the room. “I don’t see anything.”

Elegant pointed to the ball of light. “That’s where the Treasure will be.”

Skull flexed his hands. “From here on we’re gonna need this callin’ card thing.”

Queen’s eyes widened with realization. “A calling card...I see…” She grasped her chin thoughtfully. “Making the target believe the Treasure is in danger will cause it to materialize. That’s quite a bold trick.”

Taken aback by her quick thought process, Panther pouted. “Huh? She understood?”

Joker slid his eyes to her. “She probably saw our calling card for Kamoshida and connected the dots.”

Fox inclined his head. “Joker, we’ll defer to you regarding its timing.”

Mona bounced around. “OK guys, let’s get ready for the heist!” He stated firmly.

They headed back into the elevator, riding it back to the spiral of vaults. Panther turned to the biker. “The next time we enter that Treasure room will be after we send out the calling card.”

Skull pursed his lips. “In the end, that Kaneshiro bastard only showed his stupid face once…”

Elegant tilted her head. “Even in his heart, he’d rather run and hide…” She shook her head. “We’ll change that and make him face the truth of his actions.”

Queen straightened up. “Then let’s act as the Phantom Thieves should and send the calling card. It’s on you, Joker.”

He slowly exhaled. They could hold off on it. They had more than two weeks before the deadline, after all. He pursed his lips. But waiting was too risky, especially with a mafia under his command. “Let’s send it tomorrow.”

Everyone nodded in agreement and they ran back to the Safe Room at the outer rim, transporting back to the entrance of the Palace. Hitting the app once more, they traversed through the barrier between meta and physical, returning to Shibuya station.
“Now returning to the real world from Kaneshiro’s Palace.” The app informed. “Thank you for your hard work.”

Makoto raised a brow. “This app is even more mysterious than I thought…”

Airi smiled slightly even as she yawned, fighting to keep her eyes open. She was energized within the Palace, but now after several days of little to no sleep and a full infiltration, she wanted to drop to the floor. “You stop questioning after a while, though that might be a bad thing…”

Morgana purred as he sat on the railing, akin to a regular cat. “We finally secured our route to the Treasure! All we need to do now is send the calling card.”

Yusuke smiled as he leaned against the metal bars. “Indeed…We have finished the pre-arrangements, and now we shall face the true test. Let us ensure we succeed after having come so far.”

Ann yawned as she stretched her arms in the air. “We have school tomorrow, so let’s go home…” She rubbed her eye. “See you guys…”

Slinging his bag over his shoulder, Ryuji stepped beside her. “I’ll walk ya. I gotta get home too. Ma’s cookin’ tonight!” He grinned excitedly before taking her hand and tugging her down the station, ignoring her protests.

Airi watched all this with a giddy smile, the scene wiping her exhaustion a bit. “Is it happening..?”

Akira gave her a weird look as he adjusted his glasses. She was talking about the blonds’ closeness, right? “Are you…doing that thing again?”

She slowly blinked, not understanding what he was implying. “What thing?”

“You know…” He trailed off awkwardly before shaking his head. That shipping thing on the internet was so weird. “Never mind. It’s getting late and we’re all tired. Let’s go home.” He turned to the upperclassman. “Makoto, do you want us to walk you back?”

Observing them for a moment, she shook her head. “It’s all right. It’s only the second day. He wouldn’t put much effort, though I’ve started receiving text messages from him asking about the money.” She scowled. “I can’t wait to take his Treasure…” Inclining her head, she walked away, going home for the night.

Morgana jumped into Akira’s bag and the four walked over to their line, taking the train back to Yongenjaya.

Almost stumbling at the last step of the escalator, Airi gripped onto Akira’s sleeve. “Sorry…” She covered her mouth as she yawned. All those sleepless nights were taking a toll on her. “I’m so tired…”

He chuckled quietly, letting her lean on him. “You could say that again.”

“I’m so tired…” She repeated without thinking as she fought to keep her eyes open, even as they stayed closed for longer and longer.

Looking down at her with fond amusement, Yusuke grasped her shoulders to keep her upright. “I will take her home. Good night, Akira, Morgana.” He escorted her down the road back to their house, leaving Akira to head back inside the cafe.
Drowsily taking her shoes off, Airi turned around to make sure the door was locked once, twice, four times. It was becoming a habit and that was frightening in itself. She stumbled to the living room where she collapsed on the couch. “Yusuke…” She mumbled tiredly. “I don’t want to cook…”

Lips quirking, he took a seat on the other chaise. “Understandable. You must be tired from healing us constantly. I am exhausted as well…” He hummed thoughtfully. “Would any of the restaurants nearby be appropriate to your tastes? I believe we passed by one establishment that boasted international cuisines.”

She moaned in appreciation at his thoughtfulness. “Yes!…Can you order me a lamb gyro? They do delivery…”

He stood up. “No need. It’s only a short distance away…” He glanced down at her worriedly. “Will you be all right by yourself for a few moments? I could request Akira to keep you company…”

She slowly blinked up at him, trying to keep her eyes open. “I’m OK…”

Regarding her for a moment, he nodded before heading to the foyer, putting on his shoes before heading out of the house, closing the door behind him.

She closed her eyes, her fatigue getting the better of her. She was alone now. In the span of now until he got back, anything could happen. The silence continued and she slowly relaxed, about to fall asleep.

“Do you understand yet? I want to reunite you…”

Her eyes snapped open and she shot up from the couch, hastily looking around as her pulse skyrocketed. Her chest was about to explode from how fast her heart was beating. Where did that come from? Where was he? What the fuck did he want?!

Her pupils shrunk with fear the longer she continued to panic and her breath shortened as a result. Calm down, calm down…

The sound of paper smacking against wood came from her left and she quickly turned her head around. A manila envelope was thrown onto the floor through the window, the glass left slightly ajar. Did she leave that open or did he jimmy the lock?

Slowly standing up, she hesitantly walked over, picking up the weighted envelope. Straightening up, she quickly slammed the window closed and locked it before drawing the curtains closed, just in case. Even if he could get in, this brought her a slightly calmer mind.

Sitting back down on the couch, she slowly unwrapped the twine that kept the envelope sealed and she peered inside. More photos.

Pink hair walked down the backstreets with blue hair. A class president scolded a delinquent at Shibuya station. A Japanese girl laughed with a half foreigner at the crepe store. A beginner gently consoled an expert martial artist in the school hallway. An enamoured teenager cuddled the black and white feline near the Ginza line.

Each and every one of these photos were of her and her friends. Her family. He knew. He had been following her, even before she knew he was out. He knew the faces of each and every one of her
most precious people.

Her hands shaking now, she quickly placed them down on the table before sliding out the next pile.

Her heart broke.

Rose hair with ebony hair. A class president and the transfer student. A florist and a customer. A pretty girl and a handsome boy. Every one of these had only her and Akira in the frame, focusing mostly on the phantom thieves leader. The lens had zoomed into his face, capturing his smiles, his frowns, his deadly smirks.

She let them fall to the ground, impaling the rug as she listlessly leaned back against the couch, staring blankly up at the light fixture. He was sending her a message. If she didn’t comply with whatever sick game he was playing with her, he would threaten her friends, he would threaten her family. *He would threaten Akira.*

Her nails dug into her palm as she clenched her fists, almost drawing blood to the surface. It wasn’t just her anymore. They were now in danger because of her. Not only did they have to worry about being extorted, now they had to worry about a murderer on the loose. Fine. She’ll fight back. She wasn’t going to let him get away with this.

Her ears perked up, picking up the sound of keys jingling right before the door opened. Scrambling to put all the photos back inside, she just finished retying the envelope as Yusuke walked in, plastic bag in hand. “I’m back.”

She quickly plastered a smile on her face. “Welcome back. Thanks for getting food.”

After a quick dinner together, she stood up from the table and crumbled her trash, throwing it in the bin. “I’m going to take a bath and then go to bed.” She informed the artist, picking up the envelope from the table. “Good night.”

Gray eyes scanned the object she held within her hands. “What is that, Aneki?”

She stopped at the doorway, shoulders tensing. “...Just the bills. Don’t worry about it.” She walked down the hallway and up the stairs, not realizing Yusuke watched her the entire time, a crease between his brows.

Chapter End Notes

*Uzumaki is some crazy stuff. Read at your own discretion but i promise you'll never look at spirals the same way ever again.*

*Also I've been messing with formatting again. I think I'll keep it with a short middle line break as a change in location and a long line break as a passage of time and location...idk what im doing anymore tbh*
---6/21, TUESDAY, AFTERNOON, SHUJIN ACADEMY.

In the middle of Usami-sensei’s lecture about the fibonacci sequence, three phones buzzed.

R: Makoto, you OK? Has Kaneshiro threatened you or anything?
Ma: He’s been demanding money, but I choose to ignore those messages.
An: Is that OK? Have any scary men shown up at your house?
Ma: No.
Y: Kaneshiro still has the photographs in his possession, remember?
Y: Perhaps that advantage is why he doesn’t feel any urgency to act.
R: So do you think we’re safe for now then?
Ai: For now. Nishiki said he’ll tell me if anything changes.
Ak: Stay on guard though.
An: Yeah.
An: Just like Yusuke said, those photos are bad news for us.
Y: We will need to change Kaneshiro’s heart as soon as possible.
Ma: Agreed. I will do everything I can to help.

Having stayed behind to take care of some class presidential duties, Airi rushed over to the train station, stepping into a cart. She didn’t sleep again, and her dark circles were purple bruises underneath her concealer.

She was starting to feel tired all the time, even with all the coffee she drank secretly.

She had spent the night staring at those photos, memorizing her parents’ faces, Rui’s face, her phantom thieves. She wasn’t going to let him win. Maybe if he was only threatening her, she could’ve waited it out, but now? Now that he was threatening her friends? Her family?

Fuck no.

She wasn’t going to let him take them too. She was team mom and she had to protect them. Grabbing onto a safety pole, she took out her phone.

Ai: Did you find anything?
Ni: Nothing yet.
Ni: I’m calling in every favor I can for this, but you only told me a day ago.
Ni: I can only go so fast.
Ai: Sorry.
Ni: Nah, it’s fine. More importantly, has he tried anything yet?

Her hands tightened around her phone.

Ai: Yes.
Ai: He keeps sending me photos.
Ni: Fuck. Why didn’t you say so earlier?!
Ni: I’m coming over tonight. Make me that omurice, OK?
Ai: Tonight?
Ni: Can’t you read? Yes, tonight.
Ni: I’m going to help out.
Ai: Um...OK.

She put her phone away. Help out? How? He was a mobster now, so...

She bit her lip. Did he mean to teach her how to kill? She didn’t want to be a murderer, even if it was self-defense.

“You’re like me then. I’ll be back, don’t worry.”

Her eyes hardened. She wasn’t like him. She was never going to be like him. She swore that to herself, her soul pulsing an answer as Jeanne acknowledged it. She was going to protect them, no matter what.

Her phone buzzed again just as the train came to a stop.

Ak: Where are you?
Ak: Everyone’s here.
Ai: Train just got to Shibuya. Be there in a minute.
Ak: OK.

The doors slid open and she walked out, swiping her wallet at the turnstile. Forget about him for now, focus on the current target.

Hurrying down the small steps, she turned the corner and accidentally collided with the chest of a tall man. “Oomph!” She flinched, quickly taking a step back and bowing. “I’m so sorry! I was in a hurry and-”

“Oh, Kimisawa-san.”

Two hands grasped her shoulders. She looked up at the familiar voice and cursed mentally, seeing that she had accidentally run into Akechi of all people in front of Yon-Germain bakery. “Fancy meeting you here like this.” He smiled politely, helping her straighten up. “Please, there is no need to bow.”

“I’m really sorry, Akechi-san,” She apologized again, taking a step back. “I didn’t mean to bump into you like this.”

He shook his head. “It’s all right. I had some time until the taping began, so I decided to walk
around for a while. Might I inquire as to why you’re in such a hurry?”

She bit her lip. “I’m late meeting—”

“Me.”

She peered behind the student detective, silently sighing in relief as Akira walked over to them. She always felt safer with him around. The others stayed behind at the walkway, but even from there, they were observing them.

Akechi beamed. “Ah, Kurusu-san! Fancy seeing you here as well. Are you on a date?”

Airi blushed. “Um—”

“Yup.” Akira answered seemingly nonchalantly, stepping up beside her.

She glanced up at him in shock, her heart beating faster at his admission. He actually said that?

Akechi only smiled. “I see. I’ve heard many rumors about a criminal group lately. I hope you will avoid any involvement with them, since after all,” He peered down at the cellist. “You have a beautiful lady at your side.”

Akira stared at him blankly, but lifted an arm to rest his hand on her waist. “You don’t need to worry.”

Airi glanced between him and the student detective. What was going on?

Akechi nodded, noticing the possessive streak but didn’t comment on it. “Ah, lovely. However, you needn’t hesitate to ask if you or Kimisawa-san require help. I have police connections, you know.” He adjusted his grip on his briefcase. “By the by, this city is never short on excitement. First that train accident, now this mafia…” He murmured thoughtfully.

“Not to mention the Phantom Thieves. I’ve thought of a great many things during my stroll.” He blinked. “That reminds me, did the Phantom Thieves go to the Madarame exhibit before committing their crime? What is their goal? And who might be their next target?”

They watched him as he continued to think to himself, muttering his findings out loud. Sharing a glance, Airi was about to ask about his police connections, maybe he could help her, when off in the distance they heard, “Hey, isn’t that Akechi-kun?!?”

They turned around, noticing some teenage girls were starting to approach their vicinity. “Ahhh it is! I’m gonna go ask for a picture with him!”

Akechi only smiled, though the action was strained. “...It seems I’ve been gaining more recognition lately. I would love to chat more, but I really must be going. I hope to speak to you two again soon.” He gave them a quick smile before power walking away to the steps leading down the station square.

Airi bit her lip and called out. She just couldn’t help it. “...Be careful!”

Ears picking up her encouragement, he turned back around to wave at her before dashing off down the stairs, the group of girls following his footsteps.

She sighed. Why did she have to say that? It’s not like she even liked him. She was closer to hating his guts than anything because he kept reminding her of that snotty brat back at the institution.
Maybe it was because she wanted to know Akechi for himself, and not with whatever bias she had within her. She wanted to give him a chance, especially if they kept bumping into each other like this.

The hand at her waist tightened its grip and she squeaked in surprise, looking up at its owner. Akira frowned down at her. “Why are you always running into trouble?”

She smiled sheepishly. “Trouble follows us like a shark smelling blood. It’s not like I wanted to run into him…”

He shook his head. “Be careful around him, we don’t know what he wants.”

She raised a brow. "Maybe I should be more careful around you if you're going to tell these things to people."

He blinked, not understanding what she meant. "Tell what?"

Her cheeks reddening, she glanced away shyly. "You said we were on a date," She voiced quietly. "You shouldn't be saying such things if they're not true."

His eyes widened and his face lit up as bright as hot coal. He did say that, didn't he? He was so focused on trying to get Akechi away from her that he just blurted out the first thing that came to mind. Wait, he shouldn't be saying such things if they're not true? Did that mean he should only say it if they were on a date? Did that mean she would be amenable for one in the future? With him?

"Hey!"

They looked over the crowd of pedestrians to see Ryuji waving them over, giving them an impatient frown. Akira pursed his lips before tugging Airi with him as they walked over. He shouldn't be thinking about such things. They'd only known each other for three, almost four, months and he didn't know if she was even up for a date with how exhausted and stressed she was. Once things blew over, he promised. He would gather all his guts and try his luck.

Seeing the two Yongenjaya residents finally regroup with them, Makoto furrowed her brow. “That was Akechi-kun, wasn’t it? You two know him?”

Ryuji grunted from his seat on the floor. “We met him on the social studies trip. Guy’s a prick.”

She nodded in understanding. “I see. I remember seeing Akira-kun answer his question on TV.”

Akira rolled his eyes. “That was awkward, and not something I wanna do again.”

Yusuke leaned against the railing. “Shall we begin the meeting?” he asked.

Everyone nodded. “All that’s left is the calling card, right?” Makoto asked. “We should send it out at once.”

Yusuke sighed. “I would agree, but it will not be an easy task this time.”

Ann nodded sullenly. “Yeah, nobody actually knows him…”

Ryuji slumped his shoulders. “There’s so goddamn much I wanna write on the calling card too…”

Airi bit her lip. “Would this even make it on the news? Would he hand himself over to the police…?”
Morgana looked up at her from his seat on the railing. “That doesn’t matter right now. The only thing that matters is delivering the calling card and stealing that Treasure.”

Ryuji stood up from his seat on the floor. “Hey, can that Nishiki guy give it to him?”

Airi shook her head. “That’s a really bad idea. Nishiki will question why we have the calling card.”

Makoto tilted her head. “Why not use the same method as before then?”

They looked at her quizzically. She gave them an odd look before sighing. “All right. Ryuji-kun, come with me please.”

He sputtered. “Wait, what? Where we goin’?”

She turned around and shouldered her bag. “To make the calling cards.” She began walking away and after a moment, the ex-runner cursed and ran after her, leaving the others behind.

They looked at each other in confusion. What was going on?

Since there wasn’t anything to do at this point, they all went to do their business for the day. Yusuke holed himself up in the study to try to draw since Akira was out at Dr. Takemi’s. For Airi, she had to get to cooking for Nishiki who was coming over at...some point in time since he hadn’t specified.

Pushing the omelet on top of the rice, she squirted some ketchup on top and sighed. Now she only had to wait. What was he planning?

She bit her lip. She knew he was still Nishiki, but to hear him nonchalantly mention prostitution the other day as if it was just another fact of life had...unnerved her. What had he done since he joined the mafia? Was he really the same “older brother” she knew and stole with?

Maybe he was in the same league as Nishiki. They had yet to find anything on him aside from the news article, which meant he was being protected. How else was he released from prison when all the evidence was there to condemn him for life?

She clenched her fists. What were those papers he wanted?

The doorbell rang, startling her from her thoughts and she walked over to the foyer. Peeking through the eyehole, she saw it was a certain mafia member, a bag slung over his shoulder. She opened the door for him. “Hey...”

Nishiki gave her a small but awkward grin, no longer trying to seem badass in his home territory. “Hey, Lil sis. Glad to see you’re still safe. Can I come in?”

She nodded, moving to let him come in to take off his shoes.

He walked in, looking around curiously at her small house. Stepping into the tatami room, his eyes caught the little shrine she kept for her parents and he knelt down, clapping his hands twice in a prayer.
She smiled. Even now, he was respectful in the right ways.

Footsteps padded down the stairs and Yusuke landed on the first floor. “Aneki, did I hear someone at the door? Who was?” His eyes caught the mafia member in the hallway and they widened. “...Nishiki-san,” He greeted warily.

Nishiki raised a brow, standing up from the shrine. “Didn’t know you had someone livin’ with ya. Where’s that other guy?”

Airi bit her lip, feeling more nervous now. “Um, this is Yusuke, my otouto. He started living with me a few weeks ago. Akira lives somewhere else...”

Yusuke’s eyes darted between him and her. “Aneki, is it safe to have him within our home? Considering that he works under Kaneshiro...”

Pursing her lips, she shrugged. “Probably not, but he’s already here. Your omurice is ready, by the way.”

Nishiki perked up. “Oh shit, really? I thought I smelled somethin’ good but then I thought, there’s no way that’s your cookin’.” He gave her a teasing grin as he followed the faint scent of eggs and ketchup, walking into the dining room.

Sighing, Airi turned to her house mate. “It’s all right, he’s here to help.” She informed him quietly. “You can go back to painting. He’ll be gone soon.”

He hesitated. “Aneki, what exactly is he helping with...” His eyes narrowed. “Is this about that man? Has he tried something?”

She shook her head. “Yes and no. He’s here for security’s sake. Don’t worry about it.” She gave him a small but reassuring smile. “Everything will be fine.” She wasn’t going to let anything happen to him or any of the others. She would protect them, even if that meant going beyond the law. She had crossed that bridge years ago, after all.

Regarding her for a moment, he slowly nodded and padded upstairs, the door to the study closing.

She sighed once more, letting her eyes fall. She shouldn’t worry them anymore than necessary. They had yet to take Kaneshiro’s Treasure which meant he was still their primary threat as a group.

She walked into the dining room, taking a seat to observe the older man. Nishiki, for all his street urchin attitude, ate cleanly and politely, making sure to keep his mouth closed. “So...” She began awkwardly. “What is it you’re here for?”

Finishing his omurice, Nishiki let out a content sigh. “Man, your cookin’ really has improved. I didn’t choke or vomit once.”

She narrowed her eyes at him, noticing he hadn’t answered the question. “I only cooked for you because you’re doing something for me in exchange.” She snapped. “If you’re going to keep insulting my cooking from when I was a kid with shit-all ingredients, then you can get out.”

She narrowed her eyes at him, noticing he hadn’t answered the question. “I only cooked for you because you’re doing something for me in exchange.” She snapped. “If you’re going to keep insulting my cooking from when I was a kid with shit-all ingredients, then you can get out.”

He held out his hands. “All right, all right. Yeesh.” He rolled his eyes. “You’re really on edge then if you’re threatenin’ me.” Standing up from his chair, he walked over to the cabinets and opened them, taking out a bottle of cognac after a few seconds of rummaging. “Hah!” He grinned victoriously. “Knew you must’ve had one somewhere.”

“It’s for cooking.” She corrected him sharply. “Not that you’ll taste it if you keep ignoring my
question.”

He took a ballroom glass from the cabinet and poured himself a generous amount. Taking it back to the table, he sat in his chair again, letting the alcohol warm up in his palm. “To answer your question…” He drawled. “I’m here to make sure you’re as safe as I can make it.”

She blinked in surprise. “What? How?”

“I’ll install my own locks into the windows and doors. We don’t know this guy’s M.O., but we do know he’s after you, and you’re always here now.”

“How do you know that?”

“How do you think I know your address?” He rolled his eyes, taking a sip. “You didn’t tell me it, so I looked it up with the family’s permission.”

She stillled, frozen in her seat. They had that much power that they could just look up her address like that? Wait. “Family?...So you are from a clan? What about Kaneshiro then?”

The mafia-yakuza member stared at her for a moment. “Sorry, Lil sis.” He gave her an apologetic grin. “Can’t tell ya that.”

She fiddled with her fingers. “Then what can you tell me? Is that fatass really that powerful?”

Snorting, Nishiki choked as he laughed. “Fatass! Hoo boy…” Clearing his throat, he turned to her. “He’s not someone you’ll have to worry about for long.”

She narrowed her eyes. “...Is it because he’s not that high up in the chain? No high ranking captain would be in charge of extorting students, after all.”

He grinned, not saying anything as he downed the rest of his drink. Letting out a content sigh as the warm alcohol burned his throat, he stood up. “All right, let’s begin then. I’ll go change the locks and shit, you sit tight. I would’ve brought security cameras but I know there’s usually a pig around the corner, and it’s against the law to install that shit without the city’s permission.”

She blinked at the change in topic, noticing he hadn’t answered her question again. Security cameras would’ve been useful, but she knew the police department would only laugh at her reasoning and deny her request. “Oh...I’m going to watch. I should get familiar with these new locks anyway.”

He nodded and walked over to the front door, starting with that lock first. Unscrewing it out of the wooden frame, he took a brand new stainless steel lock out from the bag.

She peered at it from behind him as he installed it. It was definitely more secure than her current one since it came with a two lock system. If she tried to pick it, it would lock again once she turned the handle. That would be useful so long as she kept the keys on her person at all times. She still didn’t know how he took her keys that time...

She followed him around as he got to work, changing every lock on the windows, room doors, and even bathrooms. Yusuke gave them a disapproving frown when they changed the lock in the study, brush in his hand, but let them do their work.

Finally done with the changes, they walked back downstairs. “That’ll reinforce your security for a while longer.” He promised as he stepped into his shoes. “I should have somethin’ to tell you by tomorrow or the day after. Keep yourself safe, OK?”
Airi gave him a grateful smile. She really appreciated that he was going under the radar to do this for her. He was probably doing this without the family’s permission. “Thanks...Aniki.”

He stared at her in surprise before cracking a grin. “Finally feelin’ comfortable again, huh, Lil sis?” Taking a step closer, he enveloped her in a hug.

She reciprocated, knowing this was one of the rare times he was going to show affection. She wouldn’t know if one day, he would be gone too...

“...Keep yourself safe.” He murmured in her ear. “Don’t rush off like an idiot to confront him. You need help, you call me, OK?”

She nodded, her chin rubbing against the shoulder of his jacket from the action. “OK...”

Letting go, he gave her another smile. "Don't be like Takase.”

She froze and looked up at him with wide eyes. "You...You know about Takase?" She gripped his sleeves. "Do you know what happened? How did he..?" How did he die? How was he when he died? She just wanted to know, so badly...

Nishiki let out a long sigh before digging into his pocket. Taking out a cigarette case, he lit it with the lighter before taking a long drag. Slowly exhaling out the carcinogens, he looked out at the dim back streets. "...It was a car accident.” He said quietly. "Or, it was suppose 'ta be. Takase had been workin' three jobs, one at a convenience store and two as restaurant delivery boys. According to the clock-in sheets, he worked every day..." He took another drag, letting the smoke escape his lips.

"The driver had a massive debt with us and tried to skip town, but since he was in such a hurry and it was rainin' pretty hard, he ran a red light and hit a kid.”

"Takase..." She murmured, feeling as though she had aged decades learning this. "So that's how..." But how did Kawakami play in this? Was she just his teacher? But then, she wouldn't have agreed to be her guardian if it was just that. There was some sort of guilt in her eyes whenever she brought the other orphan up.

Letting the cigarette fizz out, Nishiki made sure it was completely dead before flicking it at a nearby trash can. "Takase died instantly.” He informed gravely. "But the driver was fine...For a few more days until his body gave out.”

She glanced sharply at him. He was fine until his body gave out after a few days? Did he mean...they killed him? She felt a little sorry that a life had to be extinguished, but it was the man who killed her older brother. With how tired she was physically, mentally, and spiritually now, she found it disturbingly easy to not care. "...Did he say he was sorry?"

A savage grin spread across his face and he chuckled darkly. "Oh, he was sorry, all right. Especially when I got in there. I was still a newbie back then, but when I found out who he ran over..." His knuckles cracked from the force he used to clench his hands. "I made sure he got what he deserved." A thrill of satisfaction rang inside her before she shook it off. No matter what was happening, she shouldn't be glad people were dead. "...It's getting late. You should go before someone notices how long you've been gone.” She smiled slightly. "Thanks for telling me, and for today.”

He glanced over at her before smirking. "You deserve to know. It wouldn't be right to keep somethin' like that from you.” Checking his phone, he cursed. "Ah shit, you're right. I should go before Kaneshiro think's somethin's up. Stay safe, OK?" He gave her another head pat before
running down the back streets toward the train station.

Airi let out a long sigh, feeling the exhaustion deep in her bones. She finally learned more about Takase, and that his death had been avenged. She hoped he was fine in the afterlife. Maybe he met her parents and Rui...

Her phone buzzed.

Y: So, what ended up happening with the calling card?
An: Makoto took Ryuji with her.
An: She specifically mentioned that he would be fine and we have nothing to worry about.
Y: Hm? I wonder what she plans on doing with him...
Ai: Probably sending the calling cards.
Y: Has anyone heard anything from either of them?
Ak: Let’s leave it to them.
Y: I see.
An: I’m sure it’ll be fine if Makoto’s there with him.
An: I’d definitely be worried if Ryuji was going alone though.
Ai: How worried?
An: Shut up.
Y: Why are you telling her to shut up if she asked a valid question?
An: You shut up, too!
Y: Well then...
Y: I suppose we will find out tomorrow either way. For now, we should get some rest.
An: Yup, cya!

She made sure to lock the door once, twice, four times with the new lock mechanism that Nishiki installed earlier. It clicked in place, the stainless steel system holding the door to its slot with an unbreakable grip.

Stay safe, huh? If only she could…

He stood from a nearby apartment building rooftop, watching as the red haired gang member left her abode after installing new locks. Did she think those would stop him? How long will she continue to deny him? Arihito and Akami were waiting for her and he was growing impatient.

His new phone buzzed in his pocket and he took it out, fumbling with the large rectangular screen. He knew this number by heart and with a jolt of excitement, accepted the call. “...Yes?”

“I thought I gave you thorough instructions. What are you doing.”

A small smile grew on his lips. Just hearing his cold and stern voice again sent shivers down his spine. “I’m sorry...I have something else to do first.”

“I don’t care. Complete whatever it is quickly and get back to business. I didn’t call in those favors just so you could mess up your task again. My other agent has been kept waiting long enough.”
“I know, I know…” He grimaced, feeling his chest ache at how he talked to him. Always so cruel to him, even though he was aware of his affections.

“I just need more time…”

Chapter End Notes

Omurice - an omelet on top of fried chicken rice with lots of ketchup. A common staple of Japanese food.
Arihito - A name that means a person who exists. I found it ironic lol
Akami - A name meaning a person who loves playing music with their soul. For a cellist, I find it fitting!

Takemi rank 6

I didn't mentions this earlier but Nishiki is actually based on Nishikiyama Akira (LOL) from the Ryuu Ga Gotoku/Yakuza game series. They center around the yakuza families operating in Japan and the games are both really fun and really funny to play! In fact, this chapter was going to go on a tangent where Yusuke would've called Akira over and then Nishiki challenges him to a knife duel. I wrote it really well but then I realized it didn't fit with the story AT ALL so I re-wrote all of it. I kind of want to do a P5 x Yakuza oneshot of how Akira learned how to wield a knife so well...probably with Majima...
Chapter Notes

Announcement: I wrote two new stories over the weekend! (I know, i’m crazy. I’m even sick now too because I’m an idiot WOO) and they're also P5 centered because I have no life.

Anyway, one of them is a Yakuza 0/1 cross over with Majima being Akira's "teacher" and the other is a Ryuji lemon oneshot with a female and male version to read! (Didn't add other pronouns because I don't think I'll do a good job and I don't want to mess up)

They're named "The Mad Dog And His Little Trickster" and "Running Straight Into My Heart" (i know cheesy thank you im not great at naming things)

Do check them out if you want!!

----6/22, WEDNESDAY, AFTERNOON, CLUB

Raising a brow, Nishiki took the red and black card from another gangster. “You found this on the car? The Phantom Thieves, huh..?” He read, turning the card around. His eyes scanned the card and he felt his brows raise up to his hairline. Turning down the hallway, he walked into the VIP room that Kaneshiro made his base. “Excuse me, sir, but…Uh, I found this thing on the car. There’s something written on it…”

Kaneshiro looked up at him with a bored expression from his seat on the sofa. “Hm? Read it.”

Nishiki hesitated. “Uh, but…”

The mafia leader narrowed his small eyes. “I said, read it!”

The former street rat acquiesced. “‘Kaneshiro Junya-san, the money-devouring sinner of gluttony…” Nishiki read off the back. “You indulge in scamming others with horrendous methods that target minors, destroying families in the process. We have decided to make you confess all your crimes with your own mouth. We will take your distorted desires without fail. From, the Phantom Thieves.’” He finished, looking up at his “boss” expectantly. “Should we do somethin’ or..?”

“What of it?” Kaneshiro retorted calmly, not phased at all.

Nishiki raised a brow. “I mean, if the higher-ups find out about this…”

He scowled. “Don’t waste your time worrying about this useless shit. Just keep quiet for now.”

“But it’s posted all over the city.” Nishiki took out his phone. “People’re talkin’ about it online too.”

Growling, Kaneshiro stood up. “All of you, bring me your earnings! If you don’t surpass your quota…I’ll kill you.”
Raising his brows at the threat, Nishiki shrugged. “Gotcha.”

Turning to leave, he didn’t see that his “boss”’s true heart replaced his real self for a moment, the purple skinned bank president clenching his fists. “Phantom Thieves…? Don’t make me laugh.”

Walking down the hallway, Nishiki completely ignored the order and instead, took out his phone, dialing a number. “…Hey. Yeah, it’s me…He’s snapped…Are we cuttin’ him off then? All right, I’ll stay for a bit until this blows over. Somethin’ about Phantom Thieves…”

Once classes let out, the thieves rushed from school over to the hideout. Airi looked around the station, noticing there were calling cards pinned to sign boards all over the buildings and streets. So Makoto had Ryuji print the cards out before posting them right inside Kaneshiro’s territory. Smart.

They met up at the hideout, leaning on the railing to watch the famous Shibuya Crossing. “The calling card’s been posted all over Shibuya…” Morgana informed them sternly as he sat on the metal bar.

Makoto crossed her arms. “A good idea, no?” She frowned. “Given the theatrical nature of this one, Kaneshiro must surely have been contacted about it.”

Morgana nodded. “You truly are the brains of this Phantom Thieves operation! Ryuji, you should follow her example!”

Ryuji turned to glare at the feline. “Y’know I’m the one who went postin’ it everywhere, right?! I even had to get all dressed up so they wouldn’t notice me!”

Akira smirked. “Nice job, Ryuji.”

The ex-runner rubbed his nose bashfully. “Finally, some thanks…”

Airi idly grasped her arm. “We should get moving before it wears off.” She murmured quietly. She wanted to be in the Metaverse where she wasn’t exhausted.

Ann nodded, a firm expression on her face. “We’re going up against a truly horrible criminal this time…”

Ryuji grunted. “That dick ain’t gonna stop us now that we got our awesome new member! Makoto!” He turned to the upperclassman. “You remember how all this works?”

She nodded. “Once we steal the Treasure, the Palace will crumble and the Palace ruler’s heart will change.” She recited.

Morgana purred. “Wow, you got that quick! It took Ryuji a while to comprehend it.”

Deadpanning, the ex-runner flicked the feline on the head. “Shut up!”

Makoto clenched her fists, ignoring their scuffle. “Evil adults are nothing more than garbage, and I am no better…” She held a fist up. “I will resolve this case, I swear it!”

Yusuke idly swept his bangs from his eyes. “Then shall we begin?”
Akira nodded, taking out his phone and activating the app.

They stared up at the bank as the atmosphere pulsed with animosity, like a threatened animal’s. A golden guard was stationed right in front of the building, and seeing them appear on the grounds, immediately convulsed into three Kin-ki, their golden armor gleaming underneath the soft lighting.

Their eyes widened. This was the first time an enemy had been posted right in front of the Palace.

Before they could even access their weapons, the Shadows struck.

Snarling, Joker quickly pushed the others back toward the gate and held up his arms in front of him. He had the fastest reflexes out of the group, even faster than Elegant’s, and he knew this was going to hurt. He didn’t have Shiki-Ouji as his Persona right now and he didn’t have time to switch from Arsene, meaning he was completely vulnerable.

The large demons towered over him and struck down with their blades, one after another. “Agh..!” He cried out in pain as the swords cleaved through his coat and into his flesh, ribbons of blood soaring from the cuts. Unable to stand strong, he collapsed to the ground and onto his front, unconscious and a pool of his own blood slowly seeping from his body.

Elegant watched in horror, her heart stopping once he hit the floor. “JOKER!” Quickly summoning her scythe, she dashed forward and tried to attack the nearest Kin-ki, scowling when the blade twanged from their resistant skins.

The other thieves quickly gathered themselves from their stupor of watching their leader fall, and immediately summoned their Personas. “Carmen!” Panther screamed, the beauteous dancer appearing with a flutter of her skirt. “Maragion!” Burning the Shadows with her power, they stood strong, only a barest hints of scorch marks on their golden armor.

Pupils shrunk in rage, Fox held a hand to his mask. “Goemon!” Wooden geta clacked behind him. “Mabufula!” The air around them quickly dropped in temperature, ice crystals gathering to strike the demons.

Queen, Mona, and Skull followed their examples, their Personas hovering behind them.

Falling to its knees, one of the Kin-ki raised its sword and struck down, its target the only unconscious person in the group.

Ruby eyes widened behind a silver lace mask and Elegant dashed in front of her leader’s defenseless body, using her scythe as a shield. The sword struck the staff of her weapon and she gritted her teeth, arms straining against the attack.

With a cry, she shook it off and snapped her fingers, Jeanne floating behind her in ethereal white. “Makouga!” Blinding light embodied the form of lances and pierced through the Shadows from every direction, destroying the distortions.

Breathing out once the courtyard was cleared, she turned around and knelt down, uncaring that her leather tights were soaking up the sanguine. She tried to hold in the tears, shakily reaching out to touch the side of Joker’s face that was facing up, feeling the faint puffs of air coming from his nostrils. He was still breathing. He was still breathing. He was still breathing.

Running over, Skull held in a curse and flipped him over onto his back as carefully as he could, splashing against the blood. “Shit, this is bad. Elegant, can you heal that? Or do we have any
Quickly nodding, Elegant clapped her hands and closed her eyes, trying to concentrate. Jeanne raised her staff and a small but concentrated ball of light gently floated down onto the unconscious body. Once it touched his chest, the golden light spread across his form, enveloping him in a warm cocoon.

Mona watched with wide eyes. “Whoa...This isn’t a normal healing spell...Has her healing always been gold in color and we just never noticed?”

Queen nodded, watching attentively as the wounds knitted back together. “You’re right. Mine is usually green…”

Panther gnawed worriedly on her bottom lip, hands held tightly together. “I hope he’s OK…”

Elegant ignored them, focused on her patient. What they were saying wasn’t important right now. What was important was making sure Joker was fine.

This was...This was their first heavy injury. Sure, she had been knocked out back in Madarame’s Palace, and Fox had gotten injured two days ago, but this? He looked like he could die. The blood pooling around him reminded her too much of her parents’, and she bit her lip, trying to hold back her tears.

This wasn’t the time for crying. He was fine. He had to be. She was their best healer. She wanted to protect him too. Repay him for all the times he had watched out for her, comforted her, just being at her side. They- She...couldn’t lose him.

A muscle in his cheek twitched underneath his mask and Joker let out a quiet groan, slowly cracking open his eyes. “Who got the license plate of the truck that hit me…”

Mona purred, crossing his paws. “It was 2-22.” He mentioned his own.

Skull sighed in relief, plopping down to sit on the ground. “Man, you got us totally worried there for a second!”

Joker snorted quietly, sitting up with a wince as his newly healed muscles twinged. “Sorry you had to worry, I was too busy shoving your slow ass out of the way.” He said sarcastically.

Panther placed her hands on her hips. “Well, if you’re joking like that, you’re probably fine then. Seriously, you scared us!” She scolded. “Elegant even rushed off into battle without waiting for us.”

Queen nodded, dusting off her tight leather outfit. “It was very irresponsible of you two to do that. Injuries are a critical focal point in battle that we should do our best to avoid.”

Fox sheathed his katana, letting it disappear back into his soul. “I don’t feel the need to lecture you. The others have already done more than enough to impress the severity of the situation upon you.”

Purple clad arms wrapped around him and Joker let out an oomph, his hand automatically resting on Elegant’s back as she hid her face in his shoulder, rose hair mixing with black with how close they were. “Thank goodness...” She whispered shakily, voice muffled by his now undamaged coat. “You’re OK…”

Softening, he nodded. “Yeah...Sorry for worrying you all. That teaches me to keep Shiki-Ouji up front.”
Taking out his phone and accessing the app, he transported them to the last Safe Room where they all took a seat on the roller chairs. The others made sure they were well equipped and prepared for their next and most important task. Elegant stayed glued to his side, worried eyes scanning his body for the now non-existent wounds.

He sighed, sitting down for once. “I’m fine. It was just a little scare. We weren’t expecting enemies right off the bat—”

“Just shut up for a second, OK?” She interrupted quietly, her hand moving to clasp his in an iron tight grip. “I was really worried...You had no right to push us back, we could’ve handled a few scratches. Then you wouldn’t have nearly died in front of us...” Just like her parents. Just like Rui. She was already fraying at the edges. She wouldn’t be able to take it if she lost him too...

He relented, letting her fret over him. He hadn’t realized how this could’ve affected her. All that mattered in that moment was that his friends were safe. “...Right, sorry. Look,” He got up and took off his coat, leaving him in his sleeveless gray vest and showing the unmarred skin. “I’m fine, see?” He reassured. “Not a scratch on me because our elegant lady took care of me so well.”

She scrutinized his limbs, blushing slightly at seeing his toned biceps that were usually hidden from view, either by his coat or by the sleeve of his polo. Appeased for now, she stood up and brushed off her sleeveless coat. “...Yeah. I did a good job.” She turned to the others who had been watching them with teasing grins, or in Queen’s case, a thoughtful frown. “Are we all ready for this?”

Everyone nodded. After that disastrous entrance, Joker made sure Shiki-Ouji occupied the forefront of his soul. He didn’t want a repeat.

They left the room and ran straight through the spiral of vaults, entering the elevator that descended straight into the Treasure room. Stopping at the bottom, the doors slid open and they ran out, pausing once they noticed the Palace ruler standing in front of the safe, three regular gangsters at his side.

Elegant narrowed her eyes when she noticed a version of Nishiki was here, standing with his hands in the pockets of his suit.

Queen gasped at the sight in front of them. “Is that Kaneshiro?!”

Skull cursed. “He was waitin’ for us!”

Joker furrowed his brow, not seeing anything that could even remotely resemble a Treasure. “Wait, then where’s the Treasure?”

They looked up at the giant safe as the combination spun at high speeds, replacing the glowing ball of light from last time. Skull gaped. “What the hell?!”

Mona took a step back in shock. “A safe...?! This wasn’t here the last time we came...” He pouted. “He changed the entire room so quickly...Tch, I guess this Palace isn’t a bank for nothing.”

Elegant frowned, taking her scythe out. “Then it’s time we crack it open. There’s no such thing as maximum security when we’re around.”

“Greetings.”

Kaneshiro walked forward to them nonchalantly. “Welcome to my private city bank. I’m surprised you made it here alive. It seems you are quite lucky.”
“Lucky?” Queen scoffed. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

Skull held up a fist. “We’re gonna change your heart and make you confess everything you’ve done. That’ll save all those people who’re suffering ‘cause of your shitty actions then and now.” He smirked. “Even the police’re strugglin’ to deal with you, so this’ll make the public believe in us too!”

Kaneshiro placed a hand on his hip. “Those in power work the ones below them to the bone for money. Such is the hierarchy of the world.” He stated matter-of-factly, lips pulled back in a snarl. “Just accept your fate as a source of my wealth!”

Fox glared, gripping the sheath of his katana. “We’ll never agree to that!”

Panther nodded in agreement. “And hierarchy? You have to be out of your mind.”

Kaneshiro snapped. “All of that was forced on me too, you know?! I went through shit until I crawled my way out of the dregs! Now it’s my turn to profit on everyone else! I don't care if I have to tear apart families or send out hits, so long as I get the cash and stay on top!”

Elegant rolled her eyes and glared at him. “So you go through something horrible and instead of going against it, you decide to do the exact same thing to other people?! You’re a pathetic excuse for a person!” She stated coldly. She would never be like him. “Scum like you need to be cleansed.”

He growled. “It doesn’t matter whether you’re clean or dirty! Only the clever come out on top! The strong and the smart devour the weak. That is the natural order of things.” A vein pulsed in his temple at his anger. “You damn brats who think you know the world through the shit you read online will make perfect prey.”

Queen scoffed. “He is utterly hopeless. Not surprising coming from scum.” She remarked scathingly, eyes honed in on the Shadow. “You'll pay for killing my father. I'll run you over with Johanna just like you did him three years ago!”

Incensed at her comment, he continued even louder. “It’s always the fools who get tricked! Fools who have to pay for their foolishness. And if those fools don’t learn,” He snarled. “Well they have to suck it up and stay as plain, stupid fools!”

Joker narrowed his eyes. “Stop talking already. We get it; you’re a hypocrite of the worst kind.”

Kaneshiro hmphed. “I guess there’s not much point saying anything to you fools!” He took a deep breath, seemingly calming himself. “This is where my gracious lecture ends. Now then, I hope you’re ready to work as slaves here for the rest of your lives.”

Fox scowled, his eyes sending daggers at the Palace ruler from the mention of slaves. “That’s outrageous!”

Kaneshiro began snickering before bursting out in full laughter, the sound reverberating throughout the vault. “I’m gonna swarm all over you...and squeeze out every last penny!” He hunched over himself, letting his arms hang below.

The fake gangsters looked at their boss questioningly, but flinched in both shock and fear as Kaneshiro twitched and convulsed, the back of his suit jacket deforming like lumps. Not-Nishiki took a step back, almost tripping over himself as insect wings burst out from his boss’s back, shouting out in fear once he caught sight of the red compound eyes bulging from Kaneshiro’s face. “H-H-H-Holy shit! What the hell?!”
The Shadows ran away in fear, leaving the Phantom Thieves to watch in disgust as the bank president in front of them had transformed into some sort of human fly. He rubbed his hands greedily, coughing up black blood from his metamorphosis. “I can take care of this myself.” He threw up peace signs. “Wassup yo?! Now come get some!”

Sneering at him, Queen summoned Johanna and revved the engine. “You filthy fly on dirty money...Get the hell out of my face!” She roared. "I'll squash you!"

Kaneshiro only laughed, his wings buzzing behind him. “Aight, here we go, yeh pieces of shit!” His head and hands twitched just like a fly’s, constantly moving in a jerky manner. “Hehehehe! Bein’ young is such a crime!” He snickered. “They’re naive, they’re reckless, and on top of that, they don’t even realize how stupid they are.” He rubbed his hands together. “Now I couldn’t just sit back and not cash in on those idiots, right? Even the police are just as dumb! Your father got exactly what he deserved for goin’ against me!”

Mona bristled as he stepped back, playing support like always. “Get ‘em, Joker! This moneygrubber’s getting a one-way ticket to redemption!”

Panther and Elegant stepped back as well, letting the others fight for now. Running forward, Joker slashed the Shadow a couple times before back flipping away. Seemed there was no resistance to physical attacks, at least. Raising his bat, Skull rushed up to the fly and smashed the spiked end right over his head, damaging him a little further.

“Johanna!” Queen shouted, sending a Freila into him, burning him with nuclear energy. Unsheathing his katana, Fox ran and raised his sword, the blade barely sinking into the fat of the enemy.

Snickering, Kaneshiro rubbed his hands together, sending an Eiga at Queen. She yelped in pain but shook it off, tightening her knuckle dusters.

“Eat this!” The Shadow screamed as he ran up to Joker and tried to deliver a punch. It was blocked due to Shiki-Ouji, the origami warrior appearing for a brief second to protect its wielder. Furrowing his brow, Joker took out his pistol and shot six bullets, doing a little more damage.

Kaneshiro laughed. “Yeh’re just gonna keep goin’ at this to the bitter end, huh? No more games then. I ain’t gonna forgive yeh punks for this.”

Queen readied her knuckle dusters. “That’s our line!” She retorted. “You had better be prepared.” Running up to him, she punched him once before doing two roundhouse kicks, jumping back near her comrades.

“Persona!” Skull yelled, the undead pirate floating behind him on his ship. “Zionga!” A strong lightning bolt speared down at the Shadow, paralyzing his movements.

“Allow me!” Fox yelled as he summoned his own Persona. “Bufula!” Taking advantage of his paralyzed state, he froze the bank president as well.

Joker held a hand to his mask. “Hua Po!” The red skinned fairy fluttered behind him. “Agilao!” With a burst of red hot fire, he burned the Palace ruler through the ice, knocking him down.

They rushed up to surround him with their firearms, clicking the safety off.

He knelt on the steel plated floor, sweating angrily. “D-Dammit..! Yeh goddamn punks..!”

“Show no mercy!” Mona shouted from the back. “Let’s finish him!”
Brandishing his dagger, Joker initiated the all-out, the team attacking him for all they’re worth.

Kaneshiro panted, holding a hand to his chest. “Tch...The hell? Yeh punks’re stronger than you look…” A grin spread below his mustache. “Looks like I gotta bring out my big guns...!”

“You’re all buzz and no bite!” Mona retorted. Elegant clapped her hands together in a prayer motion, sending a Mediarama over the party.

Kaneshiro laughed. “We’ll see about that…” He swept his arms out. “Time to roll out...! Here he is...My guardian robot!”

He turned around, waving his hand in the air and the small door within the safe opened. Flying up, the hatch closed up and with a rumble, the sides of the vault slid away to reveal the hatch was the nose of a giant metal tank in the shape of a piggy bank. The eyes were composed of machine gun turrets, rotating up and down for a target. “Gyahahahaha!” Kaneshiro laughed from within, using the speaker system. “Yeh ready to die?!”

They stared at it in shock, eyebrows raised up to their hairlines. “A pig?!” Mona yelped.

Joker scoffed, reminded of his old video games and how this wasn't even his final form. “Typical.”

“It ain’t a pig, yo!” Kaneshiro refuted. “This is my Palace’s swine-model defensive mechanoid, Piggytron!”

Elegant stared from the back of the room, hand gripping her scythe. “Then...it’s a pig.”

Panther wheezed from next to her, fighting the urge to laugh as it was a serious situation while their teammates stood at the front.

“Goin’ against me’s a real bad crime, yeh know? It’s time for yeh all to go to hell!”

“Dammit…” Mona cursed. “I didn’t expect he’d have something like this up his sleeve!”

Queen readied her stance. “Joker!” She called out to her leader who glanced over at her. “Make sure you have us regroup if you think we’re at a disadvantage! That thing’s a giant...If it attacks us while we’re at low stamina, we won’t survive!”

He nodded in understanding, staring up at the colossal machine with narrowed eyes. Their weapons wouldn’t do much…”Take-Minakata!” The armless demon knelt behind him. “Zionga!” He sent a lightning bolt at it, damaging it only slightly.

Fox held a hand to his mask. “I am thou!” He summoned Goemon to his side. “Bufula!” Ice crystallized on the stainless steel surface, helping to break down its exterior.

The Piggytron bounced into the air with its hydraulic feet before falling back down as a ball, sending a Metabolic Wave that almost knocked them all over.

Elegant shot up from her defensive position in the back. “Shit, not good!” She cursed before turning to the feline at her side. “Mona! Double healing time!”

Mona nodded, sticking his paws out. “Of course!”

Concentrating together, they sent two Mediaramas in the direction of the team, healing them back to full health. “Thanks!” Joker yelled back at them.

“Johanna!” Queen called out, the motorcycle appearing underneath her with a rumble. Spinning in
a circle, a Freila hit the machine.

“Yeh punks’re really pissin’ me off! Yeh called my Piggytron a pig earlier, right?” Kaneshiro yelled through the microphone. “Were yeh talkin’ about me too when you said that? If you were...Imma tear yeh all to shreds! Go, Piggytron! Super VIP Fooorm!”

With a start of its boosters, it landed as a round ball, Kaneshiro crawling out from the coin slot. Flying up to the top, he began rolling the large machine like a ball with his feet.

“It transformed?!” Mona gasped. “Don’t tell me it’s going to roll into us!”

Gritting her teeth, an idea came to her from their first infiltration and Queen turned toward the back. “Elegant!” She yelled urgently, gaining the attention of the backup thieves. “Snipe him!”

Staring at her in surprise, Elegant slowly smirked as she summoned her sniper rifle, taking off the safety. “Of course, Queen.” Jumping up to the top of a vault, she took position and aimed, pulling the trigger once the scope aligned with the Palace ruler.

The bullet shot through the air and knocked him over to the floor. Now that there was nothing controlling it, the Piggytron rolled over the Palace ruler with a rumble and he shouted in pain, squashed underneath its weight.

The thieves jumped out of the way of the rotating machine as it hit the wall and bounced back to its original spot.

Getting up from the floor with a curse, Kaneshiro flew into the hatch again. With a start of the engines, it used an Agilao on Fox. He cried out in pain as he burned, his element making him even more susceptible.

Joker cursed, running in front to cover him and using his dagger to angle the flames away from his face. “Fox! Switch out with Panther!”

Nodding weakly, the samurai jumped back and was replaced with the dominatrix as she ran forward, whip in hand.

Elegant jumped down and ran up to him as he stumbled to their safer position. “Fox!” She fretted, Jeanne behind her. Concentrating, she used a Diarama, healing the flaky and bubbling skin.

“Thank you…” He winced. “Having a weakness is truly appalling…”

Panther held a hand to her mask. “Carmen!” The beauteous dancer appearing behind her with the flap of her skirts. “Tarunda!” Reality warped in front of the machine, decreasing its attack.

“Captain Kidd!” Skull shouted. “Zionga!” A lightning bolt struck the Piggytron, leaving black scorch marks all over its surface.

“Dammit...How dare yeh hurt my Piggytron so much...!” Kaneshiro screamed in anger. “My Piggytron’s gonna lose...? No, that’s impossible!”

“It’s already been decided...” Queen stated coldly. “You are going down.”

With another scream, the Piggytron jumped around, showing them its behind. The vent opened up, releasing a Fear Gas from its rear onto the party before jumping back around.

Panther and Queen hugged themselves, fear overtaking their senses. Skull rushed up to Panther, a
paper fan in hand. "Get it together!" He yelled, smacking her over the head.

She blinked, the fear dissipating from her mind and she straightened up. "Thanks!"

Joker did the same for Queen, and she shook her head of any remnants. "Persona!" Panther yelled, summoning the beauteous dancer again. "Agilao!"

Fire consumed the colossal enemy, finally damaging it enough. With a boom, parts of it began to explode before it lay on the ground, completely motionless and dropping ¥17,100. Gold bars tumbled out of the open hatch, along with Kaneshiro.

Now that the battle was over, Elegant, Fox, and Mona regrouped with the others, staring down at the Palace ruler mercilessly. "Kaneshiro...!" Queen gritted her teeth, taking a step forward.

Getting up from the floor, he turned to hug one of the gold bars. "I’m not gonna let anyone have it..." He whimpered. "This is my money...

She glared. "You stole it from innocent people!"

"Fine." He whispered in defeat. "I’ll call off the debt..."

"Fine?" Skull repeated, scowling at his tone. "You’re still soundin’ pretty condescendin’."

He gripped the gold bar tighter. "You’re right...I’m a poor, ugly...idiot...How am I supposed to live a normal life like this...?" He teared up. "It’s all because of our society! Weak people can’t lead a happy life, no matter what they do! I’m a victim too, you know?! Yeah,” He nodded hastily to himself. “None of this is my fault!"

Elegant frowned disapprovingly. "You’re joking, right? You can’t just blame society when you’re part of the problem. It’s people like you who take advantage of the weak."

Fox nodded in agreement. “The more you talk, the more pathetic you sound. You are what’s wrong with society.”

Kaneshiro snorted as tears trickled down his chubby face. “I just wanted a place where I could belong! You get that, don’t you?!"

“Bullshit!” Panther yelled. “All you did was surround yourself with people you could use, solely for some easy money!”

Skull stepped up. “And you think you’re the only one who’s gotta deal with bein’ labeled..?” He gritted his teeth. “Me...and all these other guys...” He gestured to his team. “We’re all fightin’ against that!”

“But don’t worry.” Queen stated firmly. “You’ll have a place you belong. Somewhere you can make amends...” Her eyes hardened. “For the rest of your life.”

Joker rested his hands in his pockets. “We’ll take your heart...Free of charge.”

Stilling for a moment, Kaneshiro finally turned around and sat down on the ground, bowing his head in defeat.

Fox crossed his arms. “I’m glad you understand. Now hurry up and return to the real Kaneshiro.”

Lips pulling back into a frown, Kaneshiro looked up at them with contempt. “Seriously? You guys don’t have any tact. Especially with that incredible power...These Palaces could net you loads of
cash! You could do whatever you wanted to people’s hearts!”

Skull sneered. “We’re not like you!”

Kaneshiro shook his head at that answer. “Where do you find meaning in that naive sense of justice...? You know, there’s already someone out there taking full advantage of what Palaces have to offer…”

They stared at him in surprise. Queen blinked. “What..?”

Joker narrowed his eyes. “The black mask…”

He smirked secretly. “I’ll let you in on a little something...There’s a criminal using other people’s Palaces to accomplish whatever they damn well please. They don’t care about consequences. Psychotic breakdowns, mental shutdowns…” He chuckled. “Anything goes.”

Elegant furrowed her brow. “Is that the same person Madarame mentioned..?”

Skull stomped up to the Palace ruler, lifting him by his collar. “Spill it!” He yelled in his face. “Who’re you talkin’ about?!”

Kaneshiro only laughed. “Don’t even bother. You are nothing compared to them...Better be careful...A chance encounter with them could prove fatal…” Glowing a white light, Skull let out a grunt of frustration as Kaneshiro disappeared from his hold, returning back to his original self.

The floor began to rumble and they looked around. “We can think about that later!” Fox yelled. “Grab the Treasure; there’s no time!”

Queen darted her eyes to the Treasure. “In that case, we should take that large one…” She blinked in surprise. “Wait, what?!”

Mona was already at the Treasure, nuzzling his cheeks against one of the gold bars. “Mrrroooooow!” He purred in delight.

Blushing at how cute he was, Elegant held back a squeal and shook her head. “M-Mona! We have to move!”

“T-Treasure…” He drooled, hypnotized by the golden sheen.

Queen gave him an odd look. “What’s gotten into him..?!”

“This is sooooo cooooool!” He giggled. “Wowwweee, being a human is greattttt!” Turning around, his eyes locked onto Panther, or more specifically, her pale golden hair. “It’s...It’s...It’s...shiny shiny golddd!”

Jumping into the air, he latched around Panther’s head and she stumbled, trying to pull him off. “Hrgh?! L-Leff ho off mee!” She yelled, voice muffled by his tummy.

Sweatdropping, Elegant walked up to them and tore the feline off. “Mona!” She scolded and the feline froze.

Jumping out of her grip, he transformed into the bus. “Sorry, mom!”

She jerked her head toward the vehicle. “Everyone get in!”

The ladies ran toward the bus while the men lifted up the gold bars, placing it in the back. Taking
their seats, Skull slammed the door shut. “OK, all set!”

Queen sat at the wheel, stepping on the pedal. “Grr…” Mona grumbled underneath them. “Fine!”

Driving through the vault, they accelerated through a wall and over the edge of the Palace, falling through the air. “Wait, there’s no road!” Mona yelped, his blue lightheads blinking rapidly.

Blanching, Panther and Skull screamed as the van began to descend down into the Shibuya skyline.

Elegant quickly took out her phone and activated the app, transporting them back into real life Tokyo.
The bus disappeared around them and they fell onto the ground in their normal attire, wincing as they hit their tailbones. “You guys are so careless—Meow!” Morgana yelped before groaning, falling silent.

They ignored him for now, their immediate concern was getting off the concrete. “Owww…” Ann winced as she stood up, brushing her shorts off. Akira, and Yusuke shakily got up, a little rattled from the transition.

Wincing, Airi tried to get up but fell back, right on her now bruised butt. Her exhaustion was getting worse. “Dammit…” Akira held out a hand and she accepted it, finally standing up with his help.

Makoto let out a sigh, brushing her hair back to its normal style. Ryuji winced as he stood up, resting his thumbs in his pocket. “I think I cracked my ass…”

Alarmed, Yusuke turned to the model. “Ann, are you all right?! Is yours cracked as well…?”

She sputtered at his ridiculous question. “Of course not!”

Makoto tilted her head. “Isn’t it supposed to be though?” She asked innocently.

Blushing in embarrassment, Ann let out a groan as she rubbed the back of her head. “Urgh, that’s not what I mean! More importantly, it’s dangerous for us to just charge out like that!”

Sweatdropping at their conversation, Akira looked around and noticed they were in the middle of Shibuya Crossing with people staring at them. “Guys, we should be quiet…”

Realizing people were watching, they sweated nervously at the attention. “Thank goodness nobody was hurt.” Makoto sighed in relief.

Airi looked around the crowded intersection, noticing they were missing someone. “Wait, where’s Morgana?”

They finally found him in the middle of the road, knocked down by a golden briefcase. Ryuji stared wide eyed. “That briefcase…”

Yusuke bowed his head in mourning. “It appears to have been the cause of Morgana’s demise…”

Eyes darting to the light signals, Airi gasped and ran out into the street, picking up the feline and case before dashing back, just barely avoiding being hit by a car as it honked at her.

The others gaped at the close call and crowded around her. Akira was about to reach out with his hands when Makoto beat him to it. “Are you OK?!”, The council president fretted, placing a hand on Airi’s shoulder.
He frowned as he stopped, putting his hands back in his pockets.

Airi panted. “I’m OK...That was close...” Straightening up, she handed the briefcase over to Ryuji who lifted it with a grunt. “Man, this thing is heavy...” He grumbled. “This is Kaneshiro’s, right?”

Yusuke’s eyes widened. “You mean his Treasure..?!?”

Glancing around, Ann shuttled them over to the side near the Hachiko statue and out of the crowd. “Let’s stop drawing so much attention...”

Holding the comatose cat carefully in her arms, Airi walked over to the shade, taking a seat on one of the benches. “Poor Morgana...” She mused, noticing his swirlly eyes.

Makoto eyed the golden briefcase. “Where should we open it?”

“How about at karaoke?” Ann suggested.

She shook her head. “We’d have security cameras to worry about there.”

Ryuji perked up. “Oh, I got the perfect place.” He grinned, staring at Akira.

Said leader blinked, not understanding why he was looking at him like that. Airi smiled as she cradled Morgana in her arms. “I could go for some coffee.”

Yusuke nodded beside her. “I was just in the mood for some coffee too.”

Glancing at each of them, Akira shrugged and straightened up. “All right, my place then.”

Makoto blinked. “Huh..?”

They took the train to Yongenjaya where they entered Cafe Leblanc. Sojiro glanced up at them from his newspaper and raised a brow at their new addition. “Another girl, huh?”

Makoto smiled politely and bowed. “My name is Niijima Makoto. I hope we're not being a bother.”

Staring at her for a moment, he smiled languidly. “Niijima, huh..? Name’s Sojiro, but you can call me Boss. So, you’re another friend of theirs?”

She nodded, smile brightening up at his mention of friends. “...Yes.”

Smiling slightly, Akira led them up to his room where he pulled out the table. Taking a few unused chairs from behind the staircase railing, he propped them up around the desk and sat down.

The others with the exception of Makoto all took a seat, with Airi still cradling Morgana in her arms. Akira took out his own medical supply and handed it to her. Taking it with a thankful smile, she took out a bottle of Recov-R gel and a cotton pad.

Finally regaining consciousness, Morgana winced and sat up in her lap to jump to the table before licking his wounds.

“Here, Morgana.” She gestured for him to turn around so she could begin applying the medicine to his scratches. He held out his paws and tail obediently, wincing as the medicine stung.
Yusuke began trying to crack the briefcase’s code while Ryuji took a random manga from somewhere, tilting back in his chair to wait it out. Ann took a seat next to him and read over his shoulder, tilting her head at the Feathermen.

Makoto looked around the somewhat bare and aged room, raising a brow at the ceiling beams and classic styled windows. “This place is oddly calming.” She remarked before turning to the artist. “Have you learned anything new?”

Yusuke sighed and shook his head. “It’s sealed by a rotary lock. We’ll need the combination to open it.”

“Meooowgh...!” Morgana yowled as a particular cut stung worse than the others.

“Shh...It’s OK, Morgana.” Airi consoled softly as she padded the wounds with the miracle liquid, the lacerations healing right up. He whimpered and she frowned sympathetically, kissing him on the forehead and then his paw. “You’re all healed up now, so no more crying, OK?”

Akira watched with a blank face, trying to stem his jealousy. He wanted those soft lips on him instead...He shook his head. Don’t be a pervert.

Makoto grasped her chin thoughtfully. “A rotary lock, hm..?” Walking over to the case, she tilted it so the combination faced her. Yusuke sat back, letting her have a try. They all watched with their breaths held as she entered several combinations, but after a while, even she gave up with a sigh.

Jumping up on the table, Morgana sniffed around the lock, specifically at the three rotary dials, and his ears flickered. "I think our leader should give this one a shot," he announced, much to the surprise of everyone there.

Raising a brow, Akira shifted the briefcase in front of him and observed the lock. Being a three digit lock where each one can go from 0 to 9, it meant there were over seven hundred possible combinations. Unless he wanted to spend the rest of the week trying to crack it open, he needed a more...drastic approach.

"No one make a noise," he requested.

Closing his eyes, he placed his right thumb on the release button, his left thumb on the numbers-reset to 000- and began shuffling through with one hand while repeatedly pressing down on the button with his other. In fact, he was doing it so quickly, that no one else could keep up with their eyes.

Gobsmacked, Ryuji leaned in closer, and realized that his friend was actually listening with his eyes closed for the exact moment when that little click sound would occur. He glanced to everyone else, who was also watching with surprised faces, and shrugged.

Airi watched, mesmerized. He was like those bankers who could count stacks of money in seconds by hand, flipping bill by bill.

By the time Akira made it to the 231th combination, the briefcase finally made the loud click that they had been waiting so anxiously for, and the top released.

"As expected of you, Akira!" Morgana praised with a satisfied purr.

Ann clapped her hands. “Let’s open it and see what’s inside!”

They all crowded around the case as the council president lifted the top, revealing bundles and
They breathed in awe at the sight. “H-How much is this?!” Ryuji yelped, looking around at them with wide eyes.

Yusuke leaned in closer, counting the bills with one look. “I believe one stack is one million yen…” He narrowed his eyes. “...Hm?”

Ann counted the stacks in disbelief. “One, two, three….Uhhh, there’s thirty of them in here?!”

Makoto slowly breathed out at the number. “Thirty million yen...Even after splitting it, we still each get over four million...!”

Akira let a satisfied smirk grow on his face. Finally, this was their big break. “Great job, everyone. This is the best Treasure yet!”

Airi stayed silent, eyes trained on the bills. She wished, oh she wished…

Ryuji grinned happily. “Holy shit...It’s gonna be deluxe pork soup combo for me from here on out!”

Morgana gave him an exasperated look. “You have to think bigger than that…”

Yusuke shifted in his seat. “Not to bring down the excited mood...” He began slowly. “But does this money look real to you?”

Ann gave them a shocked look. “What?” She peered closer down at the bank, sputtering when she noticed they were all printed with Kaneshiro’s face. “Children’s Bank?!?” She shouted incredulously.

Ryuji gaped in horror. “F-For real..?!”

Deflating, Makoto grimaced. “I guess this represents...how everything he did was an act to make himself seem tough..? Or that everything about him was fake...”

Airi sighed and sat back in her seat. “You finally noticed, huh.” They finally realized it was fake. She handled money often enough that she knew from a glance that these weren’t even counterfeit, they were toys.

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Akira’s face fell. There goes any dreams about having a limo...

“Nooooooooo…” Ryuji slumped over the back of his seat dejectedly.

Airi smiled sheepishly at their dramatic groans of disappointment. “At least we got it, right?”

Ann shrugged with a smile, taking a seat next to her on the couch. “Yeah, we totes busted this case!”

Makoto blinked. “What do you mean? Is busting a case good or bad..?”

She grinned. “Both!”

Staring at her for a moment, a chuckle escaped her before she burst out laughing, holding a hand to her mouth. “To think the reward for the Phantom Thieves is feeling they “totes busted” the case…” She beamed. “Ahh...How funny!”
They smiled at each other, feeling their new member begin to settle into the team. “Now hold on a second.” Yusuke interrupted, sitting forward in his seat. “Even though the contents were nothing more than trash, the case itself is quite nice.”

Ryuji perked up, recovering from his depression. “All right then, let’s sell it!” He grinned. “Glad we got that sorted!”

“By the way Morgana,” Yusuke continued, turning to the feline on the table. “Have any of your memories returned?”

He shook his head dejectedly. “No, not at all…”

Ryuji frowned at his sad disposition. “C’mon, not even a little? Did that hit to your head make you forget if you did?”

Airi frowned at his constant digs against the feline. She should say something about it later. It was as if every time the feline didn’t meet his expectations, his words turned from teasing to harsh.

Morgana turned to glare at him from the corner of his eye. “It’s easy for you to talk.” He snapped. “You’re not the one who lost your memories.”

Makoto blinked in surprise. “You have amnesia..?”

Ann crossed her legs. “Something like that. He does remember searching for Treasures though.”

The council president nodded thoughtfully. “Hm. I hope your memories return soon then. So…” She looked at them hesitantly. “What happens next?”

Morgana sat up. “First, we wait for Kaneshiro to have his change of heart.”

Ryuji rubbed his hands together in glee. “It’s gonna be big this time. People’re gonna make a huge deal out of it, for sure.”

Airi let out a long exhale. “But that thing about the criminal using the Metaverse…” She furrowed her brow. “He said they were causing mental breakdowns…”

Yusuke nodded. “Yes, I was bothered by that as well.” He confessed quietly.

Akira frowned. “Who could it be..?” Was it...No. Don’t jump to conclusions yet. That last time might’ve just been a fluke, though he was suspicious even if he hadn’t said those words.

Ryuji sighed. “No point mullin’ over it now. Let’s wait and see how Kaneshiro’s change of heart goes first. We should prolly just lay low for a while.”

Makoto smiled in amusement. “I never thought I’d hear those words coming from you.”

Ann grinned, slinging an arm around his shoulders. “He’s getting a little smarter, right? Must be because he hangs out with us all the time.”

He sputtered, cheeks glowing red. “H-Hey! I’m not that dumb!”

Akira snorted, sitting back in his chair. “Debatable.”

Brown eyes snapped over to him and Ryuji teared up. “Dude...! You’re supposed to be my best friend!”
Akira grinned at that, letting him know he was only joking. “Yeah, yeah. We’re best friends.”

Airi let out an offended noise, holding a hand to her chest. “Well then, guess we’re not best friends anymore, are we?” She scoffed. “I’m being replaced by Ryuji…”

Akira sputtered, shooting up from his seat. “Wait, no..!”

She grinned at his reaction. “I’m kidding.”

He deflated, letting his shoulders slump in relief. “Don’t threaten me like that…”

Morgana purred. “You guys aren’t as disappointed by the Palace as I thought you’d be. It’s only thanks to our elegant queens that we made it this far!”

Grinning at the nicknames, Ann nudged Airi. “Yep, it’s all thanks to our elegant queens.” She teased.

Reddening at the name, Airi ducked her head shyly. “I...I guess? Elegant queens though?” It was just their code names. It wasn’t like they were actual women in power.

Yusuke crossed his arms over his knee. “You two are royalty, I suppose. The moniker isn’t inaccurate.”

Blushing as well, Makoto awkwardly swept some hair behind an ear before she shouldered her bag. “We-Well, if there’s nothing else, I should be getting home. It has been a long day after all.”

Airi looked up at her with a worried frown. "How do you feel? Now that you've avenged your father."

Makoto stilled before taking a deep breath. "It almost doesn't seem real. Not to say our efforts weren't genuine, but once upon a time, I thought I would gather all the evidence and bring it to the police. Then I would see Kaneshiro rot in prison for the rest of his life." She smiled softly. "Even though it didn't happen the way I envisioned, I still achieved my goal. Once Kaneshiro confesses, my father can rest in peace knowing I solved his case. Well...We don't know if he will confess yet, but I hold some hope for it."

Akira smiled. "That sounds good. Don't worry so much about it, I'm sure he'll confess and then you'll get your wish."

She nodded. "If only I could've decked him in real life too, but I'll settle for beating his Shadow. Anyway, let me know of any updates." She turned toward the staircase.

Ann stood up as well. “Wait, let’s walk to the station together! It’s not safe at night…”

Ryuji snorted. “You forget she’s a kick ass aikido master? It prolly ain’t safe for them…” With a groan, he also stood up from his chair and grabbed his bag. “But yeah, let’s go home…”

The Yongenjaya residents waved goodbye as their teammates left the cafe for home. Morgana darted around now that he was fully healed, taking a seat on the table next to the staircase. “We stole another Treasure.” He purred. “We’re finally making some progress!”

Yusuke smiled and nodded. “Yes. It appears we will only continue to rise further.”

Airi smiled, her exhaustion starting to overtake her again. The energy she felt inside the Metaverse was wearing off. “Yeah...I hope…” She covered her mouth as she yawned. “I hope we’ll keep
Noticing that she was fighting to keep her eyes open, Akira furrowed his brow and stood up. “You OK? You look exhausted…”

She slowly shook her head. “I’m fine…” She wasn’t going to tell him that she hasn’t been sleeping well since two weeks ago. Last night, she was able to get a full five hours before waking up in a panic. “I’m just tired and stuff from the Palace…”

Their stomachs growled, reminding them that they hadn’t eaten since they left school. Glancing at the time, Akira fidgeted awkwardly. “Er...I can call Sensei to come over to cook for us…”

Blinking, she looked up at him in surprise. “Cooking? I thought she could only make ramen…”

He coughed. “You’re not wrong, but I think we’re all too tired to get anything. Besides, the cafe’s closed now and Boss probably sealed the food away.”

Staring at him for a moment, she nodded. “OK. Wait,” She frowned. “She told me to not let anyone else know. Yusuke hasn’t met her, but…”

At that, the artist stood up from his seat. “It’s all right. I would much rather prefer real sustenance.” He stated calmly. “Akira, please escort Aneki back once you’re finished.”

The leader nodded. “Right.”

She huffed at their shift change, but smiled slightly. It showed they really cared and took this seriously. If only he would never do anything to them…

Yusuke left the cafe and Akira walked downstairs to request the maid. Dialing the number on the public phone, it immediately connected. “Hi, this is Becky! How may I serve my master today-Wait...Is this Kurusu-kun?”

He coughed awkwardly. “Yeah...Can I request you?”

“...Sure. I’ll be there soon.” And with that, she hung up.

Putting the phone back, he let out a sigh. What was her story then? She didn’t even tell Airi anything, and she was probably the closest person to the teacher.

He checked his wallet, humming contently as all the money they accrued from the Metaverse meant that he was pretty loaded for a teenager. Now that Makoto had joined the group, they had to split their earnings in seven ways, him taking both his own and Morgana’s cut, but that still meant making a lot more than any part time job.

His phone buzzed.

R: We did all we can, right?
Y: All we need to do now is await the results.
An: I wonder what’s going to happen when he has the change of heart. Do you think he’ll turn himself in?
Ma: That seems likely.
Ma: I hope he spills everything to the police…
Y: Well, there are a few lingering worries, but I believe we did well.
Ak: We did.
An: Right? We were going up against a real criminal, after all.
Y: Yes, we managed to steal the heart of a notable lawbreaker.
R: Can’t wait to see Akechi’s face when he hears the news!
An: Honestly, I just hope that people who see it get some courage from the news.
An: Right, Airi?
R: Airi?

Frowning at the lack of reply, Akira walked back upstairs to check why she was responding to the group chat.

Landing at the attic, he softened when he noticed she had moved from the couch over to the bed, having fallen asleep. Morgana had padded over to keep her company, sitting next to her still form.

He walked over as well, taking a seat on the bed and letting the feline read off the screen.

Ak: She’s asleep.
An: Oh, phew. Glad she’s OK.
An: Wait, how do you know that?
Ak: She’s still here at the cafe.
R: Ohooo...Yusuke left you two love birds alone, huh.
Y: I only left because I know Akira will take good care of her.
Ma: Let’s get back to the subject.
Ma: There’s still one thing that worries me…
Y: Do you mean how someone is using the Metaverse for evil?
An: It would be seriously unforgivable if someone was really doing that…
R: Eh, we can think about that later.
R: For now, let’s just wait for Kaneshiro’s change of heart.
Ma: Very well. Nicely done, everyone!

“All we need to do now is let the results come rolling in.” Morgana meowed quietly, considerate of the person sleeping. “We did great today though! Public opinion of us should skyrocket after this!”

Akira smiled and nodded. Things were really looking up for them.

The bell at the front door jingled, signalling someone came in and Morgana darted to a shelf, hiding at the top. Footsteps thudded closer, the wood creaking as they walked up the stairs. Kawakami showed up in her maid garb and a broom, about to say something but stopped when she noticed the person in the bed.

Staring at Airi who was sleeping away, hair and clothes mussed up from today, she turned a livid eye at the transfer student. “What is this?” She hissed.

He sweated nervously. This looked bad. It always looked bad. “Uh, I-”

“I know you two are together, but are you seriously already having sex?!?” She shouted quietly. “This better be consensual, and you better be using a condom!”

Blushing furiously at the accusations, he held his hands up. “It’s-It’s not what you think..!” He sputtered, though inwardly he wished. “We’re not together like that!”

She paused, narrowing her eyes. “...You’re not?”
He slowly shook his head.

Leaning back, she crossed her arms. “Hm... I believe you. So, why did you request me? I told you that the story about my sick little sister was a lie...” She pursed her lips. “You know you’re being used for money, and you still request me?”

He slowly exhaled, relieved that she wasn’t angry anymore. “...I want to know more. Or more like, we want to know more.”

She blinked in surprise. “Huh..? What good would that do?” She shook her head. “You really are one strange kid...” Her eyes drifted over to Airi who was still asleep, and softened. “Both of you...”

She sighed. “I’m a mediocre teacher and a mediocre maid... And yet, you listen to everything I have to say...” She looked away morosely. “...You’re the complete opposite of me. I don’t even properly attend to my students’ needs. Airi picks up my slack...” Biting her lip, she took a seat on a nearby chair, not meeting his gaze. “The money is actually... An ‘apology.’” She took a deep breath, staring over at Airi on the bed. “There was a student named-”

“Takase, right?” Akira murmured. “Airi told me his name...”

She nodded demurely. “Yes. Takase Taiki. He attended the school I taught at before Shujin. Takase-kun was considered a problem child since he had the lowest grades and skipped school a lot. So I was put in charge of guiding him...” Her face fell. “Or rather, pushing him to transfer to another school. But when I got to know him, I realized that he wasn’t a problem child after all...”

She smiled slightly. “In fact, he was working several part-time jobs just so he could cover his living expenses. His relatives took him in from the orphanage that Airi was in after his parents died, so he had to make money to support himself. He couldn’t attend school every day, but he was motivated to study. He told me he wanted to graduate and find a good job so he could go back to his old orphanage and help his little sister out... That’s why I decided to tutor him.”

Akira listened intently, noting that the person on the bed shifted but didn’t say anything. She was awake and listening silently.

Not noticing, Kawakami continued. “After I started working with him, his grades started to improve, slowly but surely.” She frowned morosely. “But I was told that it was wrong to only help certain students and not others... Then a strange rumor about him being a juvenile delinquent and being an unwanted orphan began to circulate. And on top of that, I got called into the principal’s office...” She sighed. “He threatened me... saying that I’d be dismissed if I continued to tutor Takase-kun.”

Akira frowned disapprovingly. “... How terrible.”

She nodded in agreement. “Yeah... But you could say the same about me.” She looked away. “I got scared... of losing my job, and of having rumors spread about me. So... I canceled our upcoming tutoring sessions...” She gripped her skirt tightly, wrinkling the stiff fabric. “... Takase-kun was on his way to one of his part-time jobs when I told him... Out of all days, it was New Year’s Eve, and it had been pouring rain all day... And...” She choked back a sob as tears gathered in her eyes. “He died in a car crash.”

Airi shot up from the bed, staring wide eyed at the teacher. “What...?” So that was why he died? That was how Kawakami was involved? Because she had tried to help, he ended up dying. His kind and joking personality, his hollow but cheeky smiles, his life...
At this moment, she was so glad that Nishiki had killed his killer.

Gasping when she realized her pseudo daughter was awake, tears began falling down her cheeks when she clenched her eyes, bowing her head in shame. “...Yes. He sounded so depressed when I told him that I couldn’t tutor him anymore…” She took a shaky breath. “But then he said it was no big deal because he had to work anyway, so I wouldn’t feel bad. If only I had kept my promise to him...”

Akira shook his head. “It’s not your fault.”

She didn’t listen to him. “Takase-kun was exhausted from the tutoring sessions and working at all his part-time jobs...His guardians blamed me for the accident, saying it was all my fault that he was so tired...” She stared down at her lap dejectedly. “They said that they were going to sue me and take the issue to the media and Board of Education. I wouldn’t have been accused of a crime, but if word had gotten out, the school would’ve been done for.”

She gripped her skirt. “...I wanted to continue teaching, no matter what.” She confessed quietly. “So I ended up paying them the “apology” money so they wouldn’t sue me or say anything.”

Airi clenched her fists as she scooted to the side of the bed. “Are you serious? And you’re OK with that?” She knew his relatives weren’t the greatest people, but extortion? They were no better than Kaneshiro.

Kawakami shook her head. “It was my indecisiveness that backed him into a corner, and I blame myself every day. I know paying them isn’t going to bring him back, but it’s the only way I can atone for my sins.” She shrugged helplessly. “It seems like his guardians are satisfied with our arrangement, so...”

She glanced away before standing up, pasting a fake smile on her face. “...See? Nothing good ever comes from getting involved with me. I have to keep my distance to avoid hurting others, so I don’t meddle in my students’ lives. Airi is the only exception because I’m atoning for taking her brother away, but even she wouldn’t need me once she turns twenty. I’ve been coming here because of a random twist of fate, but we should say goodbye as well.”

Akira furrowed his brow. She was a victim too. She didn’t deserve to suffer forever like this. “But I want to help with this.”

She sighed and looked away, her fake smile dropping. “Kurusu-kun...You’re really not the type to back down, are you?” She laughed cheerlessly. “I guess we’re all in this together, now that I told you the whole story, right?”

Exhaling shakily, Airi shot off the bed and enveloped the older woman in a hug. “...I’m sorry.” She murmured. “I didn’t know you felt like this...I’m sorry I tried to pressure you to tell me.” She was so sick of not knowing anything that she never considered how the older woman had felt. She had only thought about herself and not the people around her. If only she could do something now, but she was so tired...

Staying still for a moment, Kawakami slowly reached up with her hands and hugged her back. “It’s OK...It’s my burden. I’m sorry it’s taken this long to tell you...”

Airi shook her head, taking a step back. “It’s been a while now, so...it doesn’t hurt as much...” She smiled slightly. She didn’t have time to grieve. “About his relatives...Are you sure you want to just leave it?”
Kawakami nodded slightly. “It’s been years now, so I know how to manage. You don’t have to worry about this.”

Regarding her for a moment, she nodded slowly. “All right…”

Two stomachs growled and the students looked down at themselves.

Kawakami blinked before beaming. “All righty, time to cook for my master and his guest. I’m going to put more energy into it than usual today!” She covered her mouth as she coughed.

They stared at her, furrowing their brows. That cough didn’t sound healthy…

The coughs receding, she quickly looked around and perked up at the sight of some dust on the shelves and windowsill. “Oh my, this room is sooo dusty! Even though I wipe the place squeaky clean every visit…” She grinned. “Well, I guess it’s all for you, Master. I’ll work hard to earn my keep~!” She went downstairs to boil water for ramen, and Akira and Airi stayed upstairs in the attic.

Sighing, Airi took a seat on the bed again and blinked when she realized she messed up the sheets. “Oh, sorry. I fell asleep here without asking you…”

Akira waved her away. “Don’t worry about it. I can tell you’ve been tired for a while now…” He frowned with concern. “How are you really? And don’t just say you’re fine,” He quickly added when he noticed she was about to open her mouth to refute. “Yusuke told me Nishiki came over yesterday to reinstall locks around. Did something happen?” His eyes narrowed. “Did he come near you?”

She hesitated for a split second before shaking her head. “No, nothing like that happened. It’s just better to be safe than sorry…” She turned her head to observe the almost full moon through the window. “He killed them only a few blocks away from here…”

He nodded slowly. “Boss told me…He also told me he was going to take you in, but everything happened so fast and then I guess this is when you went to the second orphanage that he lost you.”

She looked down at her lap, letting the information sink in her head. “He did…? He never told me that…” A small but fond smile grew on her lips. That was really nice to hear. What would her life be like if she had lived with Sojiro? Instead of being forced to suffer the pain of losing the cello her parents gave her, to witness the murder of her best friend, to have to starve and freeze in San’ya with a bunch of other kids.

Maybe she would’ve stayed the Airi her parents knew. Maybe she wouldn’t have.

She’d never know at this point, and if she was honest, she didn’t regret it. Only Rui’s, and now Takase’s, deaths. She wouldn’t be an outcast of society just by her status of being an independent minor. She wouldn’t have gotten her Persona. She wouldn’t have met these incredibly kind hearted people, and if she did, she probably wouldn’t be as close to them as she was now. She never would’ve been so close with Akira. And she would never regret knowing him.

Her chest pulsed again like yesterday, and she could feel Jeanne shift a bit in her soul. Did she learn something new? She was about to close her eyes to concentrate, but wood creaked as Kawakami walked back up the stairs, placing two bowls of fresh steaming cup ramen on the table as well as disposable chopsticks. “Enjoy~!” She chirped. “I put in a lot of love in these, Master~!”

Akira sweatdropped and sat down in front of one of the bowls. It was still really awkward to be called master. “Th-Thanks…”
She beamed before picking up the broom and commenced cleaning the other side of the room. Airi stood up from the bed and took a seat on the couch, breaking apart her chopsticks. “Itadakimasu.” They intoned before digging into their meal.

Airi blinked as she slurped up her noodles. It wasn’t too bad actually, which was amazing since Kawakami couldn’t cook for shit. There was too little water and the noodles were a little burnt, but otherwise it was OK.

They finished quickly, letting out a sigh of content at finally getting food in their stomachs after a long day.

Finishing the cleaning, Kawakami coughed again. “Oh, uh, woow!” She laughed nervously. “It’s so dusty! If my cough is already this bad...Maybe we’d be better off tearing this place down than trying to clean it?”

She grinned, her dimple showing. “Well, the shabbi- I mean, chicness of this room is truly its charm, so let’s keep it as-is!” She checked her phone. “All right, I have to go.” Gathering her skirt in her hands, she curtseyed. “Thank you for using our service~!” Pivoting on her heel, she walked down the stairs and left the cafe, the bell on the door ringing.

Morgana jumped down from the rafters, viewing where the maid just was. Letting out a thoughtful hum, he shook himself of any dust before bathing himself with the lick of his tongue.

Checking her phone, Airi stood up as well. “It’s late and we still have school tomorrow.”

Akira nodded, getting up as well. “I’ll walk you. Morgana, stay here.”

“Yeah, yeah…” The feline replied languidly as his eyes fell closed, curling up on the bed.

Leaving the cafe, they walked the short distance over to her house, the second floor lights were on since Yusuke was still awake. Getting to the door, she opened it with the new keys before turning to Akira. “Thanks for walking me back. I know I keep saying it, but…” She smiled gratefully. “I just really appreciate you doing this all the time.”

Blushing slightly at the sweet smile, he rubbed the back of his head bashfully. “Don’t worry about it. I’d do it even if we weren’t worried…” He smiled slightly. “See you tomorrow?”

She nodded and he turned to walk back to the cafe. Making sure the front door was locked and the sign was turned to “CLOSED,” he walked back upstairs and changed into his sleepwear.

He sat down on the bed, sighing as he rolled his neck. Today had been a lot, but they accomplished another goal. They had stolen another Heart and saved yet another person. Lots of persons in fact. Did that make them heroes, even as they skirted around authority?

Morgana sat next to him on the bed. “That Kaneshiro truly was an evil stain on society.” He stated firmly. “Same with Kamoshida, and Madarame too. They hurt and exploited others just to satisfy their desires…” His ears drooped. “Still, there were people around them who noticed their terrible deeds, weren’t there? I wonder why they turned a blind eye...Why doesn’t anyone help?”

Akira sighed. “They’re too scared…” When a person was too scared, they’d ignore a lot just to save themselves. Or in Nishiki's case, taking advantage of the already existing system to protect his “Lil Sis.”

“So it’s because they don’t have the courage.” Morgana concluded dejectedly. “Humans are so weak. Humans…” He trailed off before licking a paw. “Hey, do you think I’ll really be able to
become a human? When I touched the Treasure...some memories came back.” He confessed. “I tried to force myself to forget, but…” He looked up pitifully at his leader. “I really may not be human…”

Akira tilted his head and crossed his legs. “I’m sure you are.” At the very least, he would never be a typical cat.

Blinking, Morgana let out a quiet purr and nuzzled against a hand, showing him a little affection. “Talk about a lukewarm response.” He perked up. “Now that I think about it, I gotta be human. I am the core of the Phantom Thieves, after all!”

Amused, Akira nodded in agreement. ‘I feel like my bond with Morgana is growing deeper…’

Turning in a circle, Morgana laid down on the bed. “Come on, it’s not good for you to stay up this late. Let’s go to sleep.”

Nodding, Akira kicked off his shoes and laid down in the bed, closing his eyes.

Water dripped nearby and his eyes snapped open, seeing the now familiar ceiling of his cell. Getting up from the cot, he slowly trotted over to the bars, gripping the metal.

Caroline smacked her baton against the jail door. “Our master wishes to speak with you! Heed his words!”

Igor chuckled ominously. “You’ve defeated the repulsive fiend of gluttony this time. Well done. I am glad to see you have devoted yourself to your rehabilitation.”

Justine turned to the phantom thieves leader. “You are not worthy of such kind words, Inmate...I suggest you treasure them.”

Igor crossed his legs. “Do you recall the whispers about that strange man?”

Akira narrowed his eyes. “The other Metaverse user?”

Caroline snapped her eyes at him. “Even a chicken could remember something that important! Don’t sound so cocky about it!”

He grimaced, nodding silently. He had to remind himself that when they called him, he was at their mercy. What ever amicable relationship they had when he entered willingly didn't exist here.

Justine stood at attention. “…This is about the cases of those people who shut down, is it not?”

Igor nodded. “Indeed...I speak of another with powers similar to yours. If you are to complete your rehabilitation, you may encounter him eventually…” He chuckled, his heel tapping the carpet. “Yet another thing for me to look forward to. I shall grant you an ability befitting of your newfound growth. Consider it a gift. It would be greatly troubling if you were to not strengthen your abilities.”

Akira nodded once again, noting that they were aware of everything around him. Igor was especially guilty of this, but it must be because he’s some sort of deity.

Glancing up at the speakers, Caroline tapped her baton on her shoulder. “It’s time, Inmate!”

Justine turned to him as well. “Return to your world.” She commanded softly.
A shrill ringing echoed throughout the prison and he felt himself falling back into the void, seeing nothing, hearing nothing, feeling nothing...

Airi closed the door and turned the lock once, twice, four times. Even if this lock was new, she had to make sure. She went around the first floor to make sure all the windows were locked before walking upstairs to take a bath.

Just as she was about to close the door to the bathroom, she heard another door open and Yusuke walked by, already in his sleepwear.

He stopped, noticing she was home. “Oh, Aneki. Welcome home.” He greeted quietly. “Are you all right? You had slept through our text messages.”

She blinked, looking down to check her phone. Sure enough, she missed a dozen texts from the chat. “Oh, sorry...Well, I’m sure nothing will happen. We should wait for his confession like Makoto said.”

He inclined his head. “You are right of course. I am going to bed now. Good night, Aneki.”

“Night, Otouto.”

Her phone buzzed and she check the messages.

Ni: Your debt’s been lifted.
Ni: Something happened, can’t say what, but Kaneshiro’s out of the picture.
Ai: What?
Ni: He started bawling his eyes out at the lounge and asked to be taken out.
Ni: We handed him over to the cops.
Ai: Isn’t that against the code?
Ni: He never took the oath so he doesn’t count. Anyway, just wanted to let you know that.
Ni: You can rest a little easier without 3mil over your head.
Ni: I’ll let you know if I find anything about that guy.
Ni: Night.
Ak: Good night.

She sighed. She should tell the others about this tomorrow. It was too late right now. Drying her hair with a towel, she walked into her room and stopped.

Her window was open again. She knew she locked it before leaving the house this morning.

Clenching her fists, she hurried downstairs to the kitchen, making sure to be quiet while taking a knife out of the drawer. She didn’t want to disturb Yusuke who kept the tatami room’s shoji doors closed.

She climbed back up to her room and locked the door before hurrying to lock the window as well. There weren’t any new photos or envelopes, but this was a new message. He was telling her he can get in, even with an upgraded lock. The windows couldn’t hold the same lock as the doors, but she thought...she hoped, that they would’ve done the job.

Gripping the knife in her hand, she slid into bed and hid it under her pillow. Her fingers had started twitching again, feeling the phantom strings against the tips. She wished she had time to
play her cello. It’s been so long, almost three weeks since she had touched it even. At least it was safe. He had no interest in that.

She closed her eyes, trying to sleep, but a small click made her snap to attention. Her heart began pulsing faster and she wanted so badly to cry. How long can this last? How far will he go? How long until she couldn’t hold on anymore?

With how exhausted she was, she might just collapse in the middle of the street tomorrow. Was there anyone who could help but not someone who was in danger from him? It wasn’t like she could go to the authorities for this. They wouldn’t take her seriously.

“Miss, your future..!” She covered her mouth in horror. “Please, you must let me read your fortune! Something terrible will happen to you soon if you don’t take action..!”

She shot up in the bed with a gasp. That fortune teller at Shinjuku. If she could believe her words, she must have some sort of Sight. She could help, even if it was just a little...

Another rustle from outside the window had her tensing again and she took the knife from under her pillow.

It was going to be another sleepless night.
---6/23, THURSDAY, EARLY MORNING, YONGENJAYA BACKSTREETS.

Airi yawned, the dark circles under her eyes getting worse each day. She didn’t sleep at all. She spent twenty minutes in the bathroom trying to cover up how terrible she looked. Her eyes were bloodshot from lack of rest, her skin was sallow and even her hair fell limp. When she combed her hair, the brush came away with several strands that had fallen out. She was losing hair too...

Trying to cook while the water boiled in the kettle, her eyes started to close, the sound of the eggs in the pan fading out into the distance. Just for a second…

“ANEKI!”

Her eyes snapped open from Yusuke’s urgent shout and she gasped, hurriedly turning the gas off when she noticed the eggs were burnt beyond redemption. She sighed despairingly at her blunder. Wasted food and resources. Unforgivable. “Sorry, Yusuke…”

He walked up next to her and with a worried frown, took the pan from her grasp. “I will cook. You should sit and rest...you seem even more exhausted.”

Slowly exhaling, she dragged herself to the dining table, collapsing in the chair. “Sorry…” She mumbled, guilty over wasting food and for worrying him. What was wrong with her… “I don’t think I can make the bentos today…”

“It’s all right.” He assured, expertly cooking new eggs within a minute. “Akira and I can manage. Perhaps we should stop by a convenience store to buy our lunches?”

She nodded slowly. “OK…”

The kettle whistled, signalling the water had boiled, and she forced herself to get up to pour it into a mug, discreetly adding in two espresso powder packets...or four.

She needed this, even though she was starting to suffer from the side effects. Her heart pounded against her ribcage even though she wasn’t exerting herself, and she knew it was because of all the caffeine she had been consuming the past week to keep herself awake. She’d prefer a heart attack at this point...

Locking the door behind them once they finished breakfast, they began walking down the back streets of Yongenjaya, arriving at the cafe within a few minutes.

Akira was already there, phone at his ear as he leaned against the wall. “-Said he’s calling off our debt. It seems he’s disposed of all the photographs as well.” She heard Makoto say through the phone. “And, um...My sister and her team have taken him into custody.”

“What?!” Airi yelped, the surprise driving away her sleepiness. Her sister took custody?

Akira looked up at her and waved before turning back to the phone. “Oh, good morning, Airi! Um...It appears they did not want him to...disappear, if you know what I mean. This wasn’t one of the cases she was working on, but she is in charge of him until he’s placed in prison.”
Morgana leaned over his shoulder. “His group was called a mafia, after all…” He murmured morosely. “I wouldn’t put silencing him past them.”

Airi let out a sigh. “No doubt. Nishiki contacted me late last night about that. He said his group wasn’t worried though. They handed Kaneshiro over themselves because he was a liability…”

“They handed him over? Does this mean we were successful in changing his heart?”

Yusuke tilted his head. “It’s hard to say. In my experience, Madarame had taken until the end of the deadline to confess. His health had rapidly declined once we stole his Treasure. The same could be said for Kaneshiro.”

Makoto sighed. “I see...What about those psychotic breakdowns that Kaneshiro mentioned..?”

Akira exhaled. “I’m not sure...but it’s probably about the ones on the news. There really may be someone out there who’s using powers like ours for evil…”

“True. That said, all we can do now is wait until Kaneshiro’s change of heart becomes clear to us. Thank you.” The call ended and he put his phone away.

“Good morning…” Airi yawned out her greeting, covering her mouth.

“Good morning.” Yusuke greeted as well, holding a secure hand on her shoulder.

Akira smiled and was about to greet them back but paused when he noticed her bloodshot eyes. “...Airi.” He breathed quietly, furrowing his brow in worry. “Did you sleep?”

She yawned again and shook her head. “Not really...Don’t worry though, I already drank a cup of coffee before leaving the house.”

Frowning disapprovingly, he reached out with one hand and curled his fingers around hers, tugging her to his side. “That’s not healthy.” He scolded as he helped guide her to the train station, Yusuke trailing after them. “Hold on to me, OK? I don’t want you to fall asleep in the middle of the street or something.”

Morgana popped his head out from the bag and experimentally scented the air around her. “Is that more espresso?”

Yusuke stilled. “When did you…” He frowned disapprovingly. “You’re not supposed to be consuming so much caffeine. I had thought I had hidden all the coffee within the house.”

She nodded slowly, trying to fight against another yawn. “OK…”

The artist only sighed at her scatterbrained response.

Getting to the station, they swiped their wallets at the turnstile, Airi smacking against the gates when she didn’t hover it close enough to the sensor. Akira held her shoulders when going down the escalator, and even pushed her onto the only free seat on the train.

She didn’t have the strength to protest, falling asleep immediately as the train rumbled through the underground tunnel.

Unbeknownst to her, Akira, Yusuke, and Morgana all shared a look, their concern for her growing by the minute. “Any changes?” Akira murmured quietly. “She’s losing sleep…”

Yusuke shook his head. “Unfortunately, I cannot say. She is unaware how thin the walls are, and I
can hear her shuffling upstairs even at four in the morning…” He sighed, a crease between his brows. “I am unsure of how we can help ease her paranoia at this point…”

Morgana wiggled his nose. “We’ll just have to keep an eye on her. With how tired she is,” He eyed her as her head rolled around from the shaking of the train. “It’s not hard to believe she would accidentally walk into traffic…”

“I hate how much it rains this time of year…” Inui-sensei began monotonously. “Speaking of rain, did you know that the teru teru bozu was originally female? According to one theory, it came from a Chinese paper doll of a girl- the “Sao Ching Niang.” When it came to Japan, it looked like a monk praying for sunlight, and became male.” He lectured. “In the history of the world, it’s not uncommon to twist people’s genders for politics or religion.”

He scanned the class with his gray eyes, pausing when he noticed Airi was dozing off on her desk. “Kimitsawa-chan, please look at this picture.”

Snapping her eyes open, she stared up at him with blurry eyes as he held up a tarot card. It was The High Priestess from the deck, the words La Papesse signifying its role. “Who is this woman, drawn as the High Priestess in most tarot decks?”

“She answered quietly, able to keep her eyes open for a little longer now. Maybe the coffee’s finally kicking in.

He nodded approvingly. “Correct. As expected of the class president. Joan- or Johanna as some historians argue- was the pope of Rome, even though women couldn’t be priests. As such, she was a legendary figure, sometimes thought of as an anti-church symbol.”

“Wow, really?”

“Senpai’s so smart…”

“According to the legends,” Inui-sensei continued. “Joan was a cross-dressing girl brought from Athens to Rome. Praised throughout the city for her wisdom, she was eventually chosen by the people as pope.” He crossed his arms. “However, when it was discovered that she was a woman, she was stoned to death. This incident was regarded a taboo by the church. As a result, Joan was stricken from history books.”

Airi pursed her lips, leaning her cheek against her palm. Joan could’ve brought people to a better future if they had let her be. Why was death always the first answer people decided on? Killing another person, especially someone you admired, shouldn’t be so easy like that…

Classes ended for the day and students milled around the school. Getting up from her chair, Airi noticed that Iida was still here, packing his books into his bag. She pursed her lips and walked up to him. “Iida-kun?”

Startled, he turned around. “Y-Yes, Senpai? Do you need something?”

She gave him a small smile. “How are you?”

He glanced around, noting who was still in the class before he leaned in. “I’m...I’m OK. They were threatening my family but they stopped last night.” He whispered hesitantly. “I-I don’t know if this...
means they’ll let me go though…”

She placed a hand on his shoulder. “If they stopped, it could mean they have, yeah.” She reassured. “Don’t go to the job anymore. You come to school and you immediately go home, OK? Just stay safe. I don’t want anything to happen to you or anyone else that’s suffering under this.”

He stared at her for a moment before nodding. “R-Right. Thank you, Senpai…” He smiled slightly. “You really did help, like you promised.”

Giving him another smile, she walked back to her desk and shouldered her bag. She didn’t have anything to do until the evening, so maybe she could spend that time asleep somewhere safe…

Walking out of the classroom, she headed down the hallway, passing and greeting other students who greeted back.

"Uh, Kimisawa-san!"

Stopping near the teacher's lounge, she turned around to see who called out to her. "Oh, Ikesugi-kun, right?" She gave him a small smile as the fair skinned student from class 2-E ran up to her. "How are you?"

Coming to a stop in front of her, Ikesugi breathed out. "Uh, I'm OK." He rubbed the back of his head. "I was wondering if you could help me? Since everyone keeps recommending you..."

She tilted her head. Someone wanted her help? Why did that sound so familiar..."Oh!" She blinked. "Were you the one who was about to call out to me last week? I remember hearing my name in the hallways."

He laughed sheepishly and ruffled his short brown hair. "Y-Yeah, that was Tsukishima about to call for you but I stopped him." He slumped. "I should've just let him..."

She smiled sympathetically. "Well, I'm here now. You have my undivided attention for this." No matter how tired she was, she would still help others if they asked for it.

Ikesugi breathed out a sigh of relief. "Thanks. So, ever since the new school year started, I've been feeling this weird...feeling." He scrunched up his face. "I got a few letters in my locker, so I think I might have an admirer, which is cool? But then..." He gulped nervously. "My toothbrush went missing...from my house."

Airi raised a brow. "Your toothbrush went missing? How does that connect with the weird feelings and letters?"

Eyeing the busy hallway, he leaned in closer and covered his mouth from any onlookers. "I think I might have a stalker." He confessed abashedly. "Those letters, my things going missing, this weird feeling as if someone's staring straight into my brain? It never happens in class, but once I'm out here, it comes back like- Eek!" He shuddered a full body shiver, goosebumps rising on his arms. "It's back..."

Alarmed, she looked around the hallway, trying to see who was staring in their direction. If he really did feel this unsafe, then it was her and Makoto's responsibility to make sure he was protected. If it was a stalker, then this had to be resolved immediately.

She eyed the hallways as students loudly talked with each other, slamming their lockers closed with noisy clangs as they prepared to go home for the day. She couldn't see anyone who was looking their way...
"I don't see anyone, but I'll try my best to help." Airi smiled gently. "Let me know if anything changes, especially if you get more "gifts." I don't know who could be doing this, but I just want you to be safe. Hopefully, I'll be able to find this person soon."

Relaxing at her convincing words, Ikesugi gave her a bright smile. "Thanks so much, Kimisawa-sa- senpai! It's been bothering me for a while, so I'm glad you can do something about it!" Waving bye, he headed down the stairs and out of her view.

Once she was alone again, her shoulders slumped, smile falling immediately. She was so tired that it was hard to keep up a friendly face. More importantly though, this stalker could be a serious problem. Leaving letters in someone's locker was fine since it was an anonymous way of confessing feelings, but taking things from their home? That went too far. Having a love sick stalker usually ended up in someone getting hurt. Or killed.

About to head up the stairs, an intense feeling of hate swept over her and she stiffened, a shiver creeping up her spine. What?

Quickly turning around, she tried to find where it came from. It was an oppressive anger, as if they wanted nothing more than to see her in a bloody puddle. Was it him? Or was it the stalker? If it was, were they that angry that she was talking with Ikesugi? Sure he was cute, but he was nowhere as handsome as any of her male thieves.

Her gaze caught a pair of dark wide eyes from behind a wall, pupils shrunken with rage, before the person ducked behind the corner and disappeared from her view.

Airi quickly walked up to where they were, but found absolutely no one at the doors. They must've escaped through the Practice Building.

Clenching her jaw, she tried her best not to frown as she turned around and headed toward the stairs like she originally intended. She was so tired of being stalked by him and now someone at school also seemed to want her dead. She needed a break.

Her phone rang and she took it out, noticing it was a text message directed to her and Akira.

Ma: You already know this.
Ma: But I’ve been ordered by Principal Kobayakawa to look for the culprits.
Ak: Is he on to us?
Ma: We seem to be fine for now, but we can’t let our guard down.
Ai: Why is he doing this?
Ai: Is this just because of the school’s reputation?
Ma: I assume so. He only said this could threaten the students…
Ma: I ask that you try not to stand out for a while.
Ma: By the way, Akira-kun, I usually spend my time at the student council room.
Ma: If there’s ever an emergency, feel free to find me there.
Ai: Do we still have that blanket there?
Ma: Yes. Why?
Ai: I’m coming up.

She put her phone away and left the room, walking down the hallway. She could nap at the council room. There usually weren’t anyone else there since it was a Thursday and the stalker wouldn’t be allowed in if they weren’t a council member. She didn't want to think it was someone on the council.
“Hey, remember that transfer student? I saw him earlier in the halls.”

“Oh yeah, I almost forgot about him. Is he still following Kimisawa-senpai around?”

“Yeah, I see them walk to school together every day. You think maybe they’re dating?”

“No way. She’s too innocent to even think about dating, let alone that guy...He’s kind of scary.”

“Innocent? More like too busy. You know she didn’t hang out with anyone until this year?”

“Yeah, and she only hangs out with the outcasts...Maybe she’s not as nice as she seems?”

“Maybe...but her class really likes her though.”

Ignoring the admittedly disheartening gossip as she resisted the urge to fall asleep, she trudged up the stairs and saw Makoto was standing outside, staring down at her phone. “Hi Makoto...” She greeted quietly as she slid the door open.

The council president looked up at her in surprise. “Airi, is something wrong? Why are you asking if we still have that blanket?”

She didn’t bother answering her, entering the room and going straight to the supply closet.

The Blanket was a thick microfiber blanket, brought in by a student who graduated a year ago. It was used during winter since the room didn’t have any heat, but at this time, she was going to use it to power nap.

Taking the soft comforter out of the closet, she placed it on the small couch before throwing herself down on it. Gripping one side, she rolled over, cocooning herself inside the blissful warmth. “Ahh...” She sighed in content.

She was in school. There were hundreds of students and staff still present on the grounds. He wouldn’t be able to do anything to her here. She could rest a little until it was almost evening and then she would see the fortune teller. She could give her some answers.

Footsteps approached her and she looked up with blurry eyes at Makoto’s amused yet concerned face. “Airi, are you that tired from yesterday?” She asked softly.

She only blinked as a response. She didn’t want to worry the council president, especially since the fiasco with Kaneshiro just ended...

The door slid open and Akira walked in, Morgana on his shoulder as always. “Airi, why’d you leave without- Oh.” He stopped when he saw she was bundled up on the couch.

Closing the door, he walked over and knelt down beside her with Makoto. “You don’t have to sleep here, you know.” He informed her quietly. “If you’re that worried, I would’ve let you sleep in my room again.” He saw Makoto tense up next to him and he glanced over at her. “Something wrong, Makoto?”

For a moment, she said nothing before shaking her head. “...No. Nothing’s wrong per say. Why don’t we leave her be for now?” She frowned worriedly. “She seems exhausted...”

Akira nodded and took a seat on one of the fold out chairs at the table, placing his bag with Morgana in it on the chair next to him.

Makoto took a seat on the opposite side and they turned to observe the now sleeping cellist,
watching as her face slowly relaxed as she fell into slumber. “...This is a little awkward.” Makoto confessed quietly, eyes glued on the sleeping figure with something akin to fondness and affection. “I don’t really know you too well outside of battle...May I ask how your studies are going?”

He leaned his jaw against his palm, resting his elbow on the table. “It’s OK. Ask what you want.” He reassured her. “They’re going fine since I study a lot with Airi. I got second place in midterms, so...”

She smiled. “I see...It’s good that you’re taking your studies seriously, and Airi has always been a hard worker. I’m not surprised she has been helping you, after all...” She paused for a moment. “People are asking for her to succeed me next year.”

Morgana looked up at her. “We’ve heard some people gossiping about it. How do you feel?”

She pursed her lips and crossed her arms. “...I’m not mad. In fact, I’m grateful that the school will have another council president that clearly cares for the student body.” She confessed. “It hurt to hear it at first because it stemmed from my inability to help out the scammed students, but the more I think about it, the more I realize...It’s over now. I’ll be going away to University by then, and I’m glad that I can confidently say I trust her to take care of things like I did, or even better.”

Akira nodded, smiling from her words. “She’ll be happy to hear that. Things were a little tense between you two last week...”

She ducked her head, her cheeks reddening from embarrassment. “That was...definitely my fault. I felt inferior that she was doing a better job, but I know she only wanted to protect me from additional duties. She saw how stressed I was, but I misunderstood...” She softened. “I’m really grateful I didn’t ruin our friendship.”

Akira stared blankly. She sounded way more affectionate than just friends but that might just be his possessiveness speaking for him.

“Kitty paws...”

They swerved their heads to see Airi had rolled over in her sleep, mumbling to herself as she dreamed. “Soft...toe beans...”

Morgana blushed, tail sticking straight up. “She fantasizes about my paws..?” Lifting one up, he flexed his digits before turning to Akira. “Do you think it’ll cheer her up if I let her touch them?”

Snorting, Akira covered his mouth as he laughed quietly. “S-Sure, why not.”

Makoto chuckled as well, bringing a hand up to cover her mouth. “She dreams about cats, huh...” She trailed off before shaking her head. “Anyway, there was something I wanted to ask you. If it doesn’t get in the way of your studies, that is.” She quickly added.

Blinking, Akira nodded. “Sure. I’ll lend an ear.” He did for everyone else. One more wouldn’t hurt.

She smiled. “Thank you. So...” She took a deep breath. “Up until now, I’ve been the quintessential honor student. I believe I’ve been handling my position as student council president with ease as well.” She tensed, realizing how it came off. “A-And I don’t mean that in a boasting way, that’s simply how I’ve thought about it.”

She looked down at her lap. “...But in the end, I was unable to make any kind of impact with either Suzui-san or Kaneshiro.” She murmured wistfully. “Turns out there’s no use for a rule-abiding
honor student when things get rough.” She looked up at him. “Now that I’m a member of this team, I want to do **everything I can** to help you all. All my studying up to this point has kept me quite narrow-minded. I think...I-I will need to broaden my horizons somewhat.”

Akira laced his hands together on the desk, giving her an impressed look. It took guts to admit you were flawed, and it took even more guts to want to improve on them. “Way to go, Advisor.”

She blinked before a small smile grew on her lips. “Advisor..? All right. If I’m the Advisor, then who is everyone else?”

Morgana purred. “Joker here is our leader, Ryuji’s our muscle, Lady Ann is the charmer, Yusuke is our artist, and mom is our arbiter! As for myself,” He puffed up his chest. “I’m clearly the master thief!”

Akira gave him an amused smile and patted his ears. “More like our mascot.”

Bristling, Morgana shook him off. “I am not! Just because I look like a cat doesn’t mean I am one! I’m human!”

Makoto blinked. “Arbiter?” She glanced over at the couch where Airi’s hair spilled out from the top of the blanket and softened. “She is, isn’t she…”

Akira furrowed his brow, the word being unfamiliar to him. “What does arbiter mean?”

“An Arbiter is an independent person or body appointed to settle a dispute.” She explained. “Basically, she’s our mediator that keeps us together. It fits her well.”

Mulling the information, he nodded in understanding. It did fit their “team mom.” She was always the one who stopped fights between Ryuji and Ann, and made sure everyone was healthy and happy. Was that why the battles became so much easier these days? Were they stronger because she brought them together?

“Focusing back on our talk,” Makoto continued. “My first step will be to learn more about the other students. But…” She twiddled her fingers awkwardly. “I struggle with that. There seems to be a disparity between my tastes and those of my peers…”

Pursing his lips, Akira had to nod. “You’re totally right. You’re a lot more formal than people our age. It’s not a **bad** thing, but…”

She sighed. “I knew it...I don’t even know where people like to go for fun...It would be nice to have a grasp of such concepts. Plus, the student council must be responsible for understanding the student body they serve, right? I can’t always rely on Airi for that. Uh,” She paused. “I-I don’t mean that in a surveillance way, I just want to know them as people.”

Akira snickered. “You sure you don’t mean following them around while hiding your face in that manga?”

Makoto blushed at his accusation. “N-No! That was...I’m sorry. I never apologized for following you around like that. You were very boring to observe, not that I mean it in a bad way!” She stammered when he deadpanned. “I may be a phantom thief now, but that’s no excuse for me to start ignoring my presidential duties. Now, back to the topic at hand...Where do people usually go for fun?”

He blinked, mulling over the question. “The arcade, probably. Or karaoke.”
She perked up. “An arcade? I’ve never actually been to one. Do you think you could take me? I’m not sure if it will broaden my horizons per se, but simply studying won’t get me anywhere.”

Raising a brow, he nodded. “Let’s go now. We’ll wake Airi up and bring her with us.”

She let out a sigh of relief. “Thank goodness...I think I would have been totally lost in there had I gone by myself. Well,” She stood up from her seat and straightened her skirt. “Let’s get going.”

She walked over to the comatose class president and crouched down to gently shake her. “Airi? Wake up.” She called out. Not getting a response, she shook harder. “Airi.” This time, she got a quiet groan and the cocoon wiggled around a bit, but still not awake.

She frowned, about to open her mouth again when Akira knelt down beside her and with his long fingers, began tickling the cellist’s neck.

Airi shuddered before shaking him off with a jerk of her head, opening one eye to glare up at them. “What.”

He only smirked at her crabbiness. That was revenge for when she did that to him a month ago. “We’re going. C’mon, you can’t sleep here forever.”

She pulled the covers over her head. “Watch me.” She replied, voice muffled by the blanket.

Makoto only blinked, observing yet another one of their interactions with a small thoughtful frown. “Airi?” She called out. “Can you come with me somewhere?”

“Hm?”

“I want to go to the arcade. I’ve never been, and Akira offered to guide me. I would appreciate it if you accompanied us.”

With a long sigh, the cellist rolled to the wall, unbundling herself from the blanket. “Fine...Only for you...”

Makoto beamed happily. “Thank you!”

Akira watched this blankly. What the hell was going on.

Morgana’s eyes darted between the three and with a shake of his head, he hid back inside the bag.

Slowly sitting up, Airi covered her mouth as she yawned. The little nap had helped a little, and she did feel better. Standing up, she straightened her skirt and suspenders before picking up the blanket, placing it back inside the supply closet.

She had to keep going. Just a little longer.
They left the school together and headed to the station, taking the train to Shibuya. Walking up to the ground level, they showed Makoto where the arcade was, the sounds of power blasters and 8-bit music reverberating loudly as soon as the glass doors slid open.

Makoto looked around in wonder. “So, this is where everyone comes to enjoy themselves…” She eyed a couple of school girls hanging around a claw machine, pointing to the plushes inside. “There are more girls here than I expected.”

Airi scrunched up her face, the bright lights from the machines helping to keep her awake. “Girls love video games, you know. Though I’m pretty sure they’re here for that limited edition Jack Frost doll…” She paused and turned to peer at one of the claw machines that held the plush. “Wait, what?”

Akira furrowed his brow, feeling his own Jack Frost twitch inside his soul. “He’s...an icon?”

Makoto raised a brow. “Pardon?”

Akira turned to her. “Jack Frost is a Persona I have. I don’t think you’ve seen it yet, but he looks exactly like the plush…”

She held her chin thoughtfully. “I know these dolls have been around for a while...Perhaps Jack Frost began as the myth, and the more people who saw and bought this doll, their cognition gave birth to the Shadow in the Metaverse?”

Airi slowly nodded. “That makes sense...I kinda want one now…” Biting her lip, she dug into her wallet to take out a ¥100 coin and inserted it in the slot. Taking the controls, she narrowed her eyes in concentration as she slowly moved the crane over the Jack Frost doll she wanted.

“You got it…” Akira hovered behind her, eyes trained on the claw. “Do it!”

She pressed the button and the claw slowly descended down, mandibles wide open. It hit the top of the plush, grabbing it with its feeble grip and began rescinding back up top.

Makoto held her breath as they watched the plush slowly make its way to the drop off, but they all let out a groan of disappointment as the claw couldn’t take the weight and it fell, just short of the exit.

“Dammit…” Airi cursed. “What a waste of ¥100.”

Pursing his lips, he made up his mind and Akira dug out a coin, inserting it into the slot. “I’ll try.”
She stepped to the side as he tried to grab the plush for her as well, but this time the claw couldn’t
take the weight at all and the Jack Frost doll fell back into the pile. He bit back a curse. He was so
close.

“Can I try?” Makoto asked excitedly and they nodded, moving back to give her a chance. She
inserted a coin and narrowing her eyes, she timed it just right so the claw caught the doll in its
grasp. It was slowly lifted up into the air, and with a shout of joy, they watched as it was dropped
off into the hole, dispensing at the bottom.

“Yes!” Makoto laughed in delight, reaching down to take the plush out. Straightening up, she
turned and with a slight hue in her cheeks, held it out. “Here, Si- Airi. As thank you for…for these
past couple of days.”

Airi blinked before beaming, not catching the stutter of her name. “Thank you, Makoto!” Taking
the plush, she hugged it to herself, sighing contently at the soft fibers. This would be another doll
to add to her bed. She did associate the little snowman with Akira since he had kept the Persona for
a while now, and it would help ease her mind if she had a part of him with her at home -
whereshestillfeltunsafe-. Maybe she should start a collection.

Akira could only stare, one eye twitching with irritation behind his glasses. What the fuck...

His bag rumbled and he could feel Morgana laughing to himself.

Now that they had fulfilled their side mission, they continued looking around. Hearing a shout,
Makoto turned to the shooters, watching as a guy shot at zombies on the large game screen. “Hey,
over there…You play by aiming the gun at the screen, right? That actually seems somewhat
realistic…”

She continued to observe and Akira tilted his head toward a free machine. “Want to try it?”

Tensing, she turned to him with an awkward smile. “I-If it’s OK with you…Do you think you
could teach me? You have a pistol and I have a revolver, but Airi here uses a rifle. I’m not sure if
the same applies to a game like this.”

He nodded, giving her a smirk. “It’ll be just like a holdup.”

Handing their bags over to Airi for safekeeping, they both took position in front of the controls and
held up their fake guns. Inserting a coin into the slot, they began the game. “I did it!” Makoto
gasped when she shot a zombie. “Huh?!…No way! Ahh!”

Akira sweatdropped as she continued playing loudly, other people in the arcade starting to pay
attention to them. The council president was too engrossed in the game to even notice, and their
time finally ran out, the screen asking for another coin or it was game over.

Breathing harshly from the excitement, Makoto put her gun back in the plastic rack and took her
bag back. “So this is how it is.” She smiled at her accomplishment. “It was…really fun.”

Airi smiled sheepishly at her innocent-like wonder. “You were really into it…”

She crossed her arms. “Of course that was just a game, but…I wonder if I could apply some of the
techniques I learned here during battle.”

Akira raised his brows in surprise. “You’re pretty sharp.”

She huffed in amusement. “Perhaps going somewhere I don’t normally frequent is what helped me
come up with that idea…” She paused before humming thoughtfully. “You know, it may only be a little bit...But I think I’m starting to understand how people pass time. Interesting.” She remarked. “I would’ve never even thought about coming here before.”

Akira gave her an encouraging smile. “That was a new side of you out there. I think it’s good you’re expanding your views.”

She stuttered. “I...Hey, do you think you could help me out again later?” She smiled slightly. “I might be able to give the team more ideas if I can gain increased knowledge outside of my studies.”

He nodded. “I look forward to it.” Not only would this help the team, but it’ll help him keep an eye on her. He didn’t know if it was real or it was just his imagination, but she was being really familiar with the cellist. He knew they’ve known each other for more than a year, but they were never as close as they were now. Was it just his possessiveness speaking?

She smiled. “I need to live up to your expectations now that I’ve taken up your time. Perhaps it won’t be immediately...but I’m sure I can be of use.”

He nodded again. ‘I can sense a strong resolve from Makoto…’

Airi blinked, seeing a flash of blue again but put it out of her mind. It was probably one of the machines. Her phone buzzed and she took it out.

**Ni:** I got something.
**Ni:** Meet me at the izakaya in Shinjuku.
**Ai:** I’ll be there soon.

“By the way,” Makoto continued. “You went to the red-light district when you were chasing after Kaneshiro, right? I’d like to go there as well.” She paused when she noticed them giving her strange looks and stammered. “No! N-Not for my own purposes…” She sighed. “To tell you the truth, I recently got a report that one of our students was spotted there...I’m skeptical, but…” She pursed her lips. “I’d like to confirm firsthand for myself.”

Akira nodded. “Sure. Should we go now?”

Airi checked her phone. “Yeah. I have to go there too, so let’s go together.” She linked her arms with the council president. “Or is it a bad time?”

Looking down at their entwined arms, reminded of an older woman doing the same to her three years ago, Makoto shook her head and smiled shyly. “It’s fine. I don’t have a curfew...But, I’m not sure if that student would be there at this time.”

Akira shrugged, shouldering his bag. “Won’t know if we don’t check.” He looked down at himself. “We’re still in our uniforms though...Should we make a quick trip to change?”

Makoto nodded in agreement. “Yes, that would be wise. We don’t want to stand out. I’ll meet you two at the JL Line?”

Everyone nodded and went home to change. Getting to the cafe in Yongenjaya, Akira changed into his black shirt, white shirt jacket, and blue jeans before accompanying Airi to her house.

It was still light out, so there were plenty of people around the neighborhood and even that one
rude patrol officer that hung around near the bar, but she still couldn’t find it in herself to feel safe. Arriving at her house, she opened the door and let him in, letting him know she’ll only take a minute.

He nodded and took out his phone to pass the time.

Walking upstairs, she entered her room and scanned the surroundings. Nothing changed. Shoulders relaxing, she left the new Jack Frost doll on her bed and took out her casual dress, changing in the bathroom as it had the smallest window.

Making sure her concealer still hid her dark circles well, she took her bag and padded down the stairs. “I’m ready.”

He looked up from the screen and smiled. “Let’s go then.”

They walked back to the station together and took the train to Shibuya. Going up the escalators, they met Makoto in front of the JL Line and they all took the train over to Shinjuku.

Makoto looked around at all the crowds. Even with there being light out, the streets were bustling with all sorts of people; businessmen, retailers, tourists, everyone being above the legal age. “There are so many people here…” She remarked in awe. “I guess this really is the biggest red-light district in Asia, huh. Apparently this place was a hotbed for criminals and illegal immigrants before they installed surveillance cameras...I heard there were quite a few brothels as well.”

“Those are still around.” Airi refuted calmly. “They just call them host and hostess clubs now.”

Blushing slightly at the information, Makoto nodded. “Yes, I know. You can’t root out prostitution so easily.”

Akira raised a brow at them. “You know a lot about this, Makoto…”

She swept some hair behind an ear. “Well, I heard a great deal about it from my father...This is the first time I’ve actually been here myself though.” She glanced over to another street, noticing a patrol officer walking around. “Regardless, it’s become far safer now than it used to be. Of course, the surveillance cameras played a substantial role in that...But it was mainly thanks to the police efforts to clean up the area.”

Airi tilted her head. “Was your father on the force?”

She nodded. “He was a police officer and he worked in this area.” She sighed. “But even with his efforts, there’s no way to eradicate crime entirely. It seems the operations nowadays are only better hidden…” She shook her head out of her depressive thoughts. “Anyway, seeing is believing, yes? Come on, let’s have a look around. We should walk separately. I want to see what happens when a girl walks through these streets.”

Akira furrowed his brow. “Are you sure?”

She nodded firmly before turning to the cellist. “Airi, please keep close to Akira. My aikido is proficient enough, but you’re still a beginner.”

Airi nodded. “Don’t worry, I have both of you here to protect me, right?” She smiled softly.

Akira nodded, placing a hand on her shoulder. “Of course.”

Makoto frowned slightly before squaring her shoulders. They walked down the streets a little
distance away from each other, and the Yongenjaya residents watched worriedly as several men tried to start conversations with the council president.

One man in particular was being rather obstinate as he tried to chat her up. She politely refused and tried to ask him a few questions, but he reached out and grabbed her wrist. Maybe she wasn’t thinking straight due to prolonged exhaustion, but Airi ran over and smacked his hand away before tugging Makoto by her hand, ignoring his shouts about how “two girls were better than one!”

Running down the street, Akira following them, they finally stopped close to Crossroads bar. Makoto panted. “...Did we lose him? That guy was so persistent...”

Looking back down the street and through the crowds, Akira nodded. “Yeah, he’s gone.” He turned to Airi with a frown. “That was reckless of you to just rush in.”

Airi pursed her lips. “Better than letting her stay trapped.”

Makoto scowled. “He must have been a scout for a hostess club. He mentioned how “his girls” get paid a lot to wear cute dresses...” She sighed. “All I wanted was to ask if any Shujin students worked there...but he nearly dragged me inside with him. If Airi hadn’t interrupted, I...”

Airi let out a sigh. “That was pretty dangerous...”

“For him maybe.” Makoto refuted. “I thought I was going to have to knock him out...I’m glad nobody had to get hurt though.” She grasped her chin thoughtfully. “Hm, I guess that’s how they do it...I’ve learned something new today. Oh,” She looked up at them both with a smile. “And thanks again. It seems I’m always being helped. I hope I can do the same for you both someday.”

Akira nodded. ‘I can feel quiet motivation from Makoto...’

“That aside...” Makoto continued as she glanced around, noting all the adults. “Even though this is a shopping district, there are absolutely no students around here. And definitely no Shujin students...though I guess they wouldn’t come in uniform either way.”

A red plaid pattern caught her eye and Airi looked down the street with a frown. Was her eyes deceiving her? “I think you spoke too soon...”

Furrowing her brow, Makoto turned around as well. They watched as a female high school student in clear Shujin Academy garb walked closer before going down a flight of stairs into a shady establishment, not realizing she was being observed by her fellow students.

Makoto gasped. “That was...I used to be in the same class as her! But why is she here...?”

Akira looked up at the sign, grimacing when he read “The After School Salon.” “What does that mean?”

Airi raised her brows. “That sounds like...a massage parlor.”

Makoto turned to her in shock. “What..? A massage parlor?”

She nodded slowly. “You go to these for a massage and for a little extra, you may receive some...sexual gratification.” She frowned worriedly. That was Takao Eiko they just saw. Was this her part time job? “I’m going to hope that’s not the case here.”

Makoto grasped her chin. “I’ll have to ask her about it. Oh,” She turned to both of them. “I’d like for you two to be there too, as my witnesses. Would that be OK?”
Akira nodded, resting his hands in his pockets. “Tomorrow then?”

She nodded before checking her phone. “It’s getting late...I’m sure this district will be swarming with patrol officers soon. We should go before they catch us.”

Airi shook her head, glancing down the road. “I still have someplace to go. Don’t worry,” She quickly reassured. “I’m not working as a prostitute. I’m meeting someone...That still sounds wrong.” She winced. “OK, don’t mind me.”

Makoto gave her a worried frown. “Will you be OK? Who are you meeting?”

She pursed her lips. “Nishiki. I asked him to do something for me and he said he’d get back to me. He messaged me earlier, so I should go before he gets impatient.”

Just as she said that, her phone rang out. Taking it out of her bag, she held it up to her ear. “Hello?”

“Yo, you’re late! I thought you said you’d be here already and it’s been like an hour!”

“Yeah, I’m in Shinjuku already, so—”

“Finally! There’s only so much shochu I can drink durin’ happy hour. See you soon.”

“OK. Bye.” Hanging up, she put her phone back in her pocket. “I’m going to go now before he yells at me again. Akira, you should walk with Makoto back to the station.”

He frowned disapprovingly. “And leave you alone in the middle of Shinjuku? Hell no. We're not having a repeat of this. We’ll both walk her back and then I’m going to stay with you when you meet Nishiki.” He rested his hands in his pockets as he pursed his lips. “I still don’t really trust that guy…”

Makoto blinked when she noticed those particular words. "Repeat...?"

Airi bit her lip, wanting to argue but she couldn’t find a good reason for him to leave her alone. “Fine. Let’s get going then.”

They walked back to the station, dropping Makoto off, before turning around and heading into the Izakaya on the corner. It was the same one that Akira almost entered the last time they were here, and since it was nearing 6PM, the small grill and bar was filled with people.

Looking around through the smoke from the charcoal grills, Airi finally spotted Nishiki near the back, several bottles of shochu in front of him and a half finished one in his hand. They squeezed past the tiny tables with people hunched over their alcohol and meat, taking a seat across from the tipsy gangster.

“Yo…” Nishiki greeted them, giving Akira a nod. “See you’ve got some protection with you. That’s good. How’s the locks holdin’ up?”

Airi grimaced for a split second before smiling. She wasn’t going to say it here. “The ones on the doors are pretty genius. I’m pretty sure I broke around five lockpicks trying to unlock them.”

He grinned. “Told ya they’d be great! Have you improved your lockpicking skills since Takase taught ya?”

She nodded slightly. “I got through a MIWA about a month ago within a few minutes.”

He let out a low whistle. “A MIWA, huh? Not bad, not bad…” He gestured to the menu. “Order
whatever you’d like, my treat. You too, kid.”

Akira glanced around, not feeling as awkward as he thought he’d feel. Even though this Izakaya was in the middle of the red light district, it was straight to the point just like in his hometown. They offered grilled meat and they offered alcohol. “I’ll take a few chicken sticks.”

“Same.” Airi piped up, leaning her elbows against the small and slightly sticky table.

Nishiki nodded and called out to the open kitchen. “Hey! Ten chicken sticks over here!”

“OK!”

Downing the rest of the shochu, he let out a sigh and pushed a manila folder in Airi’s direction. “Here’s all I got.”

Taking it in her hand, she furrowed her brow when she felt how thin it was. “That’s it? I thought you could get me more…”

“Listen.” He leaned in closer, eyes sober even after six bottles. “You already know he’s dangerous. Whatever else kind of information I can get ya, it won’t help you.” He jerked his chin at the envelope. “That contains the court records from his arrest, along with where he used to work. Whoever’s protectin’ him can’t wipe out bank records.”

Gray eyes darting from his neighbor to her fellow orphan, Akira furrowed his brow. “Is this about him?”

Airi nodded, gripping the envelope and putting it in her bag. “I just want more information, just in case.”

It wasn’t just in case. It was to get as much against him as she could. She didn’t know what they could do, but at least it was one more thing she knew about him. Knowing thy enemy and all that.

Akira frowned, eyes darkening with suspicion. “Airi...Did he try something? Was he around?”

She quickly shook her head. “No, I haven’t seen him-” She technically has yet to lay eyes on him. “I just want to know in case I have to go to court over this.”

Regarding her for a moment, he slowly nodded. “All right. That makes sense…”

“Ten chicken sticks!”

The waiter placed the order down on the table and left, hurrying back to the kitchen to keep up the demand of customers. They all took a stick and munched on the delicious flavors, filling their stomachs with the tender meat.

Airi could barely taste anything if she was being honest. Her senses were dulling...

Finishing off their meal, Nishiki checked his phone and sighed. “All right, I have to go. I’ve been put in charge of taking care of the rest of Kaneshiro’s shit operation…”

Tensing at the reminder, Airi narrowed her eyes. “You’re dismantling that operation, right?”

He gave her a grin, taking out a few bills from his pocket and placing them on the table. “Course. That operation was actually supposed to be his test, but as you can see, he fuckin’ failed.” He shrugged. “Sorry for any shit that went down though. We hadn’t killed anyone if that helps.”
Akira sweated nervously. The mafia really was dangerous if they could roll out a citywide operation like that. “Er...Sure. As long as you’re stopping.”

Nishiki only snickered before placing a hand on Airi’s head. “I’ll contact you later. Stay safe, Lil sis.”

With Akira here, there was no way she could see that fortune teller tonight. He would be asking questions and she would probably end up saying something hurtful. That was the last thing she wanted to do.

With a sigh, they walked back to the station and traveled to Yongenjaya, Akira dropping her home again before going back to the cafe.

Closing the door, she locked it once, twice, four times, eight times. Yusuke wasn’t home yet though he said he’d be back soon, which gave her ample amount of time to actually look through the information Nishiki had given her.

After taking a bath, she went into the study, taking a seat at the computer desk after locking the windows and covering it with the curtains. The room smelled like a blend of acrylics and eucalyptus mint at this point, making a strange yet sort of calming aroma that helped her drained heart.

Taking a deep breath, she opened the envelope and looked inside. As Nishiki had told her, it held information about his former job as well as the court trials from where he was supposed to be sent to prison for life.

She quickly read through both of them. “Worked in a government sanctioned facility...Co-workers with Sakura Sojiro, Isshiki Wakaba, and...Kimisawa Arihito…” She murmured to herself. So they were all co-workers. This Wakaba woman though…

“If you don’t have the papers, then they’re with Wakaba. Did she finish it?”

Her father only glared harder. "You already know the answer. She's nowhere near finished. It'd be a few more years before we can compile all the data."

Were they working on something important? Were her parents really murdered over something so stupid as pieces of papers? Her fingers gripped the documents, her nails leaving crescent scars on its surface. That bastard…

Letting out a sharp sigh, she turned on her laptop and opened up the search engine. “Isshiki Wakaba…”

Only a few news articles popped up, all saying the same thing in the descriptions, and she clicked on the first one. “...Was a scientist...committed suicide two years ago by walking into traffic...?” She stared wide eyed at the screen.

So her father’s, and Sojiro’s, co-worker was dead too, and recently. Why would she commit suicide? Was it due to stress? Japan did have a high suicide rate, but from someone who had been working on what seemed to be an extremely important project, she didn’t seem like she would just end it like that. It seemed so suspicious.

“Her daughter was there at the scene...no name…” She frowned, the muscles in her face pulling wearily from fatigue. So someone else lost their parent to whatever this project was. Her heart, though tired from the past weeks, felt for them. She knew what she went through, was going through.
Maybe she could ask Sojiro about this. If whatever happened to Wakaba was the same as her parents, then someone out there wanted something...and they would commit murder to get it.

Her phone buzzed.

Ni: I didn’t tell you everything tonight since that kid was there.
Ni: But I’m telling you now. Avoid Hisoka at all costs.
Ni: He’s under some pretty hefty restrictions.
Ni: My bosses told me I had to stop digging or else.
Ai: Are you serious?
Ai: So someone is letting him do this shit?
Ni: Sorry, but I can’t go against the board.
Ni: I may be higher than Kaneshiro, but I’m nowhere high enough to be touching those guys.
Ni: Keep yourself safe and tell me if anything happens.
Ai: He already picked one of the windows.
Ni: Fuck.
Ai: It’s fine. Don’t worry about it.
Ni: You call me immediately if you see him.
Ni: I can’t dig any further, but I can at least try to protect you.
Ni: That kid with you won’t be enough.

The sounds of the front door opening made her get up from the chair, closing her browser and putting the documents in the same drawer in her room that held everything else. Yusuke must be home. She shouldn’t let him see this. “Welcome home, Yusuke!” She called out down the stairs.

No one answered her.

She stilled.

No...No no no nono.

Heart beating against her rib cage, she quickly went and grabbed the knife she kept under her pillow. Gripping it tightly in her hands, knuckles white from the force, she slowly climbed down the stairs, making sure her footsteps were as quiet as possible.

Shakily taking a breath with blood pounding noisily in her ears, she leaned out from behind the wall and her eyes widened.

Her door was wide open, a single lockpick in the keyhole. On the floor in front of the door were several broken lockpicks and from the footsteps that echoed down the street and getting farther and farther away, it was him again.

She dropped her knife, and it clanged noisily against the wooden floors as she gripped her head. Her nails dug into her scalp and she screamed in frustration, the tortured sound echoing through the empty house. Even with a new lock- one that she couldn’t pick- he still got in.

He was proving to her that no matter what she did, he would still be able to get to her without much difficulty.

He was toying with her.

Sliding to the floor, she choked back a sob. “Hhh…”
She wasn’t going to cry now. She didn’t have the energy to cry. She didn’t have the time to cry. She was in danger. Everyone around her was in danger.

*And there was nothing she could do.*

Chapter End Notes

Makoto- rank 2

We're getting so close to the climax of Airi’s confidant!

Sorry for the late update, I haven't really been feeling motivated to post even though I have a lot written out. My midterms stretch for the whole of October and my family had a recent health scare, so it's been djfsjdfjdfjldjlsd. My updates will be erratic for now until probably the end of the semester.
---6/24, FRIDAY, EARLY MORNING, YONGENJAYA BACKSTREETS.

She didn’t sleep again.

The only thing keeping her going at this point was coffee. Something must’ve shifted in her body because she found she was able to stay awake with ease today, compared to yesterday when she was basically a walking zombie. Maybe Jeanne was helping out somehow, even though the Persona was just a reflection of herself.

Her complexion wasn’t any better though, and instead of just wearing concealer to cover her bags, she added foundation for the rest of her face to cover up her sallow skin. She was constantly using eyedrops to help relieve the burning of being awake for more than sixty hours. Since more of her hair kept falling out, she decided to just braid it and twist it into a half bun, half ponytail to keep it all together.

Without sleep, she found herself with too much time and started cooking early. She did everything mechanically as if she was on auto-pilot, and she didn’t even say anything to Yusuke when he greeted her. She only sat down, ate, and got back up to do the dishes.

“Aneki?” Yusuke murmured worriedly, placing a hand on her shoulder.

She shrugged it off and opened the door- the door that had already been broken into several times- and left the house, leaving him to hurry after her. They walked down the streets together in uncomfortable silence on his part.

For her, she didn’t even notice. She felt numb. As if she was submerged in freezing arctic water and the more she swam, the more tired she got until she gave up, drifting into the dark abyss that was the bottom of the ocean. Where light couldn’t penetrate. How ironic.

They walked to the cafe where Akira was waiting. He straightened up and smiled. “Good morning Airi, Yusuke.”

He was the only light that shimmered this far in the dark. “Good morning, Akira…” She mumbled, trying to smile but found that she couldn’t. It was like her face was frozen. Just like her parents had when they died, their bodies cooling on the streets. Just like Rui’s when she choked to death.

He looked down at her with concern. “You seem worse... Was it yesterday? Did those documents say something?”

She slowly shook her head and without answering him, began walking to the station.

Akira, Yusuke, and Morgana shared a look. This couldn’t go on. They needed to do something.

They swiped their wallets at the turnstile and boarded the train to Shibuya. Airi continued to stay silent as Yusuke and Akira chatted quietly, Morgana occasionally joining in. She couldn’t hear anything. Her ears were like filled with cotton, and all she could hear was that same gunshot that had killed her parents. That sound of Rui choking on her own saliva as she struggled to breathe.

“This is Shibuya, I repeat, this is Shibuya. The time is now 7:14AM, and the next stop is...”

Slowing to a stop, the train doors opened and they walked over to transfer to the Ginza Line.
Waiting for the train, they heard a familiar voice call out to them. “Whaddup!” Ryuji grinned his greeting, walking up to them. “Hey, about Kaneshiro’s Treasure...Ain’t it kinda disappointing?” He pouted, not noticing Airi’s quiet mood. “I thought the bank would have bathtubs full of cash or gold bars, y’know? But a briefcase...? Ugh,” He groaned. “I wish there was some place I could find a bunch of cash...”

“You could always obtain a part-time job, if you are so unsatisfied with the state of your wallet.” Yusuke suggested evenly.

He scrunched up his face. “Yeah, but it ain’t gonna be much...Whaddya think, Airi?”

Airi didn’t answer him, her eyes staring ahead blankly.

Ryuji blinked and stepped closer, peering down at her and waving a hand in front of her face. “Airi? You there?”

Akira took his wrist and pulled it down. “Don’t.” He murmured quietly, glancing over at the cellist with concern. She didn’t want the others to know and even though he disapproved of it, he still respected her wishes. “She’s...not feeling well. Anyway, what about Mementos?”

Giving her a worried frown, Ryuji took a step back. “Mementos, huh...I guess we’ve been gettin’ a bunch of cash out of it. I can’t keep dreamin’ about it though, so you better come with me and get some exercise in.”

Akira nodded and smiled slightly. That would have to wait until whatever this was blew over.

“Words are very powerful.” Chouno-sensei began, flipping her permed curls with a hand. “For example, Japanese is a language that when spoken, could have several meanings that would all apply! But such things have always been common among old languages, English and French being especially guilty of this. Mr. Kurusu.”

Tearing his eyes away from his desk mate, he sat up in his seat, paying attention.

“Who was one of the infamous catalysts of the French revolutionary war?”

He paused and glanced over at his class president again. The only french name he knew was hers. Could it be? “...Jeanne De Valoi Saint Remy.”

Chouno-sensei clapped her hands in delight. “Correct! Mademoiselle Jeanne was a woman of dubious repute due to her insistence that she deserved higher than her station. Though her name in French translated to ‘God is gracious,’ she was not a very gracious individual as she forged papers to steal an extremely expensive necklace that was meant for Queen Antoinette.”

“Whoa...”

“Did you know that? I didn’t.”

“Kurusu-kun’s pretty smart. You think he spends all day on the internet reading this stuff?”

“What was most interesting,” The teacher continued with an amused smirk on her garish red lips. “Was that after she was arrested, the Queen’s reputation was tarnished instead, as she was seen as
the guilty party. With just a twist of words, the public’s perception of a thief and lawbreaker was made as the victim. Such incidents like that happen more commonly than you think, and it’s all due to the power of intent in language.”

“A villain being glorified?” Morgana pondered quietly inside the desk. “I remember watching the news talk about people in scandals being let go because they were deemed “innocent,” but how many of them were actually the perpetrators? How many of them walk around free?”

Akira frowned at the question. Too many. Their justice system was flawed, he knew that personally, and he knew the man who sued him was still out there. Would he end up taking his Heart?

He glanced over at Airi who stared ahead blankly, and felt his worry increased. Hisoka was also walking around freely after ten years imprisonment, the court finding him not guilty out of nowhere. How many people actually believed that? How would she cope with this, the longer it went on? It was already affecting her so badly. What could he do to help her?

Airi heard nothing, saw nothing, felt nothing.

She brushed past Kawakami who tried to greet her even as she covered her mouth as she coughed. She sat through the classes without looking up, writing down the notes that passed in one ear and went out the other.

Ann had come up during lunch to ask if she was free to visit Shiho later, but she didn’t respond. She couldn’t endanger the ex-volleyball player too. She was still recovering, though she was almost back on her feet.

Akira had given her worried glances all day and she felt even worse for worrying him of all people.

She closed her eyes.

Something in her told her today was it. She wouldn’t be able to take it much more. Something had to give. And it might be her.

Classes ended for the day and Airi stood up from her seat, not hearing Akira, Ann, or Morgana calling out for her.

Walking out of the room, she passed by Ryuji in the hallway who waved.

She walked around Makoto who looked up at her in surprise, and left the school building.

Nothing was registering in her head today. Everything felt so flat and pointless.

Though she couldn’t sense it, her body was beginning to fracture. Her abuse of caffeine interfered with her brain and her heart, the organs working overtime for far too long with no break in sight.

The stress had ate away at her health, leaving her akin to a walking corpse. Her chiffon shirt, once snug around her curves, now hung loose on her weakened frame, shoulders weighed down by her guilt and delirium.

Each step she took was another sap of her energy, leaving her bereft of life. So close to her parents.
So close to Rui...

She listlessly stared up at the bright sun, walking down the street. Even the giant ball of light seemed dimmer today.

Was she dying?

From behind the school gates, the other thieves watched as Airi meandered down the street and to the station, worried out of their minds. “What is up with her?” Ann asked fretfully. “Did you do something again, Akira?”

He gave her an irritated look. “Why do you think it’s always me?”

She crossed her arms. “Because last time, you almost broke her heart since you were too stuck in your own head.”

He looked away. She meant that week when he avoided the cellist because of his self-consciousness. “Touche.” He muttered sullenly.

Makoto blinked in confusion, frowning slightly. “What was this about?”

Ryuji rested his hands in his pockets. “No idea, but shouldn’t we be focusin’ on the fact that Airi’s actin’ more like a zombie right now?”

She nodded. “Yes. It was worrying to see her just walk by me and other students without a greeting. She would usually say something with a smile…” She grasped her chin speculatively. “I was going to ask her to be my witness today, but seeing her like this made me change my mind. Had something happened..?”

Akira frowned. He knew what this was about. It was about Hisoka. He knew that he was out there somewhere, and Airi was worrying herself down to the bone about it. Last night in Shinjuku with Nishiki, she had said nothing happened, but her eyes had darted away for a second. He knew she must’ve been lying, but he didn’t want to confront her about it.

Now he was cursing himself for not pushing it.

Morgana sneaked his head out of the bag. “Let’s follow her and see where she goes.” He advised tensely. “We don’t know her current state of mind, and she could get hurt.”

Akira nodded. “I’ll let Yusuke know to wait at home for her just in case.”

Everyone nodded and using their experience as Phantom Thieves, discreetly followed the cellist into the station. They didn’t even have to sneak since she didn’t notice anything around her, walking about in a daze.

They watched as she got onto the train and they dashed in on the other end, Ryuji just barely making it before the doors slammed close. Their worry increased as they noticed Airi didn’t blink even as the train shook during its journey. The only thing that indicated she was still alive and conscious was that she was breathing.
“Guys…” Ryuji whispered. “I don’t think she’s OK…”

Ann gave him a look. “You think?”

“This is Shibuya. I repeat, this is Shibuya. The time is now 4:32PM, the next stop is…”

The train pulled to a stop in the station and they got off, watching from the corner as Airi stepped out and exited the Ginza Line. They followed behind her as she walked out into the station square and about to head down the flight of stairs when she stopped, right in the middle of the plaza.

They gave each other a glance. What was she doing? They couldn’t see her face since they were following her, all they could see was how tense her back was.

She continued to stand there motionlessly, people walking around her. No one stopped to ask if she was OK or anything, and she hadn’t moved for about a minute now.

Concern overtaking him, Akira was about to walk up to her to ask if she was all right when she jerked. Her entire body was shaking like a frail leaf, and she lifted her hands to grip her head, her nails digging into her scalp.

Alarmed now, Akira started toward her, ignoring their friends’ shout for him, when she let out a scream. The sound seemed to reverberate all throughout the square and people stopped, staring at her.

He stopped as well, staring wide eyed at her back. He could hear the pain in her voice, her howl was like a wounded animal that had been backed into a corner.

With a jolt, she ran down the stairs into the underground and after a moment, Akira gave chase, pushing past the people who were beginning to whisper. They didn’t know anything. They didn’t know what she was going through.

Running down the stairs, he panted and looked around, trying to find that distinct head of pink hair but to no avail. There were just too many people around in the underground walkway, and she was too fast.

“Hey!”

He turned around, seeing Makoto, Ann, and Ryuji had followed after him down the steps, panting when they stopped. “Where’d she go?!” Ryuji asked as he regained his breath.

Morgana popped his head out from the bag. “She must’ve gone home!” He theorized quickly, ears sticking straight up with panic. “We have to go after her! In her state, she could easily get hurt!”

Everyone nodded and Akira took the lead, running to his train. Swiping their wallets at the turnstiles, he held back a curse as the train just left the station and they were forced to wait. She was probably on that one.

They quickly boarded the next train and tapped their feet impatiently as it seemed to take forever to get to Yongenjaya. Every minute wasted here was another minute where Airi could be getting hurt, or worse.

Akira’s eyes darkened. He wouldn’t know what to do if something happened to her.

“This is Yongenjaya. I repeat, this is Yongenjaya. The time is now 5:03PM, the next stop is…”
Legs fidgeting as the train slowly pulled to a stop, they sprinted out of the doors and out of the station, heading straight to her house. Turning the corner, they ran down the backstreets until they saw that familiar house and they quickly slowed to a stop once they got to the front door.

Akira almost smashed his finger as he rang the doorbell, inhaling and exhaling harshly from the exercise. His hopes fell when the door opened, revealing the other occupant who lived here.

“Akira?” Yusuke blinked, hand on the door handle. “And everyone...Did you find Aneki?”

Makoto gasped with dismay. “You mean she’s not here?”

He shook his head. “No. She had not been here since this morning.”

Ann quickly took out her phone from her pocket and called the cellist’s number, but all she received was the busy tone, the automated sound beckoning a sense of dread and panic within them all. “She’s not picking up!” She panicked.

Akira gritted his teeth and in a fit of anger, slammed his hand against the wall. “Fuck!” He cursed at the situation, at the slow trains, but mostly at himself. “We lost her at Shibuya station. We thought she’d be home since she went down the stairs...Shit.” He sharply exhaled, holding a hand to his forehead at their mistake. “Where could she have gone...?” If anything happened to her, he’d never forgive himself. He had promised to protect her and he couldn’t even do that right.

They all looked down, trying to figure something- anything out.

Narrowing his eyes, Morgana jumped out of the bag and began to sniff the foyer, nose close to the floor. “...Had someone new come here recently?”

Yusuke blinked. “Nishiki-san had visited a few days ago-”

“No, not Nishiki.” Morgana interrupted, ears sticking straight up in alarm. “I know his scent from yesterday, and what I’m smelling is nothing like him. Who else has been here?”

Akira stilled. A new scent? A person that Morgana didn’t recognize? No. There was no way. He quickly turned to Yusuke. “Has anyone broken in?” He asked urgently, heart pounding anxiously for his answer.


Yusuke shook his head. “No. Not that I am aware of...” He paused, furrowing his brow as a thought came to him. “But, I had noticed she had begun locking every window...” Pursing his lips, he moved to the side, opening the door wider. “Let us talk inside. There is no point standing around where anyone can overhear us.”

They walked in, taking off their shoes in the foyer and he closed the door behind them, locking the brand new mechanism in place.

Makoto looked around curiously, this being her first time here. “You live with Airi, Yusuke-kun?”

He nodded, heading to the living room. “Aneki opened her home to me when I joined the group, seeing as Madarame is now in prison. I am truly grateful to her.”

She softened at the explanation. “I see...”

Eyes darting to all of his friends, Ryuji furiously rubbed his head. “Can anyone explain what the
fuck’s been goin’ on?!” He demanded. “Why’d Airi freak out like that? Why’s she been like this for weeks now?!!”

“Quiet!” Morgana berated as he raised his nose into the air, scenting the different smells within the house. He padded over to the living room window. “Here. I smell it here too. Along with paper, the same kind used for photos…”

Yusuke furrowed his brow. “Photos?”

Morgana turned to him. “I also smell something akin to an envelope. It has the same factory scent as manila folders.”

He froze. “Envelope..? She had one a few days ago. I inquired as to what it was, but all she said was that they were utility bills.” He grimaced. “She must have been lying…”

Ann looked around uncertainly. “So, why was she lying? Is something bad happening to her..?”

Morgana dashed over to the stairs. “Up here!”

They followed him up to the second floor and with Yusuke’s set of keys, unlocked Airi’s room. Most of them paused and looked around, having never been allowed up here. The walls were painted a peachy white, a light purple curtain billowing at the open window. There was a full sized bed with dark purple covers, two dark wooden wardrobes, a vanity where Akira could see her hair barrette, and her cello, sitting forgotten on its stand.

They hesitantly walked in. “Hey, should we be in here..?” Ryuji asked awkwardly, eyes darting to the wardrobe where he could see a flash of clothes inside.

Akira glared sharply at him. “It doesn’t matter whether or not we should be in here. She might be in danger and this could lead us to her.”

The ex-runner closed his mouth with a click and nodded demurely, able to sense that his leader and best friend was extremely worried to be so short tempered. “Yeah, you’re right. Sorry.”

Morgana dashed over to the window. “I smell it here too and it’s recent, though not as recent as the front door. However,” He turned around and padded over to the bedside drawer. “Most of the scents all converge here.”

Akira knelt down and pulled it open, furrowing his brow when he noticed there were piles of manila envelopes inside. He took them out and unwrapping the bindings, spilled their contents out on the floor.

They knelt down and stared.

They were pictures. Pictures upon pictures upon pictures. There were pictures of Airi as a little girl at a recital, happy and carefree. There were pictures of her a little later, face withdrawn and posture defeated as she sat with other hopeless children. There were pictures of her now, going to school, working, hanging out.

Some of the photographs featured them with her. Ann laughing with a crepe, Ryuji being scolded, Makoto being consoled, Yusuke walking down the streets, Morgana being cuddled, and himself. They were all taken without any of them knowing and it chilled them to the bone.

So many were with him and Akira’s heart clenched for a second. They looked so much like a couple. Was this what they looked like to other people?
Morgana shifted some of the ones on top to show the ones buried underneath and they flinched.

Pictures of a happy brown haired girl, front tooth missing. Pictures of the same girl on a stretcher to be moved, her neck a mottled red with large male hand prints. Rui. Pictures of Airi’s parents, happy and loving at a park. Pictures of them on the ground, a bullet hole in their chests as blood pooled around their bodies.

A paw brushed past all of those, showing the last photo at the bottom of the pile. A man with a gentle smile, with slicked back black hair and unhinged gray eyes.

Akira let out a gasp and picked it up. He didn’t recognize this man, but could it be? “Is this..?”

Makoto furrowed her brow, shaken from the multiple photos. “Who..? Who sent these to her?”

The leader quickly turned to the artist. “Yusuke, take out your phone. Search up Hisoka.”

Yusuke nodded, doing as he was commanded. “Understood.”

Ann took a shaky breath, picking up one of the photos of Airi in the orphanage, eyes dead and knuckles mottled with bruises. “Is this really what she went through..?”

Ryuji fell to the floor, gripping his hair. “What the fuck…” He let out a trembling sigh as his eyes stared down at a picture of Rui’s corpse. “What the fuck is goin’ on?…”

Yusuke shot up from the floor. “It is him!” He turned the phone around to show them the search results. The same man in the photo was on the screen, the name “Seto Hisoka” plastered on the news article.

Makoto furrowed her brow. “Seto Hisoka? Wasn’t he the man who was released from ten years in prison a few weeks ago? I remember reading the newspaper article about it. Sis was really angry and had been compiling evidence for a retrial.”

Morgana nodded grimly. “You’re missing something there, Makoto. What was his crime?”

She grasped her chin, trying to remember. “Something about first degree murder of a couple...named...Kimisawa…” She gasped. “The same Kimisawa?!”

With a defeated sigh, Yusuke took a seat on the bed. “If we are to believe Morgana’s sense of smell, as well as the dates on these photos, that must mean he has been leaving these with her since his release.”

Akira clenched his fists. “That explains the lock changes, and her lack of sleep...Dammit!” He cursed himself. “Why didn’t she say anything?!” Why didn’t she trust him to protect her? Did she think he wouldn’t do a good job? Did she not want him to care for her..?

Morgana looked up at him with a glare. “Why would she?! Look at these photos. He’s clearly aware that we exist and that we’re her closest companions.” He looked down, ears pressed against his scalp. ”This...was a threat.”

Ann choked back a sob. “So she didn’t tell us because she didn’t want us to worry?!” She huffed, her eyes tearing up at yet another friend who tried to protect her. “Typical Airi…”

Ryuji looked up at them morosely, overtaken by the complete shift in events.. “But where’s she now?..”
Akira clenched his jaw. Where could she be? It wasn’t as if she was off to confront him, was she?...Was she?

An idea coming to him, he pulled out his phone and opened the MetaNav. “Seto Hisoka.” He spoke into the phone and the others looked up at him, realization dawning on their faces.

“There is a hit.”

The app answered and they all shot up from the floor, looking down at the phone. “For real..?” Ryuji breathed in shock.

“You think…” Ann trailed off.

They all nodded to each other, and his thumb hit the enter button.

“Now traveling to Mementos...”
Chapter 131

Chapter Notes

Thank you for 755 kudos and 27.7k hits!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Airi stopped, people walking past her in the busy station square of Shibuya.

She shouted for herself to move but she couldn’t, as if her limbs were frozen solid. She couldn’t move. She couldn’t breathe. She was drowning. Her red eyes couldn’t move away from those unhinged gray ones.

He was here.

That same slicked black hair and those black leather gloves. Wearing a white button up and black slacks, he stood there with that same smile on his face, unchanged even after ten years in prison, just watching her.

He never moved and neither did she.

He was out in broad daylight, staring down at his target. The sun shined as if nothing was wrong, as if blood hadn’t been spilled by his hands. Even the pigeons cooed in the nearby trees that shaded him near the Hachiko statue. Pedestrians brushed past them without a care, unaware that they were in the proximity of a murderer and the child of his previous victims.

His finger twitched and her eyes locked onto the motion, watching as he slowly lifted his hand up. Molding his fingers into a gun, he smiled serenely and “shot” her.

She jerked, her hands coming up to grip her hair, her nails digging into her scalp. She choked, trying to fight it back down, but she couldn’t. She couldn’t take it anymore.

She screamed, high pitched and clawing out of her throat. He was here. He was here. 

He was here to kill her. Just like how he killed her parents, with that same infuriatingly gentle smile on his face. She wouldn’t- couldn’t let him get her!

She dashed down to the subway, not hearing footsteps following her, and pushed past the people who were in her way, ignoring their indignant cries at her rudeness. She ran and ran until she made it into a deserted part of the station with not a single soul in sight.

She panted harshly, chest constricting as the image wouldn’t leave her. Her heart pounded harshly against her rib cage and her vision swam, the fluorescent lighting of the station only worsening her migraine. Leaning against the wall, she slowly slid down to the floor and hid her face in her knees, trying not to break down.

She had probably crossed over to an off limits zone, but she couldn’t care. What could she do? How could she fight against him? She didn't want to die. Her life was finally getting better. She had income, she had a home, she had good classmates, she found her foster brother, she had the best of friends, she had a family again.
She didn’t want to give any of that up. She was selfish but she wanted to live.

The only way was…

She quickly took out her phone and opened the MetaNav, typing in his name. “There is a hit.” Of fucking course there was a hit. He was a murderer. He had to have a room in Mementos at the very least.

She had to go. She had to take him out first. Before he could kill her.

Pink hair walked down the backstreets with blue hair. A class president scolded a delinquent at Shibuya station. A Japanese girl laughed with a half foreigner at the crepe store. A beginner gently consoled an expert martial artist in the school hallway. An enamoured teenager cuddled the black and white feline near the Ginza line.

Each and every one of these photos were of her and her friends. Her family. He knew. He had been following her, even before she knew he was out. He knew the faces of each and every one of her most precious people.

Before he could kill her family. She was going to do whatever it took to protect them.

Even if that meant killing.

Her surroundings warped as she was transported to the entrance of Mementos. The tiles beneath her cracked and veins protruded out and around the walls. The TV screens began to scream its static noise, and the air began to press down on her.

Blue flashed in the corner of her eye and Elegant slowly lifted her head. She didn’t see anything that could be producing that kind of light, especially when Mementos was all red, but if she squinted her bloodshot eyes, she could see a hint of blue light near the ticket machines. What was that?

She was about to walk toward it when she remembered why she was here. She had to focus. She needed to find him and take his heart.

Taking her phone out again, she checked the MetaNav map, trying to pinpoint his location. He was near the end of Chemdah.

She gripped her phone. Perfect.

She tapped the app and moved to Chemdah Area 5’s rest spot, holding a hand to her chest as the pain immediately overtook her. It was like her insides were being grounded between gears and she was being pulled apart with strings.

She coughed harshly, saliva and tears mixing together as they trickled down her face. Wiping her mouth with one hand, Elegant gripped her scythe and ran forward, down the escalator and ignoring the Shadow people that waited for their trains on the other side.

There was no Mona bus for her to drive so she jumped right onto the tracks and ran, taking out the Shadows along the way. It was hard since she was used to going in with a team but she managed just barely. By the time she got to the next platform, her sleeveless coat was ripped in several places, blood slowly oozing out from the shallow wounds and staining her silver shirt underneath.

She panted unsteadily, her head ringing from the pressure of Mementos. She could barely concentrate, feeling like she was simultaneously held under water and in a fire as she trembled. She
was frozen and she was burning.

Her stomach rolled and her throat swelled up. Something was coming up.

Her eyes fluttered shut as she tried to fight it, but her vision swam and she swayed in her spot. Unable to hold it in, she bent over and vomited pure black.

Choking, Elegant expelled the sludge from her body and it pooled in front of her like an oil spill. Her diaphragm pushed again and she gagged, tasting the bitter vile tang of carcinogens, copper, and stomach acid as more spilled out of her mouth.

She couldn’t even find it in herself to worry about how she was throwing up black blood, had been coughing black blood, or that it tasted like death. The only thing that was on her mind was Hisoka. Nothing else mattered right now.

Spitting out black tinted phlegm, she wiped her mouth, grimacing as it stained the purple silk of her glove and turned it brown. Taking a deep breath, she tried to get her head in order. “Concentrate…” She murmured to herself. Clapping her hands together, she closed her eyes and cast a Diarama on herself. Her wounds healed in a hue of golden light, her sleeveless coat knitting back together as if she had never been injured.

Everything in the Metaverse depended on a person's health of mind. Palaces existed because of the grandeur of a person's distortions, creating fantastical locations that only made sense to the ruler it belonged to. They as phantom thieves were able to fight and use magic because their souls were healthy and fit to do so. They could kill, they could enhance, and they could heal. But only if their minds were intact.

Even as her body rejuvenated itself, the part of her that really mattered was breaking.

Picking up her scythe again, the tip scraped the broken tiles in the station as she jumped down the escalator and into the next level of tracks, running up to ambush a Shadow. “Show me your true form!” She yelled as she pulled off its mask.

In a flash of red and black ooze, it transformed into three Onmoraki, the corpse birds floating around with their shriveled faces. Lips pulled back into a snarl, Elegant quickly snapped her fingers. “Out of my way!” Jeanne appeared behind her and with a raise of her staff, sent a Makouga at them, obliterating them into nothing.

She took a deep breath, trying to regain her stamina. It was tiring. She was so tired. The taint of Mementos was wracking her body with pain, and her limbs twitched as different nerves were lit with an agony that was unfamiliar. It hurt so much…

Ann laughed as she told Shiho what happened with her at the agency that day.

Ryuji grumbled lightheartedly as she forced him to study, but the small smile on his face said he didn't mind.

Yusuke smiled, placing a plate of fancy cuisine in front of her to show his appreciation.

Makoto beamed as she held out the Jack Frost doll to her, a gift of gratitude.

Morgana purred as she rubbed his ears and paws, wiggling around on her lap like a happy kitty.

Akira smiled gently down at her, his warm arms enveloping her smaller frame to bring her closer to him. His somewhat fast heartbeat thudded next to her ear, lulling her into a peaceful calm.
She wouldn’t give up until she knew they were safe. They meant everything to her. She would gladly sacrifice herself for them.

Gripping her scythe, she continued down the level, slashing through the Shadows with renewed vigor, even as the very air she breathed was beginning to hurt her.

Turning the corner, she finally saw it. A swirling red vortex at the end of a corridor, train tracks being sucked in. She finally made it.

Breathing out in relief, she narrowed her eyes. This was it. She would finally face her parents’ killer. He’d been taunting her all these weeks in the real world where he held all the power, but in this world? This was her domain. She was the elegant noblewoman who wielded her scythe as an extension of her soul, reaping her enemies.

With a push of her legs, she jumped through the portal, landing and rolling into the dead silent room. Just like every other Mementos chamber, it was empty of everything except for the target. Red veins flashed as they twisted behind him, leading further into the depths.

He was standing there with his back toward her, dressed in the same black suit she remembered almost ten years ago. No. Exactly ten years ago.

Her breathing began to quicken as anger overtook her, clouding her mind along with the pain. She had to do it. **She had to.**

Elegant ran up to him, blade scraping against the concrete, creating sparks from the tip. “Hisoka!” She screamed. “Face me, you piece of shit!”

He didn’t move, but the glowing black aura around his Shadow grew in size. “...Airi. You’ve finally come.” He breathed in relief. “I’m so glad…”

She furrowed her brow. “What are you mumbling about?”

He turned around, giving her that same deranged gentle smile. Coupled with the glowing yellow eyes native to the Metaverse and the black flames of distortion, he looked even more demonic than she envisioned. This was her demon. The culmination of her nightmares.

“You’re here to change my cognition, no? It’s ironic that the daughter of one of the scientists who worked on the project is using the same method, on me!” He laughed softly. “But I’m glad you’re here. I’ll fulfill my goal…”

Her sanity snapped. “Shut the fuck up!” She yelled. “It’s because of you that I became an orphan! It’s because of you that matron smashed my cello! That Rui died! That I had to suffer!” She snarled. “It was all because of you! And for what? Some damn pieces of paper?!”

She blamed him for everything at this point. Everything was his fault. His his his. “You tormented me for weeks, making me lose sleep, making me worry my friends- my family! You threatened them and that was the last straw!” She pointed the tip of her weapon at him, the stainless metal glinting an ominous red from the veins. ”You’re not taking them from me, too!"

He clapped his hands. “Good, you’re angry. You should be, since I’m the one who killed your parents.” He smiled sadly. “I didn’t want to, you know? There was nothing I could do to atone for my sins, for taking a little girl’s parents away. But now…”
He began to convulse, his arms and head twitching back and contorting in impossible movements. With a geyser of black liquid, just like the kind she threw up, he transformed into a Shiki-Ouji, the bringer of misfortune standing stoically in his place. "I will atone by reuniting you with your parents! I will kill you!" He laughed, his distorted voice echoing throughout the chamber. "Then he will acknowledge me...! Everything will finally be right!"

Elegant gritted her teeth. She wanted to see her parents again so badly. But not like this. They would never want for her to be killed by the person who betrayed them. "We'll see about that...You can carry your sins all you want, but don't you dare push them on me!" She roared, running up to slash him with her scythe.

The blade bounced back without a scratch and she cursed, back flipping away. "Jeanne!" The blindingly white lady appeared behind her, arms shackled to her side. "Kouga!" With a snap of her fingers, she sent several rays of light into the Shadow, piercing his paper-like body.

He grunted before raising his hands. A swirl of red energy surrounded him as he used a Tarukaja, strengthening his physical prowess. He then roared at her, the sound like paper cuts in her ears and began to stagger his way in her direction.

She snapped her fingers again, sending more rays of light into his body. It had to work. She had to win. She had to live.

Swinging his arm, he smacked her to the side and she hit the ground in a tumble, her head spinning from the strike. Her vision swam black and she coughed, feeling her stomach protest again.

Gripping her scythe, knuckles white from the pressure, Elegant used it as a crutch to stand on her feet. She winced as she pulled the cut on her abdomen, blood staining down the front of her coat. "You're not winning...I won't let you!" She shouted, voice cracking from her emotions, and took out her sniper rifle.

He was immune to physical, but could he be knocked back? Time to find out with her new skill, borne from her will to protect.

Kneeling down on one knee and looking through the scope, she shot a One-Shot Kill. Miraculously, he did get knocked back and she rushed up to attack him several times, the sharp blade of her weapon able to sink into his paper-like flesh.

Back flipping away, she panted with exhaustion, her wounds, the smothering aura of Mementos, her lack of sleep, everything was catching up with her. Just a little longer...

Taking out her gun again, she sacrificed the last dredges of her health and poured her heart and soul into this next bullet. Shooting another One-Shot Kill, she knocked him back and rushed forward to attack, letting her blade rip into him and slicing him up into pieces.

With a groan, he collapsed and dropped ¥21,000. With a splash of black, he turned back into his human self and fell to his knees, sobbing uncontrollably into his hands.

She didn’t even care about the money, she only cared about ending this stupid game.

Putting one foot in front of another, she slowly walked up to him in a daze, lifting up the deadly blade in her hand. The fog over her mind numbed her to her actions and she moved like a soulless puppet.

She could end this right now. Everything will be over soon. Everyone would be safe. She would be safe. Akira would be safe.
Red light reflected off the surface of her weapon, and she brought it down at his neck with one fell swoop.

Red

Red

RED

Chapter End Notes

I chose Shiki-Ouji as his Shadow because of the wiki description, "The Shikiouji (or Shiki-Ouji) is an exceptionally powerful type of Shikigami that could only be summoned as a servant by the most elite... It could be used to scare away demons that cause sickness and to ward off disasters to its master." It's a servant at its core who only listens to the most powerful, and I'm sure you can all guess who that is. Also, Mementos requests are usually Shadows you have already encountered, only more powerful, so it fits!

Also I never explained, but Seto Hisoka stands for "Strait/channel" and "Secretive" so his name would be "Channel of Secrets." A strait is a small river that connects one body of water to another, so his name can symbolize a passageway to learn the truth. He himself doesn't go anywhere, and can only be used by others to achieve their own goals.
Chapter 132

Chapter Notes

Thanks a lot for all the amazing comments on the last couple of chapters! Updates will be once a week until mid december because projects projects projects (killme) friday is not a set update date

Thank you for sticking with me!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Fingers tapped the desk, the sound echoing throughout the prison. A deep dual-toned chuckle reverberated from the being in the middle of the room, his thin legs crossed and resting on the plush blue rug. There was no one else around, his two oblivious helpers having left to oversee each doorway.

"How very interesting...To think this little side experiment would go so well." He hummed, bloodshot pin-pricked eyes seeing everything in his domain. "She can withstand the concentrated distortions, though her reaction is curious....I certainly look forward to when all three face one another as equals. What will you do, Aeon?"

"Who will you save?"

“STOP!”

She jerked, the blade stopping merely an inch away from its intended target, and turned her head to see Joker and the other Phantom Thieves run up to her from the bus, Mona transforming back into his regular form. “What..?” She breathed, eyes blurred from sweat and fatigue. “Who…”

Joker tackled her to the ground, smacking her scythe out of her hand and away from the Shadow. “You already won.” He breathed out, panting from the rush. “You don’t need to go that far.”

Mona had been able to track her scent all the way from the entrance. He himself had asked Justine and with a curious tilt of her head, she nodded and told him where she had seen her. He was inwardly surprised that she would help with something that wasn't one of her tasks, but it honestly didn't matter right now. What mattered was that he had made it in time to stop her.

Hitting the concrete, Elegant slowly shook her head, barely able to think straight. “No...He’s...I…” She breathed, trying to get up but his grip at her blood stained waist stopped her. “No...I have to end it...I need to protect you…”

He frowned and lifting up both red gloved hands, encompassed her face in his palms and turned her head to look him directly in the eye. “It’s over.” He soothed, trying to make her see sense. ”You
don’t have to kill him. You know you don't want to.”

Her eyes widened. “Kill..?” Was she really going to kill him? Was she about to become a murderer?

*His smile slowly turned darker, his pupils dilating under the cheap city lamps. “You’re like me then. I’ll be back, don’t worry.”*

She sat back down on the ground in a stupor. She was nothing like him. She was never going to be like him-

She froze. She was just about to end his life. With a flick of her wrist, she could’ve severed his head from his neck. Red. So much red. Letting out a shaky breath, she slowly curled into a ball and stared at her hands. “Was I...really going to kill him..?”

Joker let out a sigh, sitting back on his heels. “...You didn’t. That’s what matters.”

Seeing that she was calming down, the others rushed up to her as well. “Mom!” Mona yelled, bouncing into her lap, a distraught frown at his mouth. “Are you OK? You’re injured.” He clapped his paws together, giving her a Diarama.

She sighed, feeling the wounds close up and her outfit knit back together thanks to the green sparkles. “...I’m OK.” She mouthed, her voice barely coming out of her throat as she hugged the soft feline, using him to anchor herself to consciousness. Was she OK..? She almost committed murder.

“Elegant…” Queen knelt down beside her, frowning concernedly. “Please don’t run off like that again. We were all very worried for you.”

“Joker especially.” Panther added quietly, a muted frown on her face as she fiddled with her whip. “We didn’t know where you were…”

Fox knelt beside her as well, helping her sit up. “Aneki, next time someone trespasses into our house, I would very much like to know.”

She choked out a laugh, barely able to keep her head up. “Right...Sorry…” She ended up worrying them anyway.

“Hey, you!” Skull growled at the Shadow. “How does it feel, huh?! Havin’ your life flash before your eyes like that?!” He snarled angrily, the photos stark in his mind. ”You killed her parents, you sonnuva bitch!”

Hisoka sobbed. “I know...I know…”

Elegant slowly got up, stumbling as the adrenaline drained out of her system, leaving her completely exhausted. Just a little longer. She had to know. “...What were those papers?”

The thieves looked to her in confusion. Papers?

With a sniff, Hisoka stood up, letting his hands fall to his sides. His face was stained with tear tracks, the droplets falling from his eyes and onto the cold concrete of the chamber. “...Your father, Arihito, and I...were co-workers. I was the newest member on the team and...I fell in love with someone.” He smiled bitterly. “He was so charismatic, seemingly kind, yet so cold...I was drawn like a moth to a flame. One that flew too close and burned to a crisp…”
His jaw tightened. “He told me to kill Arihito for his research. They had only just begun the project, but they had already amassed enough that he wanted it. I was supposed to sneak into your house at the dead of night and slit his throat before stealing his notes...but that night was your recital and I realized if I had to kill him in the house, I would have to kill Akami, your mother, and you as well. I had to leave no witnesses. Those...were his orders.”

He hung his head in shame. “Even though I knew it was wrong, I listened because he told me he would acknowledge me, told me he wanted this from me...But I thought to myself, ‘if I did it out in public, I would be arrested.’ I would be unable to kill you. And so I did it. I killed him...and her.”

He looked up at her with tear filled eyes. “I wanted to atone for it in prison, but all I could think about was you and how I took your parents away...I wanted you to be with them again. He gave me this chance, to join his new protege, but I refused. My only target would be you. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Airi.”

She let out a shaky sob as she clenched your fists. “So you killed them because someone you loved told you to...Was it worth it?” She asked coldly. “Was it really worth it to you?”

He smiled wryly. “It seemed worth it at the time. We are so alike, you and I…”

“I’m not like you at all!” She snapped. “I’m not a murderer!”

“But you were going to kill me for the one you love. I had threatened him as well, in a way.” He smiled sadly, a light beginning to envelop him. “In that sense, we are the same. The only difference is that you’ll be much smarter than me because you fell in love with a good man. I…” He let out a shaky sigh. “I would never regret the love I had for him, even as I regret everything that had come about because of it. I’m not his first admirer, after all. He only leaves a trail of broken bodies on his voyage.”

Her eyes widened. “Wait...What was his name?” She demanded desperately. “Who is the one who wanted my parents dead?!”

He only smiled mysteriously before the light completely took him over and he disappeared back in his real self.

He left a bud of a Treasure in his stead, and she hesitantly reached out to take it. It was a new scythe. The staff and the blade were both completely black, but as she adjusted her grip, the metal shined a brilliant golden sheen when light hit it. The chain on the end jangled as it hit the floor, but the sound was so far away...

She let out a sigh as it disappeared into her soul and collapsed on her knees, beginning to cough again. She was done. She couldn’t go on any longer.

This was the end for her.

“Elegant!” Joker yelled, running up to her to catch her in his arms as she fell forward. His heart stopped in his chest when he saw she was coughing up black liquid. What?! His gaze darted from the fluid to her dim eyes that were fluttering shut behind her mask.

As if she would never open them again.

His chest constricted painfully. No...! “Stay awake just a little longer!” He begged her even though he knew, he knew she had already lost consciousness. “It’s not safe for you here!”

Skull took a step back in shock, eyes trained on the little puddle that dripped from her mouth. “Is
that blood black?!”

Panicking now, Panther turned to the feline. “Mona!” She shouted desperately. “We need the bus!”

Wrinkling his nose at the rancid smell, he quickly nodded and jumped into the air and with a puff of smoke, landed on the floor as their vehicle. “Get in!” He shook his exterior.

Queen quickly took the wheel and the others slid in. Lifting Elegant in his arms, Joker ran to the bus and gently placed her down on the empty bench, letting her head rest on his lap as he scooted himself in and closed the door. “Go!”

“Roger!” Queen answered, flooring it. They drove out of the room and to the nearest platform where the app let them transport back into the real world.

Akira grunted as they reappeared back in Shibuya, still holding Airi in his arms. Her injuries didn’t exist in the real world, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t still in danger. There was only one person he even remotely trusted to help with this. “I’m going to Dr. Takemi’s. Morgana, get in my bag.” He commanded, the feline jumping into the purse, and he began running down to the platform toward Yongenjaya.

The others followed after him, running through the busy crowds of the station. People cried out in surprise when they were pushed out of the way, but the thieves couldn’t find it in themselves to feel guilty.

Ryuji swiped his wallet at the turnstile for Akira, letting him get through without jostling the unconscious person in his arms. An officer furrowed his brow and was about to approach them, but Ann used her quick thinking and smiled nervously, reassuring him that they were fine and their friend had anemia so they were taking her home.

The train pulled into the station, cutting him off of any more questioning, and the group rushed onto the cart. A few strangers got up to give Akira their seats and he gave them a thankful nod, placing Airi down on the now unoccupied bench. He didn’t want to jostle her in case it could exasperate her condition. He had no idea what was happening to her and he was scared out of his mind.

The thieves crowded around her, worry gripping their guts for their unconscious friend as the train sped to its next destination.

“This is Yongenjaya. I repeat, this is Yongenjaya. The time is now 7:43PM, the next stop is…”

The train pulled to a stop and he knelt down to scoop her up in his arms again, making sure he had a good grip at her side and knees. Making sure he didn’t bump her while going up the stairs, they finally made it out of the station and rushed down the back streets to the clinic.

Morgana jumped out of the bag to press the button for the elevator and they all squished in, going up to the third floor.

Makoto rushed ahead in the hallway to open the clinic door and he ran in. “Doctor!”

Takemi snapped her head up from behind the reception desk and her eyes widened from their usual half lidded state, seeing the unconscious person in his arms. “What- Kimisawa-chan?! What happened-?”
“Just treat her!” He commanded, Yusuke hurrying to open the door to an examination room. Akira quickly maneuvered inside and with all the restraint he could muster, gently placed Airi down on the bed.

The doctor rushed in and shooed them out, snapping on a pair of gloves.

Closing the door behind him, Akira collapsed on a chair in the waiting area, adrenaline draining out of him as he let his bag fall to the floor. He placed his head in his palms as he let out a shaky breath, worried out of his mind. Black blood...That had to be serious. Was she...dying?

He clenched his jaw, his chest tightening painfully at the possibility. She couldn’t. He hadn’t...He hadn’t had enough time with her. She deserved to live and he wanted to be at her side, like he promised. He didn’t want his light to disappear.

Someone plopped down in the seat next to him and placed a hand on his shoulder, but he didn’t look up to acknowledge them. “C’mon, Akira…” Ryuji grinned weakly, trying to cheer him up. “Airi’ll be fine. She’s our mom, right? She’s strong…”

Taking a deep breath, he slowly let it out and nodded. “Yeah...She had to be.” If she wasn’t…

Makoto took a seat across from his, observing him with a thoughtful frown. “You really care for her...don’t you?”

He could only nod, letting his hands fall to his lap. “Yeah…” He wasn’t going to entertain his suspicions of her crush, not right now when Airi was injured and unconscious in the next room.

She slowly nodded and smiled, comforted by his answer. “I see...I’m glad you do.”

Makoto took a seat next to her. “I hope she’ll be OK...” She fretted, biting her thumb hard enough to draw blood to the surface. “I didn’t know she began coughing black blood…”

Makoto looked up at that. “Is this a side effect of Mementos?” She asked hesitantly. “I didn’t cough when we were there…”

Morgana shook his head, going back inside the bag. “No. This is unique only to mom. We have yet to find out why though...” His ears drooped as he remembered the scent of death emanating from the liquid. “I didn’t think it would get this bad…”

Gray eyes widened and Yusuke shot up from his seat. “I recall hearing her cough later that night when she retired to bed, the day we handled Shimizu-san. She must’ve known…”

Akira clenched his fists. That was weeks ago. How many other things would she keep from them? Didn’t she trust them? Trust him? Did she think they wouldn’t care? That he wouldn’t? She had been the first one to really support him, to smile at him and meant it wholeheartedly. He cared so much it hurt.

The door to the examination room opened and Takemi walked out with a sigh, taking off her gloves and throwing them in the trashcan. In an instant, they all stood up. “So...” Ryuji began hesitantly, fidgeting with one leg. “What’s the word, Doc? How is she?...”

She rubbed the back of her neck. “Well...she’s dangerously exhausted and dehydrated. I had to take off her makeup to see for myself, and there’s a lot of bruising underneath her eyes. I ran a sample of her blood and it showed an alarming amount of caffeine in contrast to plasma.” She sighed. “A day later and she might’ve needed emergency care. Thankfully, you brought her just in time and with a lot of rest and food, she’ll be back to normal soon. I already injected her with emergency nutrients
and it’ll help her recover faster.”

They all let out a sigh of relief. She would be OK...

The doctor turned to Akira. “What happened? Why is she in this condition?” She asked sharply. “She would’ve died if she pushed it too far.”

He flinched. This was his fault. If only he had been more forceful, more coercive, anything. “Some things happened and...she couldn’t keep her paranoia away. I don’t think she’s slept for days…”

Staring at him for a moment, she let out another sigh. “Well, I can’t expect you to be with her 24/7. She just needs sleep right now. You can take her back home and let her get some rest. I’ll write her a note for school.”

She reached over the counter into the reception and took out a doctor’s pad, quickly scribbling on it. Tearing it out, she handed it over Akira. “Give this to her teacher. She needs to sleep for as long as possible, and when she’s awake, you give her soups and congee at best. No solids for a day and she needs lots of liquids to flush out the caffeine. She’s going to have one hell of a migraine from withdrawal and may suffer some other side effects.”

He nodded, taking the note. “I understand. Thank you, Doctor.”

She gave him a small smile before walking back into the examination room. He followed her in, his eyes catching the corpse like person on the bed and his guilt tripled, weighing heavily in his stomach.

Her skin was sallow and dim as if there was no life left in her. Her hair fell limply against the pillow and he could see that she had lost some weight, her usually form fitting polo sagging around her with extra room. Why didn’t he push harder? How could he let her get like this...

“There’s something I felt I should inform you of…” Takemi began quietly, making sure the others wouldn’t hear. “I noticed signs of emesis, as if she had vomited something, but I don’t know what…”

He furrowed his brow. The black liquid. It didn’t follow them into the real world so there was no way she’d see it. “What do you mean?” He asked quietly. “What did she cough up then?”

She pursed her lips. “I don’t know but it seems to have been forcibly expelled from her stomach. I found no signs inside her body however, though there are traces of blood in her mouth, so it’s definitely not something that’s natural or organic.”

He slowly exhaled, feeling the stress of the day catch up to him. It must be her reaction in Mementos. Why was she throwing up black liquid with blood? Had she known about this? “…Can you keep that a secret?”

Her eyes slid to him. “I am called The Plague, you know…Who would ever believe me?”

He smiled slightly. That was as much of a confirmation he would get. “Thanks.”

“It’s all part of our deal.” She handed him a prescription bag. “Make sure to add this powder to her food. It’s emergen-C which will help her recovery. Tell her to come back for a checkup when she can move.”

Taking it with a nod, he approached the bed and placed his hands underneath her back and knees.
With a grunt, he lifted Airi up in his arms and carefully maneuvered out of the room, the others following him out of the clinic and down the back streets.

Some people stared but no one approached them for which he was grateful. They couldn’t exactly explain this, and he wasn’t in the mood to talk to strangers to placate their curiosity over something that he took gravely.

Finally arriving at the house, Yusuke opened the door for them and he carried her upstairs and into her room. The photos were still on the floor but he ignored them, his first concern being the person in his arms. Placing her gently on the bed, he pulled the covers up and made sure the room was as dark as it could be to let her rest by closing the window curtains.

The room was now barely lit, the only light coming from behind the blinds, and he walked back to the bedside. Slowly reaching out, his thumb caressed her cheek, rubbing gently against a dark circle. He exhaled, shoulders relaxing just a bit. At least she was safe now, even though she was in this condition.

Quietly closing the door, he made his way back downstairs and into the living room where everyone was sat. Yusuke had made them tea and they all nursed a cup silently, just trying to process what had happened today.

“So…” Ryuji began quietly as he sat forward on the couch. “What do we do now?”

Akira sighed tiredly. “We can only wait for her to wake up…”

Ann clutched her mug. “Do you think that change of heart worked? Kaneshiro was a real criminal and he had a Palace, but this Hisoka guy was a…” She swallowed nervously. “A murderer, and he only had a Mementos room.”

Morgana halfheartedly lapped up his tea with his tiny pink tongue, tail hanging limply against the table where he was sat. “You could tell from his confession that he was aware he became distorted. It was his guilt over leaving mom alone without parents.” He explained quietly. “His love for someone had distorted him, and in his mind, killing her was the only way he could atone for his crime.”

Yusuke laced his hands together, his own cup on the table. “So, you mean to say because he was aware of his distortion, he did not grow a Palace? However, that begs the question on how he knew what distortion was in the context of the Metaverse…”

Makoto furrowed her brow and she grasped her chin speculatively. “Could this be related to the MetaNav? We can traverse the metaphysical world due to a phone application…Who’s to say other people haven’t also discovered this?…Or even invented it?”

They stilled at the thought. There was already someone else out there using the Metaverse for their own gains, and now to hear there were people researching this?

Chapter End Notes

Airi- rank 7. Stopping her from making a terrible mistake.
Chapter 133

Morgana shook his head. “It’s no use pondering about this when we won’t get any answers soon.”

Ann glanced up at the clock on the wall, the hands landing on 9:08PM. “It’s getting late and we still have school tomorrow…”

Ryuji frowned. “Who’s gonna stay with Airi then? We all got school, and we can’t ask boss to watch over her when he’s got a cafe to run…”

Yusuke pursed his lips. “I would volunteer, but I must maintain a perfect attendance to qualify for my scholarship…” He turned to Akira. “Are you allowed to miss a day? You are on probation, and I am unsure of what restrictions are placed upon you…”

He shook his head. “I should be fine. Kawakami-sensei can cover for both of us. Ann,” He handed her the doctor’s note. “You give it to Sensei tomorrow then.”

She nodded, taking the slip. “Got it. We’ll count on you to take care of Airi.”

They finished their tea with a sigh and got up. Yusuke turned toward the model. “Ann, I would like to request a favor.”

She looked at him curiously. “What is it?” She narrowed her eyes. ”...It’s not nude modeling, right?”

He shook his head. “No, unfortunately. I would like for you to help bathe Aneki for the evening. I doubt she would appreciate my touching of her person as I am male, and you had already bathed together once at the hot springs. She would appreciate being cleaned from her…” His eyes dimmed. “Earlier ordeal.”

She softened at the memory. “Yeah...of course. I’ll go do that now. Can you take out her pajamas?”

He nodded and they both went upstairs. Akira turned to Ryuji and Makoto. “You guys can go home if you want. I’ll walk Ann to the station once she’s finished.”

Ryuji shook his head and plopped back down on the couch, turning on the TV. “Nah, I’ll wait for her. Who knows what kinda trouble she’d get into by herself?”

Morgana took a seat next to him, watching the show curiously. “I’ll stay down here as well until Lady Ann is finished with mom. I…” He stared down at his paws and then Ryuji’s human hands with a look of envy. “I can’t help in this form.”

Akira frowned sympathetically. The feline seemed to be beating himself up for not being human, especially in this current situation.

Makoto hesitated, eyes darting to the staircase with a look of longing and guilt. “I want to stay, but...Sis has been asking why I’ve been coming home so late.”

Akira nodded and shouldered his bag. “I’ll walk you to the station then. Ryuji, open the door for me when I come back.”

“Aye aye, leader.” The ex-runner replied distractedly, his eyes glued to the variety show.
The transfer student and council president left the house and walked down the streets of Yongenjaya, the sky a dark gray up above as it reached evening hours. “...This may seem like a rude question,” Makoto began quietly, eyes staring straight ahead at the dark backstreets, glancing at the occasional pedestrian. “But...what are you to Airi? Aside from her leader?”

He mulled the question over in his head. “I’m her neighbor. I’m her best friend. I’m...” Her boyfriend. He wished he could say that and it would be true. But this wasn’t the time to think about those things. Her life was more important, and he had to take care of her. “...Someone who cares a lot about her.”

She nodded slowly. “...I see. So...you’re much closer to her than I thought.” She concluded inaudibly. “It seems my earlier remarks on your closeness are true. Do you think of yourself as the most important person in her life?”

He glanced over at her. “...I want to,” He reluctantly murmured. It wasn’t like he dictated Airi’s life, even though he had basically monopolized her time from the others because he was a selfish bastard. “But-”

“As someone who has attached himself to her side, you won’t deny it.” She smiled wryly at his shocked face. “Don’t think I hadn’t noticed. When you transferred here, I had suspected you had some sort of malicious intentions toward her. The transfer student with a criminal record wanted something from his kind class president, and I had no way of knowing if it was malevolent. Then Ryuji-kun and Ann joined in, and it seemed like a group of delinquents trying to use her as a cover for devious crimes, but now...” She giggled. “I can see you’re really just a stray cat who wants affection. We all are in a way.”

He scrunched up his face. Stray cat? They were starved for affection, huh...

They made it to the station and Makoto turned to him with a smile. “Thank you for walking me back. I’ll see you on Monday, so please take care of Si- Airi.”

He nodded and watched as she swiped into the station and disappeared down the escalator before he began walking back to Airi’s. Maybe he was being too selfish. He could see that Makoto had never had many friends, just like all of them, and he was being unfair with his possessiveness over Airi.

He quietly sighed, walking past the closed down movie theater. He should at least try to curb his jealousy. That day when he apologized for his stupidity, Airi had cried and said he was the best thing to happen to her. He just had to remind himself of that. That he was important to her. Likewise, she was the most important person in his life, next to their friends and teammates.

He clenched his hands. And he would do anything to keep them. They clung to each other because they were all they had. They all understood each other. There was no denying he was selfish but for once in his life, he was going to fight whoever would try to tear him away from them.

That he swore, and he could feel Arsene send an answering pulse in his chest, his deep chuckles echoing at the back of his mind.

He agreed.

Walking up the stairs back into the Airi’s room, Yusuke gently picked up his unconscious sister in his arms, frowning at how light she was, and brought her into the bathroom. Placing her on the
plush rug, he stood up and turned to Ann who had silently followed him. “I will go retrieve her sleepwear. I will leave them outside the door.” He inclined his head before walking out of the bathroom, closing the door behind him.

With a slow exhale, Ann went to fill the bath to half full before kneeling beside Airi. With as much gentleness as she could muster, she carefully stripped the cellist of her school uniform, throwing the used garments in the laundry basket in the corner.

Now that she was bare naked, the model lifted her with a grunt and placed her inside the warm bath water. Taking a loofa, she wetted it before moving to the shower foam, pumping a generous amount of soap.

She began her task of bathing the still sleeping girl, biting her lip when she finally saw everything with her own eyes. “Airi…” She took in the dark bruises under her eyes, how dim her skin seemed, even when moist. How she was slumped over in exhaustion even when asleep, how her limp hair clumped around her neck, and how her ribs were starting to stand out unhealthily against her skin.

Trying to hold in the tears, Ann sniffed as she cleaned her off, making sure she didn’t miss anything. “You idiot...You’re just as bad as Shiho…” She choked back a sob. Even though she was trying so hard, a tear couldn’t help but escape from her eye, rolling down her cheek and landing on an unmoving arm. Here was another friend who almost died to protect them, protect her. And she couldn’t do anything to help. Again.

After carefully washing her hair, Ann drained the bathtub and moved Airi out of the tub, drying her off with a towel. Letting the class president lean against her as she dried her, the towel slipped out of her fingers as she hugged the unconscious girl tightly.

She leaned her cheek against the top of her head, more tears slipping from her eyes. “You should’ve just said something…” Ann murmured, sniffing occasionally. “We all care about you so much...but you care just as much, if not more, huh? You stood up to a real killer for us…”

Clenching her jaw, she brought a hand to wipe the moisture from her eyes. “You’re our mom, so of course you’d try to protect us...But you could’ve di-died.” She stuttered out the last word angrily, overwhelmed from today’s events. “You reckless idiot, always trying to take care of us that you forget about yourself…You didn’t even see how Akira ran around like a headless chicken when we lost sight of you in Shibuya.”

She smiled slightly, trying to distract herself from thinking of her friend almost dying today. “He was the first to run after you. He didn’t even wait for us to catch up because he was so worried…” She slowly rocked back and forth, as if Airi was just a sleeping baby. “Makoto seemed a little surprised when he caught up with you first...Did she not know about his enormous crush on you? …”

A knock interrupted whatever else she was going to say, and she turned her head toward the door. “I’ve prepared her sleepwear out here.” Yusuke stated, voice muffled by the thick wood. “Are you finished?”

Wiping the last of her tears, she leaned Airi against the sink cabinet and stood up. “Yeah…” Opening the door by a few inches, she accepted the clothes before closing it again. Yusuke had chosen a long sleeved shirt as well as plush sweatpants, both with complimenting pastel colors.

She sweatdropped when she picked up the lacy thong from the bundle. Airi had thongs? “This wouldn’t be comfortable...Ugh,” She rolled her eyes. “Men…”
Standing up, she left the bathroom and walked into the bedroom, finding Yusuke observing the cherrywood cello with his hands held out like a frame, muttering to himself. “Yusuke, these aren’t appropriate for sleeping...!” Ann scolded, an embarrassed blush taking up most of her face as she held up her friend’s underwear to her pseudo brother. “Why’d you choose this one?”

Letting his arms fall to his sides, he turned to her with a raised brow. “They are the most artistic of women’s undergarments. They are small, acting more like an accessory, yet the lace design creates a tasteful image, enhancing hips, stomach, thighs, and posterior. They are the epitome of undergarment innovation.”

She facepalmed at his explanation and shook her head. “Why did I even bother...?”

Sighing, she went over to the wardrobes, avoiding the pile of photos still on the floor with a sharp sting of sorrow, and opened them to find the underwear drawer. Digging out a more comfortable pair of panties, she went back to the bathroom to clothe Airi.

What was more important than educating the artist was making sure the cellist was comfortable and warm as she slept off her exhaustion. She was going to take care of her as best as she could, even with something as small as this. It was the least she could do, for always being the protected.

Just once, Ann wanted to protect her. Just like how Shiho had protected her. The sound of a skirt fluttered in the back of her mind and she knew Carmen could hear her wishes.

They would grow stronger to fulfill that.

He rang the doorbell and the door was opened a minute later, Ryuji cursing at the complicated door knob. “How the hell does this thing work...?!?”

Akira shushed him, walking into the foyer and closing the door behind him. “Is Ann finished?”

He glanced up the stairs. “Just about I think...Should we go check?”

Akira shook his head. “No. We should let them do their jobs.”

Nodding, Ryuji leaned against the wall next to the foyer, fiddling with his phone. “There was this article online about ‘Boy M spills about abuse under Kamoshida.’” He murmured. “You think that’s Mishima talkin’ to Ohya?”

Akira snorted. “Definitely.”

They stood in silence for a while, only the occasional footstep from upstairs thumped above them. “I...” Ryuji started after a few moments. “I dun’...” He groaned, furiously ruffling his short blond locks. “I dun’ even know what the fuck just happened today.” Letting his arm fall against his leg, he stared up at the light fixture. “I’ve known Airi for five years and I never knew ‘bout any of this.”

Akira rested his hands in his pockets. “Never?”

Ryuji nodded slightly, brow furrowed in self resentment. “It...kinda makes me wonder if I even know her. I mean, fine, we weren’t really friends in middle school or last year, but since we became Phantom Thieves, I thought we all knew each other.”

His lips twisted, biting the inside of his mouth at his next words. “And even though I heard all that
shit when we had shabu shabu, it just never seemed...real until I saw those photos earlier, y’know? Like hearin’ it is one thing, but seeing real evidence of it is somethin’ else. And now with her knocking out and coughing black shit up…” His knuckles cracked as he clenched his fists, blunt nails digging into his palms. “This was all kinds of messed up and I’m pissed at myself for not noticing sooner.”

Akira only closed his eyes and leaned against the front door. He took the words right out of his mouth. “...Yeah. Same.” He whispered. “It’s my fault for not pressing about this since I knew.”

Ryuji snapped his head over to him. “You what?” He glared disbelievingly. “You didn’t say anything about this!”

“I know!” Akira growled. “She didn’t want me to say anything because she didn’t want to worry the rest of you. Hell, if I wasn’t with her that day when she found out, I probably wouldn’t have known either.”

Because she never told them anything. She didn’t say anything about those photos, she didn’t say anything about the break ins, she didn’t even get them to go into Mementos with her. She could’ve died today without them realizing, and that scared him. He could’ve lost her today…

The ex-runner deflated. “Didn’t want ‘ta worry us, huh?” He murmured. “Shit ton of good that did...We can’t keep things like this from each other. We’re a team, right?” He looked up at Akira desperately. “We’re a family, like she said.”

He nodded firmly. “Yeah, we’re family. We have each other’s backs. We’re not letting something like this happen ever again.”

Straightening his back from its usual slouch, Ryuji nodded in agreement, dark eyes strong with resolve. “Hell yeah...” The cackle in his head told him that Kidd agreed. They were going to protect their crew.

Footsteps padded down the steps and Ann appeared, the front of her polo slightly wet. “Hey, I’m done. We can go now.”

Ryuji nodded, shouldering both of their bags. “We’ll leave Airi to you then, Akira. Tell us if anything changes.”

Akira nodded and the two blonds left the house together. He idly wondered if there really was something going on between them, like Airi had hinted. If there was, Morgana was going to sorely disappointed.

Walking over to the living room, he sat down on one of the chaises and took his phone out, dialing the cafe’s number. He should let his guardian know about this. The older man was close to Airi as well and she called him “Ojisan.”

Morgana jumped off the couch and dashed down the hallway, climbing the stairs.

He watched, perplexed for a second before the call went through. “Hello? Who’s this?” He focused back to his call. “It’s Akira. I wanted to ask if I can stay over at Airi’s tonight and skip school tomorrow?”

“Wait, what? Why the hell would I let you do that?”

“She...completely exhausted herself and collapsed. We had to take her to Dr. Takemi’s clinic to get her checked out.” He clenched his hands. “She’s still unconscious and Yusuke has to keep a perfect
...I volunteered to take care of her.”

“What the hell happened? Ugh…” He sighed heavily. “All right. I’ll allow this. I’m coming over later to grab you some blankets and to check on her myself.”

“Thank you, Boss.”

The call clicked, indicating the older man had hung up on him and he sighed, putting his phone away. He was staying here tonight. If only it happened under better circumstances...

Yusuke padded downstairs and sat next to him on the chaise. “I placed her back in bed once Ann had finished. Morgana is keeping her warm.” He informed him quietly. “I overheard your conversation. You are staying here this evening?”

Akira nodded, leaning back in his seat. “Yeah, hope you don’t mind. I’m just…” He ruffled his hair, aggravated with today. “I’m just worried about her. She kept that coughing thing to herself, she didn’t tell us Hisoka had made contact with her, several times even, and now this? Rushing off into Mementos alone when she knew how it affected her?” He shook his head. “She’s so reckless…”

Yusuke observed him. “...Perhaps. But do you remember what Hisoka had said? ‘You were going to kill me for the one you loved.’ It seems she was only abiding by her instinct to protect us, no matter the cost…” He laced his hands together. “That does not excuse her lying to us, but it is understandable why she did.”

Akira only sighed. “Yeah, you’re right…” The one she loved? Could that be...him?

The doorbell rang and he walked over to the door, opening it to let Sojiro in. “Seriously,” He sighed, gripping the blankets and a bag of clothes in his arms. “The things I have to do for you…”

Akira gave a small but grateful smile. “Thank you, Boss. I appreciate this.”

“You better.” Sojiro grumbled quietly as he handed him the blankets. “Now, where’s Airi? Is she OK?”

Taking the blankets and placing them in the tatami room, he stood back up and headed to the stairs. “She’s in her room…”

They walked up the steps to the second floor and into the bedroom. Airi was sound asleep in bed, her hair and body freshly washed and dressed in a warm set of pajamas, courtesy of Ann. Morgana was curled up next to her head on the pillow, sleeping soundly as close as he could next to her.

Sojiro softened. “Now ain’t that just a damn cute sight…”

Akira agreed. It was always cute to see the cellist and her “son” together. The photos were nowhere in sight and he was grateful the older man didn’t have to see them. No one wanted to see photos of their old friends’ dead bodies, especially right now when their “niece” was sick in bed.

The barista walked closer, eyes narrowing behind his glasses when he spotted the heavy dark circles and sickly pale skin. “How the hell did this happen?” He asked quietly. “You two’re always together...I thought you would’ve spotted this sooner.”

Akira could only close his eyes, bowing his head in shame. “…I thought so, too. I wish I could’ve pushed it, but she would always tell me not to worry about it.” Too bad he was worried out of his mind now.
Sighing again, Sojiro walked out of the room and down the stairs, Akira following after him once he closed the door. “I’m goin’ home then. Make sure to cook only healthy food for her.” Sojiro warned as he put on his shoes again. “Tell me if she gets worse or something.”

He nodded and his guardian left, the door closing with a click. He let out a sigh, more tired than ever now after today’s scares. It was time for bed. Taking the bag of clothes into the bathroom, he changed into his sleepwear and readied his blankets. It wasn’t as good as a bed, but it was something.

Yusuke stepped into the room in his sleepwear as well and rolled out his futon. Making sure to pray at the shrine, especially after today, they turned off the lights and laid down on their respective beds. “…Hey, Yusuke?”

“Yes?”

“I’m just wondering what you feel towards Airi.”

“I admire her. Even though she had lost her parents at a young age like I had, she still worked hard to regain her home. She applies 110% of effort into everything she does, and she consistently takes the time to care for us, even if it is at the cost of her own health. I love her.”

His eyes snapped toward the artist. “Love her?”

Yusuke nodded, staring up at the dark ceiling, knowing that was where her room was. “Yes. She is the family I yearned for in Madarame’s shack. Natsu-nii and Yukimi-nee were some of my closest companions, but...they had never put in much effort to care for me, nor I them. We were too absorbed in our art. With Aneki, we cook for each other, we study together, we fight together as thieves...Is that not love?”

Akira relaxed. So it was a sibling love.

He turned his eyes back up at the ceiling. Was he himself in love with her? Could it be called love when they had only known each other for less than three months?

He stared down at his hands. These hands that were so stained with blood, the sanguine practically dripping from his nails even though they were physically spotless.

His breathing quickened and unbeknownst to him, his pupils shrunk, the first signs of an oncoming panic attack. What had he done. What did he almost do. WHAT DID HE ALMOST DO?! 

Hyperventilating, he gripped his head, uncaring that he was still stood in the station square, people walking past him as if he didn’t exist. As if he didn’t matter. That’s right. He didn’t matter. He ruined a family. His love had ruined him. He killed his friend and his wife. He almost killed their child. He almost killed her friends.

He had to...He had to go away. Somewhere far away, where he would never see the light of freedom again. He didn’t deserve it. He was a monster. His love was a monster.

He choked back a sob, wanting to retch up something, anything, but he hadn’t eaten. He knew his cognition had changed without his knowing, though he wasn’t sure how. None of the experiments he observed had ever come close, and that was ten years ago. How far did the research go before Wakaba died? How much did Sojiro remember?
What did he himself remember? He was given nothing but an objective when he was released, and he failed even that. He never even met the other agent. How much did he know and kept to himself?

“I’m so sorry...Airi…” He breathed out shakily, tears falling and wetting the ground in little drops. Was there something he could do? To make this even marginally better for her? He never meant to hurt her. He never meant to hurt anyone. But if life taught him anything, it was that he was a failure and his actions hurt everyone.

He had sent all those photos, those confidential documents from his database, all for what? Just to fuck with her mind like he had done to him? Would he even be able to face him ever again? If he went away, there was no doubt he would be tracked down and taken care of. He wouldn’t let him leave just like that. He could almost fool himself into thinking he was wanted if he didn’t know he was only being used.

Letting his arms fall limply to his side, he stared up at the evening sky, silently crying from being overcome with grief, anger, self-resentmentsorrowsmuchguilt. Perhaps...Perhaps he could leave her one more piece of information. It was so insignificant to the grander scheme of things, a piece of data that no one cared about, but maybe, just maybe...it would help. There was nothing else he could do to repent.

She deserved to know.

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She floated in an everlasting darkness. Where she was didn’t matter because she didn’t exist. She felt nothing, she saw nothing, she heard nothing, she was nothing. Her fingers- what were fingers?-twitched and she realized she had a body. Was she alive? Was she a person? What was a person?

“Hm? What the-?”

“Hey! Can you hear me?”

“Tch...She’s barely corporeal in this realm...Hey, Justine! Why is there a new prisoner?”

“The Aeon is not in our files. Only the prisoner Kurusu Akira should be here. Send her back.”

“What if The Master’s expecting her? She’s the Aeon. He should know that she’s here in the Velvet Room.”

“No. We should not waste his time when this was a fluke. She does not belong here. I will send her back then.”

"...Fine."

Footsteps approached her, the clacking of maryjanes on brick echoing in her ears. Ears? “Aeon... Why are you noted down on my clipboard? Neither I nor Caroline had done it, and yet...Who?” Papers flipped, the sound echoing in the cold dungeon. “...How were you able to see me earlier? Only the prisoner should be able to...Who are you really?”

Who said that? Who were they? They sounded young. What was young? What was old? Who was she? What was she?

She closed her eyes after realizing they had been open this entire time, staring into the void. Did
she need answers? Not really. It didn’t matter. All that mattered was getting some rest.
She was so tired...

“Mor...find her...save...-manity...Aeon...-elp...The Trickster...s...”

Thank you to my friend Ryann for this fanart!! <3 His art is at Rae Ariadne on facebook and instagram if you’re interested!!
---6/25, SATURDAY, EARLY MORNING, YONGENJAYA BACKSTREETS.

An alarm rang out in the room and Akira groaned, clenching his eyes shut. “Shut up…”

“My apologies.” Yusuke replied quietly, turning off his alarm as he sat up in his futon. “I must ready myself for school. Would you check up on Aneki? I don’t believe she had moved all night or else I would have heard it, but as a precaution…”

“Say no more…” Akira groaned as he sat up, his back cracking from sleeping on blankets instead of a mattress. He covered his mouth as he yawned, throwing the comforter off and folding them before putting them in the corner for later.

He padded upstairs to Airi’s room, quietly opening the door and peeking in. She was still sound asleep and Morgana was too. Stepping into the room, he walked closer to the bed. Her dark circles weren’t as dark now, and she looked a bit healthier than she was yesterday. That must mean she was getting better, right?

Deciding to leave them be, he left the room and went back downstairs. Yusuke was already dressed in his uniform and stood in front of the stove, a frilly pink apron on his front.

Akira sweatdropped. He never thought he’d see the sight…

He walked into the kitchen and opened the fridge, taking ingredients out for a soup. He could probably make a good vegetable stew with how well stocked the fridge was. That should be healthy enough along with the medicine Dr. Takemi gave him.

“The pots are in the cabinet to your left.” Yusuke informed him as he expertly flipped an egg.

Akira nodded, taking out the cookware and filling it with water from the sink. They spent a quiet morning together before Yusuke had to leave for school.

The door closed and Akira sighed. It was just him who was awake now. He may as well let the stew simmer while he went to take a shower.

Taking his bag of clothes, he went upstairs and into the master bathroom. He looked around curiously, noting it was a typical Japanese bathroom with a sink, toilet, and bath, and a comfy rug on the tiled floor. He placed his things on top of the clothes basket before stripping down.

His cheeks heated up. This was where Airi showered and bathed. This was where she would be naked most of the time. All that smooth creamy skin and her soft curves...

Feeling himself tense at the thoughts, he quickly shook his head and stepped inside the tub. Don’t be a pervert now, especially when she was still recovering in the next room.
Quickly washing himself, he dressed in his casual clothes and headed downstairs. Taking out two bowls, he scooped the freshly made soup into them, one of them containing medicine, before bringing them up the stairs.

Using his back to push open the door, he walked over and placed the meals on the bedside table. Peering down at the two slumbering thieves, Akira shook Morgana awake by his scruff.

Blue eyes snapping open, the feline let out a yawn, showing his tiny pink tongue before he commenced bathing himself awake. He looked over at Airi and his ears drooped. “She hasn’t woken up, huh...I would’ve noticed if she did.” Nose twitching at the scent of vegetables, he looked to his left at the bowls of soup. “Oh, are you going to wake her up for food?”

Akira nodded and the feline jumped off the bed and onto the table, lapping at his meal. Placing a hand on her shoulder, Akira gently shook the unconscious person in bed. “Airi, wake up. You have to eat.”

She didn’t move an inch, only her chest rising up and down as she breathed indicated she was still alive. Frowning worriedly, he shook her a little harder. She had to wake up and eat or else her health would get worse. “Airi!”

One of her eyes twitched and she let out a quiet groan. “Airi.” He shook her again and she finally cracked her eyes open, still bloodshot from lack of sleep. “Huh..?”

“You have to eat.” He advised quietly, helping her sit up in the bed and propping up her pillow. “C’mon, I made some soup for you.”

Her stomach growled as an answer and she nodded slowly, eyes still half lidded. “OK…”

Lifting the bowl, he carefully held it to her lips. It should be cool enough for her to drink. He tilted it into her mouth and she slowly drank the contents, coughing a bit when she swallowed too quickly. Placing the bowl down, he gently patted her back, making sure it went down the right way. “You OK?”

She nodded slightly, breathing out in relief. “Yeah...Thank you, Akira.” She gave him a small and tired smile, her hands trembling as withdrawal set in. “You’re taking care of me like I’m a baby…”

He snorted. “Well, you’re my baby right now, so…” He glanced away, his cheeks reddening at his lame joke. “A-Anyway, you should finish your soup and then sleep some more. You’re still exhausted and Dr. Takemi said you need lots of rest.”

She slowly blinked. “She did? Oh...It’s Saturday…” She furrowed her brow. “Shouldn’t you be in school..?”

“And leave you alone when you’re sick? No.” He deadpanned. “Boss already gave me permission and Ann gave Kawakami-sensei a note. It’s fine.”

She slowly nodded. “OK…”

He helped her drink the rest of the soup before slowly placing her back against the mattress, watching softly as she breathed out and fell asleep again. Collecting the bowls, he walked downstairs, Morgana following him, and he washed the dishes before going back into the tatami room. He might as well get some studying done.

His phone buzzed in his pocket and he took it out, noting that it was Sojiro’s number. “Hello?”
“Hey. I don’t usually dig up another guy’s number like this, but I’m too busy with the cafe to come visit. How’s Airi? She wake up?”

Akira sweatdropped. It wasn’t like his guardian was going to sexually prey on him if he kept his number in his mobile. “...She woke up to eat and immediately went back to bed. She seems OK so far…”

Sojiro sighed. “That’s good...You need anythin’ to help her with? Medicine, food?”

He hummed, glancing over at the still mostly full pot of soup on the stove. “...No. I think she has everything she needs right now, but thank you for the offer, Boss.”

“All right then. Tell me if anything changes...I gotta get back to the cafe.”

With a click, the call disconnected and he placed his phone back inside his pocket. Even the usually reserved and gruff man was worried about all this. He hoped that he would only give them more good news...

It was late in the afternoon now. School would be letting out soon, which meant Airi should have another meal. Every phantom thief had been texting him throughout the day for updates, and he tried his best to keep them in the know, though there wasn’t much to say other than that she woke up for a few minutes.

Ann and Ryuji were exceptionally annoying about this, blowing up his phone during what was the school’s lunch break. At least they were doing this because they cared.

Getting up from the mats, he walked over to the kitchen and scooped some of the heated soup into a bowl, adding the medicine and watching with a thoughtful frown as the beige powder dissolved. Just how did Dr. Takemi make her drugs? Maybe behind one of the doors at her clinic was her secret lab...

He left Morgana inside the tatami room, letting the feline do whatever he wanted. He stepped upstairs, carefully holding the dish in his hands in case he spilled it, and walked into the room.

He blinked, noticing there wasn’t anyone in the bed, though the comforter was thrown to the side. Slowly walking over to the bedside table, he placed it down before glancing around. She was awake? Where did she go?

Walking out into the hallway, he heard water splash to his right and he turned his head toward the bathroom. He walked up to it and pressed his ears against the closed door, knocking on the panel. “Airi?”

“Yeah?” He heard from inside.

“You OK?”

“Yeah, don’t worry, I was just going to take a bath. I feel gross…”

He snorted, leaning against the wall next to the bathroom door. “Ann cleaned you up last night.”

“She did a bad job then.”

“I’ll be sure to tell her.”
“Great.”

He pursed his lips at her short answers. “...How are you feeling?”

She paused in taking off her shirt, eyes dimming at the question. How did she feel? Feel what? Everything still seemed so muted...

“Airi?”

“I don’t know…I don’t really know how to feel right now...I spent the last week with my mind going numb. It was like…” She struggled to say it as she stripped out of her pajamas, fingers jerking as she tried to control her shaking. “It was like drowning in a frozen sea...Everything felt numb and it kept getting darker and darker…”

She still didn’t feel like she was awake, as if she was only wading through an everlasting nightmare. A truly terrifying nightmare was when it would give a person a chance to calm down. It would lull them into a false sense of security, and just when they think it was over, it would only start anew again.

She was afraid she was in one of those lulls. Was she really awake and free?

The bath had finished filling up and she stepped inside, sighing in content as the hot waters soothed her aching body, her muscles screaming when she sat down. “...I’m sorry.” She confessed guiltily, her chin dipping into the bath. “I know I kept this from you guys. I didn’t want to lie to you, I just…I didn’t want you to worry more than you already were. He wasn’t just targeting me, he was going to target you guys too…”

“...We’re the Phantom Thieves. It’s not like we can’t defend ourselves.”

She let out a sigh of frustration. He still didn’t get it. “In this world, we’re all defenseless.” She spat bitterly. “It’s only in the other world we have a chance of surviving against these...these monsters…” She would’ve been a monster too if they hadn’t stopped her. She would’ve been a killer.

“You’re just like me.”

She let out a shaky sigh and hugged herself, bringing her knees up close. She didn’t want to hear his voice ever again. ‘I’m not…” She whispered.

“What?” Akira asked through the door but she didn’t hear him.

“I’m not like him. I’m not like him at all.” She wasn’t anything like him, even when he spilled his heart to them. How he fell in love only for that love to manipulate him. How he became a murderer because he followed his heart.

Her blood pounded faster and her breathing quickened. She wasn’t like him. She wasn’t like him at all.

Red light reflected off the surface of her weapon, and she brought it down at his neck in one fell swoop.

The light flickered for a second and she blinked, gasping when the clear bath water she was sat in was now a bubbling red. Red. So much red. “No!!” She screamed as she jumped out of the bath,
tripping on the edge and landing on the rug in a heap.

She had to get the blood off. She had to get it off. She pulled the towel to her, drying herself frantically even as the fibers abraded her skin. She wasn’t a murderer. She hadn’t killed anyone. She was clean. She didn’t kill him.

“Airi!” Akira shouted through the thick wood, hitting the door with his hand. “What’s wrong?!”

“I’m not like him!” She shouted hysterically, not hearing anything except her racing heartbeat in her ears. “I’m not like him at all!” The blood wouldn’t come off. It was as if it stained her flesh, seeping through into her pores to remind her that she was so ready to butcher that man. That she wasn’t human, she was a monster.

She wasn’t Airi.

Sobbing with the large towel draped over her, she began to claw at herself. She wanted it off! She had to get it off!

The door burst open and Akira looked down at her in shock. Her hair was damp but the rest of her exposed skin was dry and red, as if she had rubbed herself raw with the towel. She was wailing, tears running down her face, and chanting “get it off” while clawing at her arms and legs, her nails leaving red lines on her tender flesh.

Not caring that she was almost naked, he quickly knelt down in front of her and grabbed her wrists, stopping her from mangling herself any further. “Airi, stop!” He urged desperately, using his strength to restrain her arms.

“I have to get it off!” She shouted, trying to shake off his grip. “I’m dirty...There’s so much blood...I’m not like him…” She wept, her arms quickly losing strength from exhaustion and she collapsed against his chest. “I’m not...like him…”

He furrowed his brow in worry, and he felt his heart ache for her yet again. “Of course you’re not…” He gathered her in his arms, hugging the trembling form close to him. “You’re not a murderer…” He murmured reassuringly. He hoped his words could get through to her. “You’re a kind, beautiful, and wonderful person who would never hurt anyone.”

She whimpered, burying her face next to his heart. “But I did...I almost killed him...It would’ve been so easy to just let my scythe chop off his head...” She took a shaky breath, frightened of her own capacity. “I almost did it…” It would’ve been so easy. Was she human if she could do something so horrible? Was she Airi?...

He shook his head, hugging her tighter to himself. “No, that was just Mementos messing with you. You’re not a murderer, OK? Repeat after me: You’re not a murderer.”

She sniffled. “I’m...I’m not…”

“You’re not a murderer.” He stated firmly.

“I’m...not...a murderer…” She repeated quietly, finally beginning to calm down with the help of his soothing voice and his strong heartbeat next to her ear. “But there was so much blood…” She looked down at her hands, expecting to see crimson gore but was met with pink and marred skin, not a drop of sanguine present. “Huh...? But the bathtub was full of it…”

He glanced over at the normal clear water, still steaming innocuously, and grimaced. Was she hallucinating because of that black liquid? Or was it from withdrawal?
Filing it for later, he turned back to look down at her and gently rubbed her back, the thick towel hanging over her head draping around her all the way down to the floor. “...You’re just tired. C’mon, let’s get some food in you and then put you back to bed, OK?”

She nodded slowly. “OK…”

He stood up and making sure the towel was wrapped securely around her with no chance of flashing him, he lifted her in his arms for the third time in two days and carried her over to her room.

They passed by Morgana in the hallway who looked up at them gloomily, his ears pressed against his scalp from what he heard. “Mom…”

Placing her down on the bed, Akira opened one of her wardrobes and pulled out whatever seemed comfortable and warm.

He blushed as he reached down into her underwear drawer, randomly grabbing whatever was on top, and his hand came away with a pair of pastel green panties. “H-Here.” He stuttered awkwardly, handing her the clothes. “Get dressed and I’ll take care of everything.”

She sluggishly took the bundle of clothes from him, hands jittery and weak. “Thank you…”

He nodded before leaving the room and taking care of the mess that the bathroom had become. While mopping the floor, he let his mind wander. Why had she freaked out like that? Was it just her exhaustion and withdrawal messing with her? Or...was that black liquid even more sinister than he thought? He would ask, but she was in no condition to answer him and he didn’t want to stress her any more than she already was.

Putting the mop into the bucket, he hung up the rug on a rack to dry. At least he had been able to calm her down. It was time for him to be her pillar of support. She had been his ever since his first day of school, and whether she knew it or not, it meant a lot to him.

After cleaning up all the spillage and emptying the bath, he went back to her room, seeing she was now fully dressed in a knit sweater and thick sweatpants, hugging herself insecurely. Even though it was the beginning of summer and she was in such warm clothes, she shivered as if she was in a freezing tundra.

He took a seat beside her on the edge of the bed and lifted up the bowl he left earlier. “C’mon, you need to eat.” He held it out to her lips and just like before, she drank the whole thing with his help.

Sighing as she was now bundled in snuggly clothing and a stomach full of warm soup, she clumsily scooted onto the bed, pulling the covers over herself.

“I’ll go clean the dishes.” Akira stated, about to get off the bed when her hand reached out and snatched his wrist.

“Oh…” Airi whispered timidly, staring up with tired eyes and faint traces of insecure hope. “Can you...stay? Just until I fall asleep? I always feel safest when I’m with you, and…” She burrowed beneath the blanket, her damp hair wetting the pillow underneath her. “You’ll help chase away the nightmares.”

He was her safety netting. He kept her buoyant in the torrid seas of her mind. He kept her from drowning. She needed him.

He softened. “Yeah, of course. Anything for you.”
She shifted to the side, giving him ample space to lay down on. “Thank you, Akira…”

He smiled gently before settling down beside her, placing his glasses on the bedside table with one hand, the other still holding onto hers. “Always.”

And he meant that.

Chapter End Notes

Airi- rank 8
He scrunched up his face, eyes still closed shut as an incessant ringing rang out throughout the house. He just wanted to sleep on this soft mattress and snuggle into the warmth on his right. It was so inviting...

Something landed on the bed and padded up to him, swatting his nose with a paw. He opened one eye and glared tiredly at the feline. “What…”

Morgana sat back and turned his head toward the bedroom door, ears standing straight up. “Someone has been ringing the doorbell for a minute now.”

Akira’s eyes snapped open. What? Was it Hisoka?

He quickly sat up but paused when something tugged at his right hand. Turning his head, he softened when he noticed Airi had laced her hand with his, still slumbering away peacefully right next to his indent on the bed. He blushed. Were they cuddling while asleep?

The doorbell rang again and he cursed quietly, carefully removing her fingers from his and getting up from the bed. Whoever was at the door was going to wake her up from much needed sleep and he didn’t want that.

Quickly running down the stairs, he warily looked through the peephole on the front door and blinked. Taking a step back, he opened the door for his teacher. “Kawakami-sensei…”

The older woman was stood at the doorstep in her regular clothes, looking out of breath as if she had ran here after school had let out. She held a plastic bag in her hand and from the sharp cardboard edges, he could tell they were cheap drugs from a local pharmacy. “Kurusu-kun…” She panted, wiping her damp forehead with an yellow striped sleeve. “Takamaki-chan handed me that note today and I got worried.” She covered her mouth with her arm as she coughed. “Is she OK?”

He nodded, moving to the side and opening the door further. “She’s fine. just collapsed from exhaustion.”

She stepped in, toeing off her flats before hurrying up the stairs. He followed her back into the bedroom, standing a few feet away.

She gazed at her slumbering pseudo daughter for a moment before moving to the bedside, observing the girl with a worried frown. “I didn’t know her dark circles were this bad…” She murmured, covering her mouth again as she coughed.

He furrowed his brow. She had been coughing since a few days ago when he called her over. Was she sick?

Clearing her throat, Kawakami took out the items from her bag, placing them on the bedside table.
There were fever and pain relievers, and even traditional herbal tonics. “I got these from my elderly neighbors.” She explained quietly. “They usually hand these to me because I should keep healthy as a young girl.” She rolled her eyes. “At least they might come in handy today…” She bit her lip, holding back a cough. “How long has she been asleep?”

He rested his hands in his pockets as he leaned against the wall. “A few hours now? Before that, she was knocked out for a good fourteen hours…” It was probably time to wake her up for dinner.

Straightening off the wall, he walked downstairs to heat up the soup again. The pot was half empty now, but there should still be enough for another two or three bowls for tomorrow.

Morgana followed him in, making sure the teacher wouldn’t see him. “…She’s sick.” Morgana stated quietly, eyes trained on the stairs.

Akira paused, scooping the warm soup into two bowls, one for Airi and one for the feline. “…You sure?”

The feline nodded, ears twitching as a cough reverberated down from the second floor. “I can hear the fluid in her lungs...She should take it easy.”

He nodded thoughtfully, lifting the bowl into his hands and making his way back upstairs, leaving the other one for Morgana to eat. Could it be the stress of having two demanding jobs? How much was she paying Takase’s relatives?

Landing on the second floor, he was about to enter the room when he stopped, watching from the open doorway as the teacher gently brushed some hair out of Airi’s face, a soft look on her face. “Airi…” He heard her whisper in the quiet house. “You need to take better care of yourself. Don’t stress yourself out so much, OK?...” She muffled her cough before continuing. “I know I haven’t done much for you since signing those papers...but I hope you know I’ll always be here for you. And it’s not just for Takase-kun either.”

Akira smiled at the private one-sided conversation. He had an inkling that the teacher’s distance from Airi had hurt her, even when she said it was fine. Maybe he could have that kind of relationship with Boss one day. He was already a lot nicer than when he first arrived in Tokyo three months ago.

He paused. Had it really been three months already? It seemed like it was just yesterday he rode the train into the big metropolis all by his lonesome, no family or friends at his side. Yet now, he was surrounded by the most loyal friends he could ever even dream of asking for, a stern but fair guardian with stellar coffee and curry, and a way to right the wrongs in the world, one heart at a time.

He shook his head in amusement, a small smirk tugging at his lips. Life was strange like that.

Quietly taking a few steps back, he started walking again, making sure his footsteps were louder now to alert the teacher of his presence. She quickly moved away, sitting at the edge of the bed.

He walked into the room, holding the now lukewarm soup in his hands, and placed it on the bedside table. Taking a seat on the bed next to Kawakami, he gently shook the slumbering girl. “Airi.” He called out softly. “It’s time for dinner.”

She twitched before a groan escaped her. Good, that meant she wasn’t too exhausted to wake up like earlier.

Slowly opening her eyes, she rolled over to face him, still blurry with sleep. “It’s night already..?”
She yawned, covering her mouth.

Kawakami snorted. “Almost. You slept a whole day away.”

Airi stilled at the familiar voice, opening her eyes to look at her teacher in disbelief. “Sensei..? What are you doing here?”

Hurt flashed in her eyes before she grinned, pointing her thumb at her other student. “Kurusu-kun and you weren’t in class today, and Takamaki-chan handed me the note about your sickness, so...I wanted to come check up on you.”

Airi slowly sat up in the bed, Akira helping her up, and stared at her for a moment. “You...came to check on me?” In the whole year and a half that Kawakami had been her guardian, she’d only been to her house once and that was with the agents. Any other interactions they had were on school grounds as teacher and student. She kept her distance and made it plain that their relationship was solely because they knew Takase.

Her vision blurred and biting her lip, she wiped her eyes with a sleeve. To hear that she was worried for her, and even came to her house to check up on her...She really did care about her. She had always doubted whether or not the teacher liked her for herself, and not just because she was Takase’s “little sister.” But this was...more than she hoped for. Her and Sojiro were the only adults she trusted.

She softened. “Thanks...Nee-chan.”

Blood rushed to her cheeks and Kawakami glanced away, a small but ecstatic smile on her face. “...You’re welcome, imouto.” She covered her mouth as she coughed.

Airi blinked. She was still coughing?

Clearing her throat, Kawakami took some of the herbal bottles from the bedside table and held them out for the cellist. “Do you want to try some of these medicines? The old ladies next door keep telling me they swear by this stuff!” She grinned. “I’ve been taking some myself and they kind of work!”

Her phone rang and she cursed, taking it out of her pocket and reading the message. Eyes scanning the text, her face fell. “It’s my boss...He said I could have a shift tonight. Um…” She pursed her lips, clearly conflicted about leaving the vulnerable student.

Airi gave her an understanding smile. “It’s OK, I have Akira with me. You go do your job…” It was already more than enough that she had come over to see her.

Staring at her for a moment, Kawakami nodded slowly and stood up from the bed. “All right...Kurusu-kun, take good care of her, OK? I’ll see you on Monday, and Airi, I’ll see you when you’re feeling better.” She reassured. “I’ll make sure this won’t impact your scholarship with the school.”

Akira stood up as well. “I’ll walk you down. Airi, are you good enough to eat the soup by yourself?”

She nodded. “Yeah, I feel a lot better now. Bye, Sen- Nee-chan.”

Giving her a wave, Kawakami walked down the stairs, Akira following her. Morgana darted between his legs and up the steps, making sure the teacher wouldn’t see him.
Stepping into the foyer, she slipped into her flats before opening the door. “...Thank you, Kurusu-kun.” She voiced with her back turned toward her.

He blinked, resting his hands in his pockets. “...What for?”

She chuckled quietly. “You don’t even know...I never would’ve thought my relationship with Airi would ever improve like this. I was...cold, and she was too polite to say anything...” She turned toward him, showing him a watery smile. “But ever since you came here, you made me worry for her...First, because you had so many bad rumors following you, and I thought you were going to do underhanded things to her...”

He resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Did everyone think he was out to hurt Airi or something? First Sojiro, then Makoto, and now his teacher.

“And then you caught me moonlighting as a maid...” She chuckled wryly. “I had to make you swear not to tell her but she ended up finding out anyway...Even though I spent that night crying, I couldn’t figure out why.” She confessed quietly, eyes staring ahead at nothing. “I signed those papers because it was another way for me to atone for Takase-kun. I never...I didn’t want to get close to her. I’m an unlucky woman, you know. Everyone around me ends up hurt. And yet, here we are...”

A small smile grew on her lips. “I was worried out of my mind today when I got that note from Takamaki-chan. I realize now...I care a lot for her. I don’t want her to end up like Takase-kun, overworked and too tired to enjoy her youth.” Her jaw tightened. “I want to be able to do something this time...I don’t know if you know this, but she used to work every day when we were dealing with child services last year, just to afford everything here.”

She gestured to the inside of the house. “It was only when you transferred here that she slowed down...She made real friends, she smiled real smiles...” She grinned. “And it’s all thanks to you...I hope I can count on you to continue to be by her side. Thank you.”

He smiled and nodded. It seemed like he helped a family come together. Could he have something like that someday? His Phantom Thieves were pretty close to being actual family at this point, but none of them were adults no matter how much Makoto and Airi seemed to be. “You’re welcome. I’m happy for you and Airi, Sensei.”

She covered her mouth as she coughed. “A-Anyway, I better get going now before I’m late. I’ll see you on Monday.”

Even though she was still exhausted, she was tired of sleeping. After finishing the rather hearty stew that Akira had brought her, Airi had tried to go back to sleep but found that she couldn’t. She wasn’t used to sleeping so much anymore.

“Mom?”

She turned her head, looking down at Morgana who sat on the floor. “Do you feel better now?” He asked quietly.

She smiled softly and nodded. “Yeah...Thank you, Morgana. That Diarama probably saved me...” Yesterday’s events were still rather hazy in some parts once the adrenaline wore off, but she remembered the cooling sensation of the healing spell. Yusuke was right, her own healing was slightly different in that it was warm. Like the sun.
He purred, tail waving back and forth behind him. “I’m glad to hear it helped. My healing skills are the best in our team next to yours.” He jumped up on the bed, padding next to her. “...It was really reckless of you to face against him alone.” He chided reluctantly. “You went in without any backup, supplies, or even a plan. You were everything but a true phantom thief at that moment.”

She closed her eyes and nodded. “I know...I just...” She stared down at her hands, trembling only marginally now, and flinched as a flash of red covered her palms for a second. She was seeing things. “I didn’t want any of you to be hurt by him...He already hurt me years ago and I thought I could do it...” She huffed tiredly. “I did do it...I almost went too far. I almost...” She took in a sharp breath. “I almost killed him if you all hadn’t stopped me...”

His blue eyes gazed at her for a moment before he rubbed his head against her hands, his fur even softer than the plush version of him she had next to her. “You didn’t. That’s what matters. There’s no doubt that something about Mementos is hurting you, and being that deep in might’ve affected your mind.”

He licked her fingers affectionately. “I’m glad you’re OK…” Zorro shifted in his heart. She was important to them and it wasn’t just because she was their “mom.” Something else told him he had to stick near her, just like how he stuck by his leader. They meant something to him, but he didn’t know what.

She gently rubbed his ears, feeling his purrs rumble beneath her fingers. “Yeah...” Why did Mementos hurt her like that? It was hard to breathe, it was hard to concentrate, it was hard not to vomit. Was it some sort of reaction to the deeper parts? No one else on the team had this sort of backlash.

She let out a sigh. She was too tired to think and too tired to sleep.

Pulling the covers off her, she slowly got off the bed, standing up on unsteady feet. She could feel her legs tremble as she walked out of her room and down the stairs, gripping the safety rail tightly. She hadn’t noticed earlier when she went to take a bath, but her body was really frail right now.

Morgana followed after her worriedly, his paws walking faster than she was. “Mom, where are you going? You need more rest!”

She scoffed. “I’m not that stupid. I just...I just want to do something that isn’t sleeping. TV is fine, right?” Making it to the last step, she felt one of her ankles give up on her and she gripped the railing tighter as she fell on her rear with an oomph. “Ugh...!” She winced as the muscles in her arms protested at the rough treatment. She was really weak...

Two warm hands reached under her arms and lifted her off the stairs effortlessly, letting her rest against a firm chest. She looked up and behind her at Akira who frowned down worriedly. “Why are you out of bed?”

She smiled sheepishly. “I don’t want to sleep anymore...” Noticing his unimpressed face, she pouted. “C’mon, please? Just let me watch TV or something. I’m not going to do anything stupid.”

He heaved a long sigh. “...Fine, we’ll go to the living room. You’re not moving an inch off that
sofa, OK? You need to conserve your energy.”

She deadpanned. “Fine…”

Keeping a secure arm around her waist, he guided her into the living room and onto one of the chaises, holding her hand as she slowly sat down with a wince. Morgana jumped up next to her, using one of his paws to press the power button on the remote. The TV flashed onto a talk show, the hosts asking the idols about their backgrounds and such. Akira took a seat on her other side and she leaned her head on his shoulder, watching as Risette answered enthusiastically.

Idols were so boring to watch when exhausted. Airi fought the urge to yawn as Kanamin described her daily diet as well as her exercise routine when working on DropKick. It was either this or the news, and she didn’t want to hear about crimes right now. She couldn’t show she was tired either, or else Akira would carry her to bed again and demand she sleep.

For all his nagging, she couldn’t help but be so grateful to the man next to her. Here she was, complaining like a spoiled sick baby while he took care of her, cooked meals for her, cleaned her mess in the bathroom, and with a sliver of guilt on her part, kept her company instead of going to school like his probation report demanded him to. He barely even yelled at her for being reckless.

She subtly glanced up at him, his eyes glazed over behind his glasses as he stared at the TV. He didn’t seem like he was enjoying the show either.

Morgana rested his chin on her thigh, watching avidly as the colorful and bright idols began to dance on the stage, singing together for a finale.

She looked down at him in amusement, giving him a few scritches and receiving an answering purr. He was though.

The front door creaked open and all three of them leaned their heads to look down the hall. “I’m home.” Yusuke’s voice could be heard, the sound of him taking off his shoes before his dull footsteps approached them.

Airi gave him a small smile. “Welcome home, Yusuke.”

Akira waved languidly, covering his mouth as he yawned from boredom. “Hey.”

He stopped at the doorway, furrowing his brow. “Should you be out of bed right now? You are still recovering…”

She resisted the urge to roll her eyes. How many people were going to nag at her about her health? Though she was grateful they cared so much, it was starting to get a little annoying. “You’re a little late to be scolding me. These two already did that.”

He raised a brow. “As they should. What you did was reckless beyond belief and your body is paying for it. I urge you to return to bed soon.”

She sighed but acquiesced. “Yes, yes…”

Four growls echoed together in the room and they all looked at each other. “Now that I think about it…” Akira held a hand to his stomach. “I only ate breakfast today.”
Yusuke perked up. “Since we are all famished, shall I demonstrate my cooking skills to you, Akira, Morgana?”

Morgana sat up straight, blinking curiously. “What kind of cooking? Are you as good as mom?”

He smiled slyly. “I shall let you be the judge of that. Come!” He gestured toward the dining room with the kitchen just beyond. “Witness yet another form of my art!”

They sweat dropped at his theatrics. Leaving his bag next to the couch, he moved into the kitchen to begin cooking.

Airi was about to get up but the hand on her waist stopped her. “Before we go…” Akira began quietly, mindful of the clanging noises coming from across the hall. “…What is that black liquid you were coughing up?”

She froze, her entire body stiff like a statue. He knew? She barely remembered anything from yesterday, but...they had been there when she collapsed. Had she thrown up black right in front of them? She didn’t want to worry them even more. What could she say? “I…”

“Don’t lie, mom.” Morgana pleaded, standing up on his paws. “Yusuke told us you were coughing three weeks ago, right after we came out of Mementos. How long has this been going on and why haven’t you told us?”

She plastered a fake smile on her face. “What? No, nothing like that happened. Are you sure you didn’t just mistake the black goo from the Shadows? Maybe I tracked them in with me. It’s probably nothing anyway, so don’t worry-”

“Airi, stop.” Akira voiced tightly, turning to face her directly. “We know, OK? We know you were throwing up some sort of...black blood.” His lips twisted as he recalled the sludge. “What is it? Did you know about it?”

“Indeed.”

They turned their heads to see Yusuke leaning against the doorway, a serious frown on his effeminate face. “Please, Aneki. Do not lie.”

Staring at her boys, she bit her lip and her shoulders slumped. “...I don’t know what it is.” She confessed quietly, hands still shaking though not as bad as before. “I never threw up black liquid until...until yesterday. After Shimizu-san’s Mementos run, I kept having the urge to cough but I…” Her eyes darted away guiltily. “I kept it to myself.”

Morgana stood still. “That was why you kept laughing on the way back, even at Ryuji’s terrible jokes…” He looked up at her in disbelief. “You were disguising your coughs.”

She nodded. “I...coughed up red blood that day.”

Furrowing his brow, Akira turned in his seat so he could grasp her hand in his, helping to keep down her trembles. “But...Why didn’t you say anything?” He asked worriedly. “Coughing blood up is serious.”

She looked down. “Only if it persists, which it didn’t...I thought it wouldn’t happen again, so I...didn’t say anything. I’m sorry, I know it’s not a good excuse…”

Yusuke clenched his jaw and looked away. “So, there is nothing we know as of now that can help…” He murmured. “Would you have such a reaction again if you travel back into Mementos?
As we have observed, you are fine within Palaces, but something about Mementos seems to cause you harm…"

She sighed. “I don’t know...I would have to go back in to check.”

The hand on hers tightened its grip. “No.” Akira voiced firmly. “You’re not going back.”

She snapped her head up to look at him. “I have to. I’m a member of this team too, even if all I do is drag everyone down with my problems.” She argued, already beginning to feel drained again. “Mementos is a good way to help people, and I’m not going to sit back and watch from the sidelines as you all endanger yourselves.” She didn’t want to be left behind. Not now, when she needed them more than ever. She was selfish, but they were her family now, and she would do anything to be with them. She wasn’t losing anyone else.

“We’re not kicking you out,” Morgana refuted quickly, stepping on her thigh with his front paws. “We just don’t want to see you like that again. That black liquid...it smelled like death.” His ears pressed against his scalp, distress tainting his features. “Going back in could kill you.”

She smiled, albeit bitterly. “Everyone dies someday, and if it meant I could stay by your sides…” She argued. “Then that’s fine with me.”

“Airi!” Akira snapped, eyes hard with anger and horror. How could she say that? Didn’t she think about how that would affect them? How it would affect him? “Don’t…” He clenched his jaw, his chest constricting painfully. “Don’t say that so easily.”

Yusuke stared at her with wide eyes. “Aneki…” He whispered, throat tightening at the possibility.

Morgana stayed quiet, only gazing up at her with teary blue eyes, his ears pressed tight against his scalp. She softened at their horrified expressions. “I’m not saying I want to die, the opposite really…” She smiled gently. “Being with you all...means more to me than anything. Besides, it could’ve just been really bad coffee.” She tried to joke, but she knew from their solemn faces that it didn’t work.

Akira only stared at their hands, trying to memorize all the lines and callouses that decorated her palms. Why...Why did she have to say that? To be with them meant more than anything else in the world to her. He couldn’t take that away from her. But…

“We’re setting up more ground rules.” He declared reluctantly. “You aren’t fighting if we go past Chemdah. You stay with Morgana at all times. If you’re feeling sick enough that you start coughing, one of us will go with you back into the real world.” He stated firmly. “Got it? I’m not…” His thumb began to caress the back of her hand, ever so gently as if she was as fragile as glass. “I don’t want to lose you.” He had already come too close to that. Never again.

Airi only sighed. “All right...Thank you for understanding.”

Yusuke only pursed his lips. “If that is truly your wish, then...I suppose we cannot stop you. I will personally ensure you follow Akira’s commands.” He voiced strongly. “We will not be having a repeat of this-” A pot clanked noisily from the direction of the kitchen and he quickly turned back into the dining room to investigate. “No! My Risotto!” They heard him yell, a flurry of noisy reactions coming from within.

Giving her one more glance, Morgana rubbed his head against her arm before darting to investigate.
Airi would’ve gotten up as well if not for the iron grip on her waist and hand. “Akira…” She whispered, leaning against him just like she had earlier. “I’m not planning on dying anytime soon. I promise.”

He only closed his eyes in resignation and rested his cheek against the top of her head, inhaling that familiar scent of peppermint. “You’re reckless…” He laughed humorlessly. “I’m holding you to that.”

Thank you to my friend Amanda for this sweet fanart! I’ve been collecting every piece you guys gift me with in one album because they’re awesome and you’re all awesome for your amazing support and comments <3
Chapter 136

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

----6/26, SUNDAY, EARLY MORNING, YONGENJAYA BACKSTREETS.

Airi dragged herself out of bed Sunday morning. Even though she was still tired, her back was starting to ache from sleeping so much.

Last night after an artistically weird but still delicious dinner by Yusuke, Akira went back to the cafe. He was reluctant and hadn’t wanted to leave, saying he should be with her just in case, but she forced him to, saying she was fine with just Yusuke.

Her heart warmed to know he was so worried for her, but really, there was no need for him to use up his free time on her when he could be doing other, more important things. She knew he had a lot of responsibilities on his shoulders and she’d be selfish to keep him to herself.

Morgana also offered to stay but she told him to please watch out for their leader like usual. Akira needed him to stay focused. With a puffed up chest, he acquiesced and delved back inside the bag and Akira left with a grumble, saying he was competent on his own.

Yawning, she walked downstairs to cook breakfast, her legs much more stable than yesterday. It was weird that she was safe now. She had spent so long looking over her shoulder, jumping at every tiny noise. She hadn’t slept for so long and then she almost knocked out for two days if Akira hadn’t woken her up for food.

She had that weird dream though. There were two different voices, saying something about how she wasn’t supposed to be there...and something about a trickster.

She shook her head. It didn’t matter. It was probably some dream that her withdrawal came up with. What did matter was that she was alive and that everyone around her was still safe.

“Good morning, Aneki.” Yusuke walked into the kitchen, dressed in his usual black and blue shirt as well as his black skinny jeans.

“Good morning.” She gave him a small smile as she flipped the eggs. “Thank you for letting Akira stay over yesterday in the tatami room with you. I know it’s already kind of cramped…”

He shook his head as he took a seat. “It’s of no worry. I’m glad he was able to care for you when we could not. Are you...feeling better?”

She nodded, killing the heat. Scooping up two bowls of breakfast, she brought the meal over to the table. “I do. Thank you all for coming after me. If you hadn’t…” She bit her lip. “I would’ve turned into a killer. I would’ve been like him.” She still couldn’t say his name without getting angry. “I’m sorry you had to see me like that…”

He picked up his chopsticks. “Do not apologize for being angry. We are displeased that you had kept it from us, but we understand. He was not only threatening you, but threatening to harm us if you had not complied.” He smiled softly. “I am thankful that you are so protective of us, Aneki. I hope you know you are dear to me as well.”

She blushed, beaming at her younger brother. “Yeah...Thank you, Otouto..”
“Perhaps next time, you will let me know if someone is trespassing on our property?”

She sweatdropped. “A next time?…”

They intoned an “itadakimasu” before they began to eat. She could actually taste her food now and she relished in the simple flavors. Her phone buzzed and she unlocked her screen, reading the messages.

An: Airi, are you OK?
R: You awake? Hope Akira did a good job...
Ma: I hope your recovery is going well. Let us know if you need anything.

She smiled fondly. She was so lucky to have been blessed with such good friends.

Ai: I’m awake. Thanks for worrying.
Ai: I wouldn’t be here without you guys.
Ai: I’m feeling better too, and hopefully I can be back at school soon.
Ma: Please don’t force yourself. Take as much time as you need.
R: What Makoto said. Your health is way more important than school.
R: Since that shit happened with Hisoka, you deserve some time off.
An: Yeah. Take it easy!
An: Let us take care of you for once.

Not receiving any more messages, she placed her phone back down on the table to resume her meal. They finished within a few minutes and sat at the table to digest.

Noticing Yusuke had begun eyeing the front door while fiddling with his phone, Airi sighed as she collected their empty dishes, taking them to the sink. “You can go, you know. I’m not going to keep you prisoner here with me.”

His eyes slid to her and his brow furrowed with worry. “You are not completely recovered, and we have no assurance that Hisoka will not be back.”

She flinched at the name, her hands stilling under the water. “…I know I stole his Heart. I doubt he would be back so soon.” She gave him a small but reassuring smile. “Don’t worry, your sis is strong.”

He shook his head. “That is not the issue. I am aware you are a strong person. My worry stems from your inability to stay still. You went to great lengths to protect us, and yet would we not do the same if we were in your situation?”

She frowned in confusion as she washed the dishes in the sink. “I’m not understanding…”

He laced his hands together on the table. “What I mean is, you treat us as if we are incapable of protecting ourselves. The logical thing to do was to call us before heading into Mementos, and we would have followed you without a second thought.” He explained firmly. “I understand you were not thinking clearly, but you should have informed us the second he made contact with you. You recall we are a team? Then let us help you. Do not rush ahead only to leave us behind.” He lowered his head, eyes dimming at his next words. “Do not leave me behind…”

Softening, Airi dried her hands before approaching him and wrapping her arms around his broad shoulders.

She hadn’t realized. She was so busy trying to protect them that she ended up hurting them with her
coddling. In her defense, she wasn’t exactly thinking straight, but she knew he had been abandoned by the other apprentices over the years. She didn’t want to do the same. “I’m sorry, Yusuke…” She murmured into his soft blue hair, smelling their shared shampoo. “I...I didn’t realize I was treating you guys like actual children. Of course you’re capable as well. I’m sorry for making you doubt that…”

One of his hands rose up to lightly grasp the arm around him, reciprocating her hug.

“You’re my brother in every sense but blood. I would never leave you behind, OK? And if I do, you can scold me again for being an idiot.”

He slowly nodded, a small smile at his lips. “...Of course. That is my brotherly duty.” A wooden clack of sandals echoed in his head and Goemon enforced his soul, renewed with her assurance.

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After Yusuke had left to Shibuya with Akira, Airi went up to take a bath again. She had freaked out yesterday, but that was hopefully only due to her exhaustion which was going away thanks to rest and medication. The water had looked like blood but she knew now that it was only her own mind playing tricks on her.

Turning on the faucets, she let the bathtub fill up with steaming hot water as she stripped down. She blushed as she slid off her panties, remembering that Akira had taken these out for her yesterday. She should probably apologize for that. Having him do that for her must’ve been embarrassing.

The faucet stopped once the water reached the desired amount inside the tub, and she slowly stepped in, wincing as the heat stung her sensitive skin. Now that she wasn’t in a daze like the past week, with that haze filling up her head, she could feel everything. Everything was louder, coarser, spicier.

She sat down in the steaming bath with a sigh, bringing her knees up. She just had to wash herself and then she was done.

She hugged herself, breathing faster when the sun shined through the small window, lighting up the water with a tint of rust. It was fine. Everything was fine. It wasn’t blood.

She repeated those sentences to herself over and over until her heart calmed down and the water was clear again, showing her slim legs.

She slowly exhaled. Everything was fine now. She had to keep reminding herself of that. Scrubbing all the dirt and sweat from the past couple of days, she drained the tub with a sigh and toweled herself off. It felt like she was finally clean, physically and mentally. It was really all thanks to Akira.

She slowly dressed herself in a comfy shirt and shorts, lost in thought. He had been by her side this entire time and never once got mad at her for keeping so many things from him. He had only been worried for her. She didn’t deserve his kindness...

Walking into her room, she sat down at her vanity and dragged a comb through her wet locks, only a few strands falling out this time. Did this mean she was getting better? Or was it because she knew it was over?
With a sigh, she placed the comb down on the table and stared across the room at her cello, a fine layer of dust coating its surfaces. There was one place within the house she had not seen since this all started. She had to tell them.

Walking down the stairs, she lightly stepped into the tatami room and knelt in front of the shrine. She lit some incense, placing it in the holder before bowing her head. “Mom...Dad...” She whispered. “I fought him...I fought off...” She bit her lip and forced herself to say his name. “I fought off *Hisoka*. He started stalking me once he was let out of prison...Toying with me by giving me photos of you, of Rui...” Her jaw tightened. “I almost...I almost...”

Her breath hitched, trying to hold it in, but seeing her parents smiling faces and her innocent two year old self, she couldn’t. She just couldn’t. Clenching her jaw, she bowed her head, eyes welling up in shame. “I almost killed him...” She sobbed out the horrible truth. “I almost ended up just like him...I almost became a killer. I’m sorry. I’m sorry I’m not your daughter. You deserve a better, more clean me. Kimisawa Airi would never have even thought about killing. I...almost don’t feel human anymore with how little I know myself.”

The droplets caught onto her lashes, and when she tried to blink them away, they only fell to the floor, absorbed by the straw mats. But she was human. Akira had told her so. He made sure to drill into her head that what she did wasn’t her fault. He anchored her to reality. He anchored her to her humanity. This world...would be nothing to her without him in it.

Taking a deep breath, she wiped away the extra moisture from her face. “He told me he...he killed you because someone he loved told him to. Some...fucking asshole wanted something as stupid as papers and he ordered Hisoka for it.” Her eyes darkened. “Whoever he is...He better watch out. If he was willing to order someone to kill you guys, how many others has he wiped out?” She clenched her hands on her thighs. “I swear...I’m going to take his Heart.”

She felt Jeanne acknowledge it in her mind and she clapped her hands twice. Her parents, no matter what her dad did at his old job, didn’t deserve to die like that. Death was never the answer. She couldn’t find out the name of Hisoka’s benefactor from his Shadow, but she would in time. There was no doubt he was hurting others like he had hurt her.

Her phone buzzed and she swiped the screen.

**Ni:** Yo, everything OK?!
**Ni:** I’ve been trying to call you but you haven’t picked up.
**Ni:** If you’re not gonna answer by today, I’m coming by!

She smiled softly. At least one person from her past was still around.

**Ai:** I’m OK.
**Ai:** He hasn’t come back.
**Ni:** Phew...OK, that’s good.
**Ni:** Call me if you need me. I’ll be disappearing for a while.
**Ni:** Bosses need me for another job and I gotta hide from the cops.
**Ai:** Stay safe.

Another job? What could that be about..?

The doorbell rang and she swerved her head to stare at the front door from inside the room, furrowing her brow. She wasn’t expecting any visitors.
Slowly getting up from the seiza, she cautiously walked up to the thick wood that separated her from whoever was outside and looked through the peephole. Taken aback by what she saw, she unlocked the door and opened it. “Hello..?”

Ann, Ryuji, and Makoto were waiting outside, plastic bags in their hands. “Hey!” Ann greeted happily, brightening up at her appearance. “You’re up and walking!”

Airi could only blink. “Uh...Yeah...I told you two hours ago. What are you guys doing here..?”

Makoto smiled. “We’re here to take care of our “mom,” as Ryuji-kun says.”

Ryuji grinned and bumped shoulders with her. “Drop the “-kun.” We’re friends, right?” He turned back to Airi. “Can we come in or nah?”

Staring at them for a moment, she smiled and stepped to the side, holding the door open for them. Walking in, they toed off their shoes and carried their bags over to the kitchen, placing some of them down on the counter.

Dropping her bags, Ann launched herself at her, hiding her face in the crook of her neck as her arms encircled around her slightly shorter frame. With an oomph, Airi instinctively hugged her back, already feeling warm moisture on her shoulder. “Ann..?”

“You’re OK…” Ann voiced shakily, muffled by her sleepwear top. “I’m so glad…”

Softening, Airi relaxed in her embrace. “Yeah...I’m OK. How can I not be when you guys take care of me so well?”

Sniffing, the model moved back, showing her teary baby blue eyes. “If you’d let us take care of you…” She pouted. “I’m so tempted to yell at you for your recklessness, but I know Akira, Yusuke, and Morgana would’ve done so already.”

Airi sweatdropped and smiled sheepishly. “Yeah...They scolded me a lot.”

Ryuji snorted, sitting backwards on one of the dining chairs. “Glad someone’s able to rope you in. Seriously though, you sure you OK?” He asked concernedly, looking her up and down for any signs of weakness. “I mean, you were stuck in bed just two days ago…”

Makoto nodded in agreement, taking out the items from her own bag and placing them on the counter. “Yes, Ryuji-ku- Ryuji’s right. An average person usually takes at least a week to recover, especially as something as serious as a caffeine overdose.”

Airi smiled slightly, taking a seat at the table as well. “Well, the average person doesn’t go into Mementos like us, nor do they have access to Dr. Takemi’s medicine. I’m fine though, just still a little tired.” She reassured. “I’m pretty sure I’ve slept something around thirty four hours in two days.”

Makoto nodded slowly. “That’s good, but oversleeping is also unhealthy.” She held up a bunch of different herbs, as well as small bags of dried fruits. “I hope you’ll indulge me, but I want to make you a meal.”

Airi smiled slightly, taking a seat at the table as well. “Well, the average person doesn’t go into Mementos like us, nor do they have access to Dr. Takemi’s medicine. I’m fine though, just still a little tired.” She reassured. “I’m pretty sure I’ve slept something around thirty four hours in two days.”

Makoto nodded slowly. “That’s good, but oversleeping is also unhealthy.” She held up a bunch of different herbs, as well as small bags of dried fruits. “I hope you’ll indulge me, but I want to make you a meal.”

Airi blinked. “Oh, right. You’re really serious about diets. Well…” She smiled. “Sure, why not. It would be nice to have someone else cook for me. Yusuke’s pretty good but he spends most of his time painting instead.”

Ann perked up and walked over to Makoto’s side, peering down at the multitude of different foods.
“Can I help? I want to learn how an aikido master prepares her meals.”

Makoto smiled. “Sure.”

The two began moving around the kitchen, taking out pots and pans as well as exploring the cabinets for what she had in stock.

Airi watched with a fond smile. To be truthful, she never thought these two would ever get along so well. Ann was hotheaded and loud while Makoto preferred quiet and structure. They were very different people with very different likes and dislikes, but seeing them laugh while preparing food together showed that anyone could be friends. It was their similar circumstances of being wanted for the wrong reasons that let them bond like this, and she was glad to welcome another member into their little dysfunctional family.

“Uh…”

Perking up, Airi turned to look at Ryuji who fidgeted in his seat. “What’s up?”

He glanced over at the girls as they joked about what to make. “Can you do somethin’ for me?”

Airi nodded. “Sure. What is it?”

Getting up from his seat, he grabbed his own plastic bag and gestured for her to follow him. Curious now, she glanced back as Makoto and Ann started chopping things, unaware of their movements, and followed him to the first floor bathroom.

He dropped the bag onto the small counter and dug out the items, revealing it to be a hair bleaching kit, complete with aluminum foil, plastic gloves, petroleum jelly, and a shower cap. “I usually ask Ma to help me out, but she’s been real busy lately and my roots are startin’ to show up again—” He babbled nervously, parting some of his hair to show the black strands peeking from his scalp. “And it’s expensive to do it at the salons so I bought my own kit but I’m really shit on getting everything covered, so—”

“Yes, I’ll help.” Airi interrupted, amused as he finally took a breath. “Can you walk me through it? I’ve never done this.”

Ryuji nodded and handed her a pair of plastic gloves. “Yeah. Put those on, then we’re gonna mix the powder and activator liquid by a 2:1 ratio. I got the 20 so even if you mess up, it won’t make much of a difference.” He lectured, taking a seat on the floor in just his yellow tanktop and cargo shorts. “Then just apply it all over my hair, and make sure you don’t miss anythin’.”

Airi raised a brow at the new fountain of information coming out from the ex-runner and nodded. “OK…”

Hesitant with this new activity, she carefully measured the powder before adding in the liquid, mixing it until it became close to a white froth. She wrinkled her nose as the smell immediately began to sting her nostrils. “Ugh, how do you stand this smell?”

Ryuji shrugged, taking a jar of petroleum jelly from the bag and applying it to his hairline and the bare skin near it to prevent burning. “Eh, you get used to it. I’ve been doin’ it for three years now, remember?”

“Ahn, but…” She paused before shrugging. “OK. I’m going to start applying it now, so let me know if I hurt you or something.” She was really unsure of what she was doing because all she knew was some styling.
Taking a seat on the closed toilet lid, Ryuji scooting to sit with his back between her legs, she started applying the goopy bleach onto his scalp using her covered fingertips. “Do you want your regular hair lighter too?”

He hummed. “...Sure, yeah. It’s been gettin’ a bit dark anyway.”

She smiled teasingly, making sure to cover every tiny strand she could see. “So you can match with Ann better?”

Sputtering, he was about to turn his head to look at her but her hands stopped him. “Hey, don’t move or it could get in your eyes!” She scolded.

Grumbling, he turned back around and hunched his shoulders. “I’m not…” He argued weakly. “I’m not tryin’ to match with her. I just wanna try a lighter blond, that a problem?”

She grinned, squinting as the stinging scent began to hurt her eyes as well. “No, it’s not a problem...I just think it’s cute.”

He scoffed. “Cute, sure. You and Akira are pretty “cute” then, too. Wait a few more days before you get together so I can win the bet, yeah?”

She stilled at that, her hands slowing to a stop and resting on top of his head as his words sunk in. She and Akira were cute? As in, together? As a couple?

Her heart beat faster. She knew he had bet with Ann on this, but somehow, she really thought it was just a joke. She’d never even thought about having a relationship, until Akira showed up. Did she want that?

She could see herself with him. It wasn’t hard since she saw him almost every day, and they were really close for friends. He had even taken care of her all of yesterday. Were they already dating and she didn’t know?

“-ri? Airi?!”

She snapped out of her thoughts and started applying the bleach again. “S-Sorry.” She stuttered a reply, covering his roots at the nape of his neck. “Well...if you’re saying Akira and I are cute, then you’re accepting you and Ann?”

He stayed quiet at that, and she finished applying all of the goop onto his locks, some of it already beginning to dry as she covered it with aluminum. Once she snapped the shower cap on his head, he began again. “...Dunno.” He muttered inaudibly, idly picking at the rug with his fingers, pulling a loose fiber. “She’s hot, yeah, but she’s also a nag and all she cares about is sweets and us as her friends.” He sighed, remembering when she had applied medicine to his jaw. “But she can be pretty nice. I dunno...I don’t wanna think about it right now.”

She pursed her lips but nodded. “OK, but you know you can talk to me about it, right? Or if you’re uncomfortable sharing this with a girl, you can have your bro talks with Akira. I won’t judge.” She softened. “I just want to see you guys happy. You two have always been around each other ever since she moved here.”

He nodded quietly. “Yeah...”

“-ri?! Ryuji?! Where are you guys?!”

Hearing Ann’s shout for them, Airi stuck her head out of the bathroom door. “I’m helping Ryuji
right now! Are you guys done cooking?"

"...What are you even helping him with?! His grades?!"

Offended, Ryuji stood up and stomped out of the small bathroom. "My grades ain’t a problem!"

"Oh my gosh, what are you doing?!" Ann laughed as she finally saw him, the sound coming down the hallway. "Are you bleaching your hair here? Asking mom to do it for you, huh?"

"Shuddup! It wasn’t like you were gonna help!"

"Hey, if you asked, I would’ve!"

Airi rolled her eyes as they began arguing again but smiled. It was nice to have them as friends again and maybe with a little time, they’d finally admit their closeness to each other. Ryuji seemed too stuck on Ann’s physical appearance while Ann was offended by his immature antics. If they did get together, that would be one explosive couple.

"Airi?"

Makoto voiced from the kitchen doorway, the two blonds’ argument fading away as they moved further into the dining room. "Food’s ready!"

"OK!" She shouted back, standing up and throwing away the gloves in the small waste basket. Making sure to wash her hands and that there was no bleach spots on her clothes, she walked back into the dining room, Ryuji stomping pass as he grumbled about washing his hair out.

Ann and Makoto were already sat at the dining table, a huge selection of small dishes decorating the surface. There were thirty different kinds of appetizers and health snacks, and eating all of this would count as a full meal. There was soup, fruits, raw and cooked vegetables, kimchi, grilled chicken, braised pork, walnuts, and so much more.

Amazed, Airi took a seat, a plate and a pair of chopsticks already in front of her. "Wow...This looks great." She smiled softly. "Thank you so much, you guys. You must’ve put a lot of effort into this."

Ann grinned, twirling a ponytail. "Heh, I didn’t do much, it was all Makoto." She turned to the council president. "I didn’t know you were so strict about food."

Makoto raised a brow. "What you eat is what your body uses. If you’re feeding yourself with junk food all the time, you will end up sluggish and tired." She lectured as she picked up her chopsticks. "By having a variety of different dishes, your body takes in all the nutrients it needs to perform at optimal energy. It’s just healthier."

Ann stared at her in surprise. "Wow...I just eat cake and desserts all the time."

Airi smiled sheepishly. "Well, sugar is good for you, but not artificial sugar. You could try just eating fruits and not ice cream or cake?"

She pouted. "But…"

Makoto chuckled. "She’s not saying you have to completely stop, but it’s more healthy to have a wider variety in your diet."

"So, different desserts then?" Ann perked up and beamed. "Don’t mind if I do!"

They sweatdropped at her logic and sighed. "Itadakimasu..."
Ryuji had come back down with a head of freshly bleached short blond locks and joined the lunch, adding to the family atmosphere. Airi felt herself smiling and laughing genuinely for the first time in weeks, and it was all thanks to her Phantom Thieves. She really wouldn’t be here without them.

The front door slammed open and the sound of shoes being flung vibrated down the hall. Jumping at the loud noise, they all got up from their seats and looked out, seeing Yusuke hurry up the stairs after kicking his shoes off, elation shining in his eyes. “Yusuke?” Airi called out. “Everything all right?”

He didn’t stop, but they heard him say from upstairs just before he closed the door to the Study, “Yes! More than all right! Inspiration has finally struck!”

Everything was quiet now and they looked at each other before shrugging. “It’s nice to see some life in him again.” Ryuji remarked, leaning against the doorway and scratching his full stomach. “He’s been pretty mopey.”

Makoto raised a brow. “Was he not very inspired before? He goes to Kosei on a scholarship, correct?”

Airi nodded. “When he moved in, he would spend hours in the Study trying to paint, but I haven’t seen any finished pieces.” She idly grasped her arm. “He went out with Akira earlier…I wonder if he helped him out?”

Makoto paused. “…They left you alone?” She narrowed her eyes. “I noticed Yusuke wasn’t here earlier, but to know Akira was also absent from the neighborhood…” She clenched her fists. “How irresponsible of them. You could have had an emergency and neither of them would have been here.”

Airi sweatdropped. “It’s OK, they actually didn’t want to leave me, but I told them to.” She felt bad enough for shackling them here with her.

Ann frowned disapprovingly, placing her hands on her hips. “Did you kick them out or something? I know Yusuke can be side tracked, but Akira would never leave unless you told him off.”

Airi blinked. He would never leave? To hear Ann say that, an outsider’s perspective…it was odd but also comforting. It meant that other people saw this connection they had with each other. It wasn’t just her imagining that Akira was nicer to her. He gave her special treatment. But why?

Makoto nodded. “He told me Friday that you were his most important person. I hoped he would’ve made good on his promise.”

Her eyes widened. “Most important..?” She was his most important person?

Stretching his arms in the air, Ryuji yawned. “Man, all that food’s made me sleepy…”

Ann frowned and grabbed his arm, dragging him toward the kitchen. “You ate most of the food, which means you should also do the dishes!” He protested weakly but did what she said, brown eyes grudgingly softening for her.

Airi and Makoto watched with small smiles before moving to the tatami room, taking a seat on the straw mats. The dark wooden cabinet caught her eye and Makoto shifted to in front of the shrine, silently lighting the incense and clapping her hands twice. She closed her eyes in a prayer and bowed her head for a few moments before straightening up.

Airi smiled softly, resting the upper half of her body on the kotatsu. “Thank you, Makoto.”
Smiling, the council president moved back to sit across from her. “It’s only right, Si- Airi.”

Catching the stutter, Airi looked up at her curiously. “What was that?”

Covering her mouth at her mistake, Makoto waved her away with her other hand. “N-Nothing!” She shied away, not meeting her eyes. “I just...sympathize with you.”

She lowered her gaze. “As you know, I lost my father three years ago, and it has never been the same...My mother died giving birth to me, so all I had was him and Sis.” She whispered. “We were happy together, and Sis always worked hard in school to be a good role model for me, but when she had free time, we would go shopping together. When my father was still alive, he would attend my aikido tournaments. Those were better times. But…”

Her hands clenched on her lap. “After he was killed, Sis had to work extra hard to support us. She didn’t have time for me or anything aside from her job, so...we drifted apart.” She exhaled shakily. “Remember after our encounter with Kaneshiro at the club? I mentioned how I’m a burden to her...and it’s true. In her words, all I do is ‘eat away at her life.’” She closed her eyes, a tear slipping from a corner.

Airi frowned sympathetically and reached out with a hand, wiping the tear away. “To be...completely truthful,” She began carefully. “She’s not wrong. You’re a minor and a dependant on her taxes as well as her expenses. Being a prosecutor brings in good money, but with the economy being where it’s at, she’s probably taking as many cases as she can.”

Makoto only lowered her head, her bangs shadowing her face. “Yes…”

“However,” She continued softly, catching her attention. “She’s your sister, and it’s clear she loves you very much or else she would’ve kicked you out by now.” Now she was unearthing theories from that psychology book Mishima gifted her. “As humans, we are extremely flawed and there’s no doubt the stress has been eating away at her. She’s only twenty-two, right? Maybe you just need to show her how much you’ve grown as your own person. She sees you as a dependent, something akin to a helpless child. Show her your strength.” She smirked. “Show her your justice.”

Staring at her with wide eyes, Makoto teared up and covered her face. “...Yes. You’re right.” She sniffed, wiping the moisture that fell off her lashes. “I just need to show her she doesn’t need to work so hard for me. I’m a big girl.” She gave her a watery smile. “...You remind me of her, before our father died. You’re supportive and always willing to help me, even though I’m the one with seniority...I guess that’s why I’ve been unconsciously calling you Sis by mistake.”

Her eyebrows flew up. “Me? Sis?” She smiled with amusement. “I’m younger than you though.”

Makoto giggled, covering her smile. “Yeah, so maybe I should just call you your name.”

Airi beamed. “We are a family now, so...you can count on me as a sister then.”

Her family was growing and she couldn’t be happier.
The Chapter will be my christmas present to you all. -wink- So save that date. Dec. 25!
Since it was a Sunday, he didn’t have school and so, it meant taking care of his own business. Yusuke had sent him a text to meet up at Shibuya station, saying Airi had wanted to be alone today without them “nagging” her.

Akira frowned at that. They nagged for a good reason. Hopefully Yusuke had gotten through to her about their overprotectiveness.

Walking up the stairs into the Underground Walkway, he spied the artist next to the 7a exit, people watching as usual while pedestrians walked by. “Hey.” He greeted as he walked up to him.

Yusuke gave him a nod as a greeting. “Akira, thank you for coming to meet me. Do you remember how I mentioned my need to understand the heart? Well,” He frowned. “I am having a hard time grasping it. How will I be able to reach the truth of pure beauty..? What should I paint to capture the contents of the heart?”

Akira grasped his chin thoughtfully as he hummed. What embodied the contents of the heart? He blinked. “...Mementos?”

Yusuke gasped as his answer. “Ah, I see..! Mementos!” He breathed in awe. “The desire that emanates from that place is the root of humanity!” A smile spread on his lips. “Incredible! You honestly have a unique perspective on things. With that destination in mind, let us make haste!”

Taken aback, Akira sputtered. “Now?”

Yusuke took out his phone, opening the app on his screen. “What would be a better time than the present?! Inspiration comes and goes as quickly as the wind and I must capture it before it escapes my grasp!” He activated the app and with a sense of weightlessness, transported them into Mementos.

Putting his phone away, Fox looked over at his leader. “I would like to go deeper. Perhaps…” He hesitated. “Hisoka’s room, or what is left of it.”

Joker slowly nodded. “...All right. We don’t have Mona here to drive us, so we’ll have to do some walking.”

Taking out his own phone, he transported them to the last area of Chemdah, the large blockade standing staunchly in front of them. Turning around, they walked up the escalator into Area 7. Fighting the Shadows in the area wasn’t as easy if they had the whole team with them, but for some reason, they found themselves leaving the battles without any shortages of breath.

As if the battles became easier...or they became stronger.

Joker mused at that. He had thought about Elegant’s role as Arbiter a few days ago, but was it true? Their bond with her strengthened them?
Turning the corner, they found Hisoka’s room, or what used to be his. It was empty of any occupant, and hopefully that meant he had a change of heart.

Joker rested his hands in his pockets as he watched Fox take out a sketchbook from his back (yet another mystery of the universe that he would never be able to solve).

Pushing his fox mask up, he began drawing his surroundings, eyes darting from the veins and the swirling red vortex behind them and back to the paper. “This distorted realm, teeming with Shadows…” He murmured. “The physical embodiment of the desires of the human heart...The same thing which brought forth the beauty of the “Sayuri” can also create such morbid fabrications…”

He smiled slightly. “But I actually find that aspect to be quite fascinating...The heart is akin to an abyss…” His smile fell. “What had compelled Hisoka to have done what he did? Had love truly distorted him to commit murder? Was that a pure response of his heart?”

Joker frowned speculatively, trying to come up with a sound reason. This wasn’t something he wanted to get into, but in their line of work, it always meant that underneath the layers and layers of distortions, there was a good person at the core. It was always a hard pill to swallow when they saw the undistorted versions.

“...I don’t know much about love, but when you see it represented in media, they always have the people in love do reckless things.” He shrugged slightly. “I guess it can’t be explained, which is why Mementos is some weird, messed up Palace.”

Fox nodded thoughtfully. “I suppose we will never truly know for sure. Now, regarding the source of my slump...I actually have an idea. In that other dimension, I saw the perversion of Madarame’s heart…” He pursed his lips dispassionately. “At that moment, the art realm I had so much faith in was distorted by greed and unchecked desires. That is when the true ugliness of the world became clear to me…”

He gripped his pencil tighter. “And from that point forward, my brush has been stayed by crippling hesitation…” He sighed as he continued to sketch. “Does pure beauty truly exist..? And if so, can hands tainted by Madarame’s depravity capture it..? Considering such intense questions only served to distance me from reality. Doubt filled my mind. I struggled to find a reason to move my brush again…” He closed his eyes for a moment. “And honestly...I still have yet to discover a suitable answer.”

He continued his drawing of Mementos. Time passed by and Joker grew more and more nervous, continuously glancing at the swirling red vortex behind them. There was something Mona had mentioned during that first or second trip down here. Something about chains…

Noticing his fidgeting, Fox looked up from his sketchbook. “…What’s the matter? Have you been overcome by an urge to paint?”

Joker grimaced, the hairs on his neck rising. “Just hurry it up.”

Fox frowned. “Please, do not rush me. I only need a little more time…” He hummed to himself as he returned to his drawing. “The lingering uncertainty present in this place seems to be sharpening my senses...I feel a revelation approaching…”

His eyes lit up and his hand moved in a blur. “Hm, yes..! Inspiration has struck..! That must be it..!” He muttered to himself excitedly. “Such brilliant composition! Ah, my heart races..!”
Joker sweatdropped at his enthusiasm when a splash of red and black spewed in front of them, and he readied his dagger as a Slime appeared.

Fox scowled. “Hmph, how inelegant!”

Joker couldn’t help himself. “Of course it’s inelegant, she’s not here right now.”

Giving him a cursory glance for his terrible joke, Fox unsheathed his katana. “You wish to carry out your distorted will, foolish Shadow?” He glared at the wiggling monstrosity. “I shall cut you down for interrupting my work..!” With a flash of his blade, he slowly sheathed his sword as the Shadow spewed out black blood, leaving a blank card as well as ¥1600 on the floor.

Joker watched with raised brows before picking up the treasures. If he had any doubts about them becoming stronger at a fast pace, they were gone now after that demonstration. Maybe they could finally do that movie night at Elegant’s house and level up, so to speak. Would that make him the strongest since he hung out with her almost every day?

Fox exhaled as he let his katana dissipate. “It seems I’ve become too passionate. That Shadow was either too weak, or it seems I have become stronger. You had not even needed to join in. Still,” He smiled. “I appreciate you being here...You’re like Theo.”

Joker stared at him for a second. Who was Theo? “…You caught me.”

Fox gave him an odd look. “…I worry that you may not get what I mean. It was a figure of speech. I was referring to Van Gogh’s brother, Theo. Van Gogh did not achieve fame in his lifetime, but found an admirer and supporter in his brother.”

He pursed his lips and nodded. He could go with that. “Thanks, bro.”

Fox smiled. “Well, there aren’t many who are willing to deal with my...eccentricity, Elegant notwithstanding.” He eyed the card in his hands. “By the way, what’s in your hand..? A card?”

Joker nodded. “It’s a lot like that Media card from Madarame’s Palace.” He took it out of his pocket for comparison. They were the same paper and edge design, but the Media card had a healing depiction while the other was blank.

Fox tilted his head, gloved fingers twitching at his sides. “Whenever I see blank paper, I have the urge to draw something on it...May I?”

With a shrug, the leader handed it over to the artist who began doodling on the surface. After a moment, Fox began chuckling before gasping. “Impossible..!” He muttered to himself, his puffy sleeves covering whatever he was drawing from Joker’s curious eyes. “Good...What?! Hrrm…” He held it up. “A satisfactory result.”

He turned the card to show his leader the design. “What do you think? Not bad, wouldn’t you say? Soon enough, my slump will be a thing of-” He was cut off as the card began glowing, the drawing settling into the paper and powering up into a Recarm. “My picture…” Fox stared at it with wide eyes. “Turned into a real skill card?”

A smirk grew on Joker’s face. “That’s an amazing power. This will be useful in the future.”

Fox smiled and nodded. “Indeed...Joker, would you mind helping me further? If I can overcome this slump, I should be able to aid our group like earlier- perhaps even more so.” He perked up. “I know...Why don’t we act as the thieves we are and strike a deal?”
Joker nodded. “Let’s do it.”

Fox smiled satisfactorily. “It’s a deal then.” He bent down to pick up his discarded sketchbook when he furrowed his brow. “...Do you hear that?”

Joker blinked before concentrating on whatever seemed to have caught the artist’s attention. Turning his head, his ears caught the sound of jangling chains and he froze. “Shit…”

He finally remembered. Mona had mentioned there was a powerful Shadow named The Reaper that roamed around Mementos. If they stayed in one spot for too long, it would be able to track them down and could kill them.

Taking a few steps, he grabbed Fox by his arm. “We need to go. Now.”

Fox slowly blinked at the urgency in his tone. “Does that sound entail something dangerous?”

Joker nodded grimly. “If we don’t leave now, we might actually die.”

Eyes widening at his gruesome words, Fox nodded and the two thieves quickly darted out of the portal and turned the corner the way they came from. Running down the tracks, they could hear the sound of chains approaching closer, fabric billowing in the harsh winds of Mementos.

Gritting his teeth, Joker turned his head to look behind him and felt his blood freeze in his veins.

The Reaper was a large figure, rusted chains hovering around it as it floated closer. It wore a bloody and ripped double breasted coat, two sniper pistols in its skeletal hands. Its chains rattled as it glided closer, cocking one of its weapons at them.

Cursing, the two thieves quickly jumped and slid down the escalator railings back into Area 8. They heard a roar of anger from above, The Reaper not being able to follow them.

Fox let out a slow exhale, heart pounding from the close brush with death. “That...was an experience I would not care to repeat.”

Joker nodded, straightening up as he panted from the run. “Same…” He idly wondered if the team was going to get stronger, would they be able to face off against that monster? All Shadows carried a sum of money, the stronger the Shadow the more money it had, so The Reaper had to have a lot in its pockets, right?

Shaking his head, he brushed the thought away. It would be a while until they could face off against that thing.

Taking his phone out of his pocket, he transported them back to the lobby before transitioning back into the real world.

Yusuke clutched his sketchbook, gazing down at his rough sketch with an excited smile. “Akira, I will be going back home to finish this. I will let you know once it’s ready. If there are any cards you need, please let me know a few days beforehand so I may experiment.”

Akira nodded and the artist left for Yongenjaya. What to do now…

His phone buzzed and he took it out, noticing it was a message from Mishima to meet up at the Diner. He furrowed his brow but shrugged. Yusuke would be home with Airi, so he didn’t need to
be there as well. She might complain about his hovering again.

Shouldering his bag, he walked up the stairs into Central Street, heading right to the Diner. He went up the stairs, nodding to Yukimi when she waved as he scanned the restaurant for that familiar short blue hair. A hand waved out to him and Mishima gestured him over.

Walking over to the table, he took off his bag and placed it beside him as he sat down.

“Hey.” Mishima pouted, a cup of coffee already in front of him. “Next time tell me it’s just an interview! I looked like an idiot getting all dressed up for that!”

Akira blinked for a second before smirking. “Did you like Ohya-san?”

He scrunched up his face. “She’s the devil incarnate! It was horrible!” He despaired comically. “She’s pretty, but super scary too. Though that drag queen she hangs out with is even scarier…”

Akira raised a brow. “I’m sure Lala-san was hospitable.”

Shuddering, Mishima shook his head wildly before focusing again. “But thanks for meeting me. How goes the activities?” He grinned, not letting him get a word in. “Actually, I already know! The Phan-site has been crazy busy thanks to you guys.” Glancing around nervously, he reached into his bag and pulled out a handbook as well as...

Akira’s eyes widened. A gun? This upper middle class teenager had a gun? No. Looking closer, he realized it was a replica.

Mishima placed both of the objects on the table. “This book here is all about the latest security techniques, and this is, um...a model gun. It cost me a lot of money…”

Akira furrowed his brow. “It looks almost real.” In fact, it looked a lot like the one Ryuji had given him during that second run in Kamoshida’s Palace. Did he also go to Iwai for this?

Mishima nodded rapidly. “Well, yeah! That just goes to show how special it is! I heard they had to completely halt production because people kept mistaking it for a real gun.” He awkwardly rubbed the back of his head. “It was suggested to me by this military buff from the Phandom. I figured I could use a bit of security, since I’m the sole admin of the whole Phan-site. I mean, you guys are getting really popular. There’s been a lot more info on the forum lately too…” He sweated nervously. “Some of the stuff up there is pretty scary...so it seemed like I might need a little protection.”

Akira felt his brows raise up at his insight. It was probably getting dangerous for his classmate to keep doing this. “That’s a good idea.” He glanced over at Yukimi who was giving their table strange looks, eyes darting to the illegal object in disbelief. “You should probably put it away though…”

Blinking, Mishima gasped and grabbed the dubiously legal items off the table and back into his bag. “Yeah, good idea.” He cleared his throat. “I may just be your background support, but I need to be able to protect myself. Besides, I’m the kinda guy who goes the whole nine yards once he decides to do something.”

He shook his head. “But as I was saying, we’ve had a pretty massive influx of new posts on the forum lately. One of them seems particularly worthwhile. It’s bigger than anything we’ve done so far…” He bit his lip in excitement. “But if we want to really make the Phantom Thieves famous, we’ll need to go after some flashier targets.” He grinned. “Leave this to me though. I’ll get all the info we need, even if I have to put myself in danger to do it!”
Akira smiled at his enthusiasm and nodded. It was good to see the ex-volleyball player in such high spirits. It was a huge difference from when they first met, and he was glad he seemed to have recovered from the ordeal.

“By the way, um…” Mishima rubbed the back of his head. “Do I look any different to you? People keep telling me it seems like I’ve changed recently, Matsumoto especially.” He grinned. “I guess I can’t hide my newfound confidence, huh? My true worth will finally-”

“Well, well, well! If it isn’t Mishima!”

The Phanboy stiffened at the familiar voice and they both turned to see three male teenagers walk up to their table. Mishima grimaced. “Akiyama-kun…”

Akiyama smirked. “Long time no see, zero. Y’know, we’ve been sitting just over there the whole time,” He gestured to a couple tables over. “But we didn’t even notice you sitting here!”

Akira observed with narrowed eyes as Mishima’s shoulders hunched over, reminiscent of when he was still in the volleyball team. Old bullies, huh.

“You’re exactly the same as you were back in middle school, Mishima.” One of the other guys remarked callously.

The last teenager huffed. “Yeah. Once a zero, always a zero.”

Mishima only laughed weakly as he glanced away from the stinging remarks. “Y-yeah, haha…”

“You haven’t changed your cell number, have you?” Akiyama asked bluntly.

Mishima blinked. “Huh? N-No, I haven’t…”

The bully raised a brow. “Then why didn’t you come to our hangout? All our ex-classmates were there, y’know!” A smirk grew on his face. “Oh, wait...Nobody even remembered you existed! Can’t invite a guy you can’t remember, right?”

Mishima only grimaced deeper, hunching his back. “R-Right, ahaha…”

Akira narrowed his eyes, gripping his hands together. He wasn’t exactly close to his year-mate, but he was a nice guy who looked out for his team and didn’t deserve this verbal abuse. He was about to open his mouth when Akiyama began walking away. “C’mon guys, let’s go.” The other two followed him and the group left the restaurant.

Once they were gone, Mishima sighed deeply but his shoulders were more relaxed now that his past tormentors left. “It’s not what it looks like...OK?” He frowned at the table. “You know that one guy in every class who ends up being the butt of all the jokes? That guy was me…” He clenched his fists on his lap. “But I’ve changed now. I can help you...I’m not going to be that boring guy anymore...!”

Akira furrowed his brow. He seemed to have another reason for helping them. Was he insecure? “You know...It’s OK to be yourself. You’ve been helping us a lot.”

Mishima pursed his lips. “But I can help more if I’m stronger. I don’t want to stay as that guy anymore...Then maybe she’d notice me.” He whispered that last part. “...Sorry about that. Anyway, it’s getting late. We should probably head home…”

Staring at him for a moment, Akira nodded slowly. “...Yeah. I have to check up on Airi.”
He blinked. “Oh yeah, both of you weren’t in school yesterday. Did something happen?”

The phantom thieves leader pursed his lips. Here was the guy who seemed to be infatuated with her, but hadn’t noticed her declining mood or lack of energy these past few weeks? His feelings seemed shallow compared to his own. “…She overexerted herself and collapsed on Friday. I’ve been taking care of her.”

Mishima paled at the news. “C-Collapsed?! Oh no…Senpai works too hard…” He tightened his jaw. “I need to be stronger for her too…Is there anything I can do for her right now?” He looked up hopefully. “Maybe a fruit basket, or—or a bouquet…!”

Akira only rolled his eyes. “She’s mostly fine now, just needs more rest. I’ll let her know you were worried…”

He was ignored as the ex-volleyball player whipped out his phone, thumbs flashing all over the screen as he texted his class president.

Akira stared blankly before shaking his head. There was no point in being jealous. “I’m gonna go now. See ya tomorrow.”

Mishima waved distractedly as he was too immersed in his phone.

Waving bye to Yukimi who stuck her tongue out at him, he walked down the steps and into Central Street, the loud noises almost deafening him compared to the quiet restaurant. It was early evening now, and the streets were filled with people.

Even just walking around, he noticed the tense atmosphere from last week had disappeared now that Kaneshiro’s operation had been dismantled. Nishiki had mentioned it was just a “test” for the former Palace ruler, and that was frightening to think of. How many lives were ruined during this so-called test?

His phone buzzed in his pocket and he took it out. It was from Yoshida.

It had been a while since he had helped out the politician and last time, he seemed rather disheartened from a man calling him “No-Good Tora.” He felt for him. He made a few mistakes because he was stupid but those mistakes shouldn’t haunt him for the rest of his life, especially since he hadn’t hurt anyone. Was there anything he could do besides helping out at his speeches?

Pursing his lips, he started another chat.

Ak: How are you feeling?
Ai: I’m a lot better than yesterday.
Ai: Did you tell Yuuki-kun about this?
Ai: He’s blowing up my phone with texts.
Ak: He asked how you were.
Ai: Well, I’m thinking I should go back to school tomorrow.
Ak: No. You’re not back to 100%.
Ak: Take another day off. Please?
Ai: Maybe…
Ak: Yusuke’s home, right?
Ai: Yeah, he went straight to the study to paint.
Ai: It’s nice to see inspiration in him again.
He put his phone away, worries eased.

Chapter End Notes

Yusuke rank 1
Mishima rank 5

Someone asked where to send fanart, and honestly I didn't think I would receive enough to warrant such a question?? But since they asked, if any of you have any art that you want to submit, you can send it to me at aristomuse@gmail.com! Or just post it in the comments like usual or tag me on twitter! I'll be sure to post them at the end of an update with a special thank you for each and every one of them!

I love you guys <3 I love that you love this fic so much!
Shoudering his bag, Akira went up the stairs into the station square. Yoshida was already there with his signature wooden stand, setting up for his next speech. There were a few people milling around the tram as if they wanted to hear what he would say, but their disinterested faces contradicted that.

Walking up to the man, Akira greeted him with a slight bow. “Good evening, Yoshida-san.”

Yoshida looked up at him and smiled. “Ah, Kurusu-kun, you made it just in time. If you would…” He gestured to the sign and Akira nodded, holding it up for the crowd to see.

Stepping onto the small stand, Yoshida cleared his voice and began his speech. “That you possess free will does not mean that you can always do as you please. To make your decisions based simply on loss and gain is to act like a heartless machine.” He lectured loudly, gaining the attention of a few passerby. “The reason so few people care about their fellow man is because so few have the energy to do so. We politicians have fallen short of our goal to change society. We need your support more than ever!”

A man in an expensive suit tch'ed. “That approach isn’t going to work! You have to get the voters more excited!” He shook his head. “You’re going to completely lose the hearts and minds of the people.”

Yoshida acknowledged but didn’t reply, his eyes glancing over to the man who interrupted his speech. “Again, what I’d like to say is-” His eyes widened. “Councilman Matsushita!”

The man, Matsushita, nodded and walked up to his old colleague. “It’s been so long since we last spoke. I wanted to stop by to see how you were doing.”

Akira observed this from behind the board he held. Didn’t Yoshida say he was scorned for his actions? So why was this man, who’s clearly well off and still a councilman, talking to him?

“A-Oh, of course…” Yoshida replied faintly, eyes still wide with surprise, and stepped off his stand. He gestured for Akira to lower the sign and he did, the three of them moving to the side of the tram for a little privacy.

Matsushita raised a brow. “Oh, you have a high schooler volunteering for you, huh? My, times have changed.” He turned to Akira. “Do you know about the Kuramoto Children?”
Resting his hands inside his pockets, Akira nodded. “Yes, Yoshida-san told me.”

Matsushita looked at him, slightly impressed. “That was nearly 20 years ago. I’m impressed that you’re so interested in politics. I was a member of the Kuramoto Children as well. Yoshida and I joined the same year.” He boasted. “I made an amazing career change, going from a pro wrestler to a Diet member.”

He scoffed. “I was elected easily, but I had no idea what I was doing. I realized I wasn’t elected on my own merit when I failed to be re-elected for a second term.” He turned to look at his old colleague. “That was true for the both of us.”

Yoshida shook his head. “You made a great comeback though. You’re truly an inspiration.”

Matsushita smiled slightly. “As are you, old friend. You’re working harder than anyone on the campaign trail.”

Yoshida shook his head again at the compliments, dark eyes tired but sharp. “Oh, there’s no need for false praise to impress the boy here.”

Shrugging, the councilman turned back to the student. “Yoshida’s well-informed about the inner working of politics, so I’m sure he’ll be a great teacher. However,” He paused. “I suggest you only do as he says and not as he does, if you want to become a Diet member.”

Tensing at his words, Yoshida crossed his arms. “...And what might that mean?”

Matsushita turned back to him. “I’m guessing he doesn’t know..?” He raised an unimpressed brow as Yoshida widened his eyes. “You really think you can win the election by being completely honest and making good arguments? You’ve got to secure votes!” He insisted earnestly. “Or else you’ll be forever known as No-Good Tora!”

Hearing his old nickname again, Yoshida clenched his fists and took a step forward. “Without honesty and good arguments, there can be no political justice!” He shouted righteously.

Eyebrows raised, Matsushita smiled. “Heh...It’s been a while since I’ve heard one of your grandiose speeches.” Seeing his smile, Yoshida smiled as well and they shared a laugh.

Akira watched curiously. He always thought politicians were crooked like everyone else. The only things he ever saw on TV about them were their scandals and how their policies negatively affected the nation. But...they were just people too. They were human and they had faults. It was what the public truly wanted that decided their power.

Chuckles winding down, Matsushita turned to the teenager. “Kurusu-kun, was it? Tell me, what about Yoshida here drew you in?”

Akira smiled slightly. “His message. He has a lot of good points.”

Touched by his sincere response, Yoshida widened his eyes. “Kurusu-kun…”

Raising a brow at his honest answer, Matsushita nodded. “Well...that’s quite impressive. You just may have the potential to become a Diet member. You address matters quite directly for a young person. It seems you have been taught well.”

Yoshida smiled. “I intend to teach him everything I know. That’s what we agreed on.”

Hearing this, Akira felt a smirk grow on his lips. This was one politician that meant what he said.
“By the way,” Matsushita began. “How are things between you and old man Kuramoto?”

The former Diet member grimaced. “We’re still not on speaking terms.”

The councilman nodded thoughtfully. “…There’s something I’d like to get your opinion on, so I’ll be in touch.” He was about to walk away but paused. “…Oh, that reminds me. You may still distrust me because of what happened with the missing party funds...But I’m not the one who pointed the finger at you. That’s all I’m going to say.”

He walked away, disappearing in the night crowd of Shibuya and Yoshida groaned, rubbing at his receding hairline. “Why did he have to mention that..?” Sighing, he turned to the phantom thieves leader. “Ah, my apologies. That’s all for today. I shall see you next time.”

Akira nodded. “Thank you for tonight, Yoshida-san. Have a good night.” He waved to the politician as he left, turning around to head down the steps into Shibuya Station.

He felt like he learned a lot today. Regarding that scandal though, maybe it was something the older man would open up about some other time. It was clearly hurting him even after twenty years. His own speech skills seemed to improve as well. Maybe next time they came across a Shadow, he should try them out...

He finally made it back to the cafe with a sigh, letting the door close behind him. Even though he wanted to go see Airi, he knew she would complain about him being overbearing.

Sojiro looked up from the counter, putting on his white jacket. “Hey.” He greeted languidly. “How’s Airi been? She feelin’ better?”

Akira nodded. “Yeah, she told me she’s a lot better today.”

Sojiro nodded slowly. “That’s good...That girl can’t ever stand still when she could be working.” He sighed, the creases on his face deepening further. “I’m guessin’ she was worrying too hard about Hisoka….” He crossed his arms. “Where could he be?...”

Akira stayed silent. He couldn’t say that the murderer already had his Heart stolen and was almost killed himself. Hopefully this would mean he would leave Airi alone now since his distorted desires were taken.

With a sigh, the older man left the cafe, leaving Akira alone with Morgana and he went up the stairs to collapse on his bed. So much had happened in just a scant three months. Was he really the leader of a vigilante group? Did he really have friends who would risk their lives for him and vice versa? Was he really in love..?

He debated with himself as he stared up at the old rafters. What did he know about love? It wasn’t like he had much of that growing up. Maybe what he was feeling was really just some deep friendship, except…

He let out a sigh. It definitely wasn’t.

He felt nothing like this for Ann or Makoto, and he was pretty close to the former at this point, though not as close as Ryuji was. No. He only felt this way toward Airi.

*Out of the corner of his eye, he saw another pair of shoes walk up next to him to also take shelter from the rain. He turned his head to see who it was, and his breath hitched. It was the girl he*
followed. He hadn’t gotten a good look at her earlier, what with how determined he was to get to the right train, but now with her so close, he studied her person. His hands started to feel a little clammy.

His eyes widened at her bold statement, and he gazed down at her in astonishment. No one else had stood up for him. Not his friends, not his family. Yet this girl who barely knew him, treated him like...a normal person.

She was so interesting in this sea of gray people, her uncommon pink hair standing out like a gleam of life. Why was he so curious..?

He grasped his chin, thinking deeply for a moment, before nodding hesitantly. Airi was pretty special. She had been the first one to be nice to him in Tokyo, and it really stood out in his mind. She was nice to everyone though.

He swallowed, wetting his dry throat. His eyes rested on the visage in front of him, not wanting to blink or look away. She looked...really beautiful with his gift. Unconsciously wetting his lips, he looked away, feeling his face heat up.

Taken aback by the casual statement, Akira looked away. He swallowed, wetting his dry lips, as he felt the heat rise up in his face. He made her feel safe?

Biting his lip nervously, he wrapped his arm tighter, and hesitantly rested his cheek on top of her head. His heart pounded in his chest, his breathing just a little faster than normal.

He slowly looked down at his new lunch, and moved to open it. It was a simple chicken omurice with lots of vegetables, complete with a Morgana face drawn on with ketchup. He smiled gratefully. No one but his mother had ever made him a bento, and he hated his mother's cooking.

Akira gazed with his mouth slightly open, entranced by the vision in front of him. He watched avidly as she gazed downward, eyes unfocused in concentration. Her slightly furrowed brow, tense shoulders, and the graceful motions of her arms, manipulating the instrument to sing out the melody she wanted.

It wasn’t like they lived together, but at this point, her house and even Cafe Leblanc felt more like home than his house back in Mishima.

A hand slowly reached up, cupping his cheek where he could still feel the phantom sensation of soft lips caressing his skin. Heart beating rapidly in his chest, he felt his cheeks burning under his palm, the difference in temperature like night and day. Wetting his dry lips, he idly wondered what it would feel like if those petals had landed on his own.

His lips tightened, and Akira looked away. An uncomfortable sensation bubbled in the pit of his stomach at the thought of her wanting the artist’s attention.

Blinking, he felt his cheeks heat up against the cool plastic of his glasses at being called handsome. No girls back in Mishima ever told him he was handsome. Even his mother complained about his looks, saying he took too much after her for a boy.

He stared down silently as she took care of him. What did he do to deserve them? Deserve her..? When was the last time anyone had cared for him like this? Her hands were smaller than his, her fingers slimmer. They were calloused from playing a string instrument and from roughing it out in the city in her younger years, but they still held an elegance to them. Fitting for her. He wasn't going to mention that they fit well with his hands. His healed fingers twitched and entwined with
her smaller ones, the touch sending shivers down his spine. Her soft warmth was so comforting, he could fall asleep like this...

He froze, hand still outstretched in her direction. They stared at each other, neither saying a word. Seeing the fear in her eyes, because of him, stung. It hurt so much.

Was that all he was to her...? A distraction? He’d been stuck in darkness for so long, shuffled from jail to court to probation. No one had wanted him except her. Her presence was just so comforting, he couldn’t help himself. Was he just a parasite, leeching off of her kindness? Didn’t she say she thought of him as handsome? Wasn’t she happy with him? Did he get everything wrong? Was he not wanted here, too...?

He didn’t feel worth it. She was kind, beautiful, and hard working. Everyone in their class looked up to her, most of the school following suit. The only reason the other students in their class were nice to him was because of her. The only reason they were friends was due to unusual circumstances. He was an inconvenience to her...

He smiled weakly as he leaned his cheek against the top of her head, inhaling her calm scent for the first time in a week. Walking past him, she grasped his hand and pulled him in the direction of her house. Fingers twitching, he entwined his with hers, matching her pace. He missed this.

He was glad he was able to mend his relationship with Airi. He almost lost everything because he was thinking too deeply into his own self worth. It didn’t matter if he didn’t feel worth her time. He’d make himself worth it. He’d work hard to prove to himself that he was worth these friends, this family, her. Even if other people thought he wasn’t worthy of anything.

He’d listen but the instant something happened, he was stepping in. This man was still a mobster and he didn’t trust him anywhere near her. He had swore to protect her and he took that seriously.

If anything happened to her, he’d never forgive himself. He had promised to protect her and he couldn’t even do that right. Why didn’t she trust him to protect her? Did she think he wouldn’t do a good job? Did she not want him to care for her...?

Was she...dying? He clenched his jaw, his chest tightening at the possibility. She couldn’t. He hadn’t...He hadn’t had enough time with her. She deserved to live and he wanted to be at her side, like he promised. He didn’t want his light to disappear.

Didn’t she trust them? Trust him? Did she think they wouldn’t care? That he wouldn’t? She had been the first one to really support him, to smile at him and meant it wholeheartedly. He cared so much it hurt.

She didn’t say anything about those photos, she didn’t say anything about the break ins, she didn’t even get them to go into Mementos with her. She could’ve died today without them realizing, and that scared him. He could’ve lost her today...

He was important to her. Likewise, she was the most important person in his life, next to their friends and teammates. He clenched his hands. And he would do anything to keep them.

He obviously cared a lot about her. Enough so that her almost dying shook him to his core. The fear he felt for her in the last couple of days was stronger than any kind of fear he had experienced for himself, simply because it was her. He couldn't help but hold onto her as tightly as he could.

But even before all that, he had been attracted to her. His palms would get a little sweaty every time she looked at him, that sweet smile making his heart skip a beat, her graceful bless skills that left
him to watch in awe as if she was some sort of divine being, her encouraging and kind demeanor, her mature, slightly perverted but full of life personality, her soft lips on his cheek that silenced his brain every single time…

Morgana jumped up next to him on the bed, tilting his head as he observed his leader’s consternated frown. “What are you thinking so hard about?”

Akira glanced over at the feline. “My feelings for your mom.” He answered truthfully.

The feline purred. “Oh? Are you finally admitting it? I’ll admit, I didn’t think you would hold out this long.”

He deadpanned. “Thanks. I appreciate your support.” He replied sarcastically.

Morgana snickered. “Well, so long as you aren’t just taking advantage of her vulnerability right now, I approve...Good luck, Akira.”

He looked up at the feline in surprise. He actually called him Akira? Smiling slightly, he reached over to give the feline some scritches. “Thanks, son.”

“Ugh!”

After another hour, the others left knowing Yusuke was home to watch for her. Airi had then went upstairs and quietly stepped inside the Study, making sure to avoid the art corner.

Yusuke was so focused on his painting, using a combination of reds and blacks, that he didn’t even notice she came in.

Taking a seat at the desk, she turned on her laptop and held back a swear. Her bills were now overdue by four days, and she had to pay a fee for that. She hadn’t gone to work for two weeks and now she was hit with this. At least her and Yusuke’s share in the team budget more than covered it.

They had decided to pool some of their earnings together for the bills and groceries, but everything else they could keep for themselves. All he spent his money on was art supplies and...calbee chips. Lots of calbee chips. They had a whole kitchen cabinet filled with them because he insisted they were a work of art.

Paying them all off, she sat back in the chair and turned around, watching as he continued his work. This was the first time since the shack that she’d seen him so concentrated. The space between his brows were creased, and his eyes barely blinked, his long lashes making sure to fan any dust away that could distract him for even a moment. His right arm, though wild with movement, was fluid in its performance, his brush barely leaving the easel if only to get more pigment from his palette.

The doorbell rang and she perked up. Who could that be? She made sure Akira wouldn’t come by today since he said he’d spend the day out, so it wouldn’t be him.

Glancing over at Yusuke who was so fixated in his art that he didn’t hear it, she got up and walked downstairs, peeking through the crevice. Moving back, she opened the door. “Ojisan?”

The owner of Cafe Leblanc was stood outside her door, her fourth visitor of the day, holding a plastic bag in one hand and a just finished cigarette in the other. “Airi.” He greeted, looking her
over through his circular lenses. “You’re lookin’ a lot better than last time. That’s good.”

She furrowed her brow. “Last time...?” Did he visit her while she was asleep?

He nodded. “Yeah, came over on Friday night when Akira called me. I would’ve come sooner but business has been hectic and home is...” He glanced away for a moment. “Anyway, seein’ how you’re all better now, I’m here to give you this.” He held up the plastic bag in his hand. “This is all the leftover curry from today, still warm from the pot. You and that Kitagawa kid can share this for dinner if you haven’t had any yet.”

She stared in awe, hands already stretched out for it. Leblanc’s curry for free? She could already feel herself drooling. It had been too long since she had it and she realized she’d been craving for it. Maybe he put in crack cocaine as its secret ingredient? Either way, she’d never refuse this. “...Thank you so much, Ojisan. I’ll make sure to savor each bite.”

He snorted but handed the goods over, watching with amusement as she inhaled the aromas. “I know how much you enjoy it, as do everyone else.” He bragged. “It’s her recipe after all.”

She blinked, subtly wiping the drool from her mouth. “Her?”

Coughing, he turned away from her and back out into the dark streets, the lights from her open door shining a small path. “Never mind. I have to get home now. I’ll see you whenever.” He smiled languidly. “Make sure you stop by for a cup sometime. I saw all those espresso packets in your kitchen.”

She grinned sheepishly. “But yours is always the best. Good night, Ojisan.”

He softened. “Good night, Airi. Stay safe, ya hear?” Turning away, he headed right on the dimly lit lane, taking a left and disappearing from her sight.

She smiled softly, beginning to feel fatigued again at being awake for so long. It was nice of him to visit her like this. She had never been as “sick” as she was a few days ago, and it seemed like she worried everyone. She’ll have to make up for that.

He was ready. He had finished his new objective. He had left the information to be delivered within a few days. He wouldn’t even know he had accessed his database again. The only thing left to do was to submit.

Even though he knew he was only damning himself further, he couldn’t help but feel at peace. For once, he did this of his own volition. His mind wasn’t distorted anymore, he was doing this with a clear heart.

He didn’t control him anymore. No matter the love he yearned for, he knew it would never happen. The only thing that would happen was this.

He walked into the building, the automated glass doors sliding out of his way, and he stepped up to the counter.

The receptionist looked up at him. “Hello, welcome to the Shibuya Police Station. May I help you?”

He smiled serenely, holding up his 9mm, the cold metal glinting in the harsh fluorescent lighting.
He was ready to accept his fate. “Yes.”

“I’d like to be arrested.”

Super thanks to Asher for this amazingly cute artwork!!! <3 AHHH SO MUCH FANART I LOVE YOU GUYS
Calbee chips are the green chip containers you see Yusuke munching on almost all the time. I'm sure it's because they're delicious and cheap (perfect for a scholarship art student on a budget) but it would be funny if he actually really liked them. He's so skinny I worry for him LOL
Chapter Notes

I CAN’T BELIEVE HIS NAME IS AMAMIYA REN 雨宮蓮 (Rain shrine Lotus?)
LMAOOOOOOO ATLUS THROWING US OFF SO BAD. I actually set an alarm for
6AM so I can watch the stupid stream only to have my heart crushed.

It's...an OK name I guess. Ren is fine, if a bit weak for a rebel name but lotuses in
Buddhism is a euphemism for breaking through muddy waters to shine purely, so
there’s symbolism in that, BUT AMAMIYA? LOL Makes me want to break out into
Bohemian Rhapsody every time I say it. Unfortunatel‌y since it's also present in the
P5DSN trailer, it means the name is official and here to stay >_> sigh Yuki Makoto is
now also P3-kun's official name.

ALSO THOSE TRAILERS WERE SO BOMB OMG BUT THE DANCE MOVES
ARE SO BAD. CAN’T BELIEVE WE HAVE TO WAIT HALF A YEAR FOR ALL
OF THIS STUFF.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

----6/27, MONDAY, MORNING, SUBWAYS.

Akira and Yusuke journeyed to school for the first time since becoming teammates without Airi
with them. Though they were friends and had plenty to chat about, it just felt weird that the cellist
wasn’t at their sides, as if there was a void that had to be filled. “So...How is Airi now?” Akira
asked quietly as they waited at the Ginza Line. “She told me she was better last night.”

Yusuke nodded, brushing some of the hair that fell into his vision. “Her condition has improved
considerably. She had wanted to attend school today, but I was successful in my attempt to
overturn her decision. There is no doubt she is still weak, and a little more rest could rectify—”

“Ah!...I made it on time.”

They turned around, seeing Akechi walk up to them with a smile, slightly out of breath from his
run. “Good morning Kurusu-kun, Kitagawa-kun. I suppose I’m still safe if you’re here...” He
blinked, looking around the two thieves. “Where is Kimisawa-san? Is she not usually with you on
the journey to school?”

Yusuke glanced over at him. “...She is unwell at the moment, and has opted to stay home.”

Akechi’s brows raised in surprise. “Unwell? Oh my, I hope it’s nothing serious. Getting rest is the
best choice in this sort of situation. I would prefer some rest as well, but...” His face fell. “I can’t
afford to be late today too.”

Akira raised a brow. How stressed was he as a student, detective, and a guest on TV? “You seem
busy. Maybe you should take a break.”

Akechi tried to smile but ended up grimacing. “Well...I don’t deny it. I have much more work in
television because of the Phantom Thieves.” He sighed. “I have permission from my school, but
it’s still tough to do both.” Exhaling, he shrugged and smiled. “...Ah, I can’t keep complaining as I quite enjoy my work. Well, let’s both do our best today. Please give my regards to Kimisawa-san, and I hope she will feel better soon.”

With a nod, he walked down the station, leaving Akira and Yusuke to watch his retreating silhouette. His bag rumbled and Morgana leaned his chin on his shoulder. “He’s pretty overworked for a teenager...” He mused quietly, the train just pulling into the station and the floor rumbled underneath their shoes. “But doesn’t he seem too nice to us?”

Yusuke nodded, frowning thoughtfully. “It does seem so... We'll just have to be on guard around him.”

It was the first time Akira had ever gone to school here without Airi being next to him. He glanced over at the empty desk to his right and felt a pang of loneliness, but at least he still had Ann and Morgana in the room. Even though his classmates hadn’t done anything to him, he still felt vulnerable, as if he had been using Airi as a shield to hide behind for the last three months. Maybe he should actually talk to his classmates...

“Let’s begin class.” Ushimaru-sensei grumbled from the front of the room. “We’ll continue from last time-”

The announcement bell rang over the intercom and they all looked up at the speaker. “Uhhh, ahem... Ushimaru-sensei, please come to the faculty office at once.”

Akira sweatdropped at the weird message and familiar female voice. Was that Kawakami?

Ushimaru scrunched up his face. “What..?” He shook his head. “I don’t know what business this is...” He snapped his eyes toward the students. “You better study on your own until I return!” Pivoting on his heel, he left the room, sliding the door closed and the entire class erupted into whispers as they blatantly ignored his command.

“That voice...” Morgana whispered from inside his desk. “Wasn’t that Kawakami on the PA? There’s no way that announcement was real...” His tail whipped behind him. “It must have been the signal!”

Akira nodded, about to take out the spare metals in his bag when Ann turned around in her seat to face him. “Hey...” She whispered. “That was Kawakami-sensei, right?”

Akira nodded. “Yeah, I have a deal with her so sometimes she lets me get away with things in class.”

She pursed her lips. “A deal, huh..? Well, I guess it’s just one of those things you do.” Glancing at their classmates who were busy doing other things, she leaned in closer, covering her mouth from any onlookers. “How’s Airi? Is she better? I saw her yesterday and she seemed OK...”

He pursed his lips. “You’ve seen her more recently than me then, so it seems like she’s fine... but I’m still worried. That black liquid she was coughing up...”

She frowned fretfully. “Yeah... Was that really because of Mementos? I just don’t get it...” She exhaled harshly. “We’re completely fine going in and out, no matter how deep it gets, but for her, it’s like her body’s rejecting it. Why does she have to keep suffering...?”

Akira only sighed, leaning his cheek against his palm. “I don’t know...” The only thing they could
do was be there for her.

Morgana rested his tail on his thigh. “The only thing we know is that the more mom is exposed to Mementos, the more resistance she builds up.” He whispered. “Last time we entered as a group, she was completely fine in the first Path. But that doesn’t answer the question as to why she’s so vulnerable to it. Mementos is a Palace too, but she’s fine when we enter individual Palaces...Could it be something else making her sick?” He flicked his ears. “We won’t be able to answer this question until we go deeper.”

Ann let out a sigh. “Yeah...Even though it hurts her like that, we should let her build up an immunity. I…” She bit her lip. “I don’t want her to be hurt anymore. Those photos…”

Akira looked up at her. “Did you clean them up? Or was it Yusuke?”

She glanced away, toward the window where the sun shined innocuously, unaffected by their problems. “Yusuke did...I couldn’t…” She closed her eyes, a worried crease in her forehead. “I couldn’t look at them again...I just can’t connect the Airi we know to the Airi in those photos…” She leaned against her arms. “I didn’t even know I started crying again that night until Ryuji wiped my face.”

Noticing Morgana wilt inside the desk at the mention of the ex-runner, Akira quickly changed the subject. “It’s her past. We can’t change what happened…” Her losing her parents, being mistreated by the people who were supposed to take care of her, witnessing a friend die… “But we can be there for her...We’re her family now.”

Staring at him for a moment, Ann smiled softly. “Yeah...family…”

“Takamaki-chan, Kurusu-kun.”

They looked up at the unexpected call, seeing Matsumoto and Namikawa standing in front of their desks. Behind them, Mishima continued to glance over in their direction but stayed at his seat, fidgeting with his phone. “Where’s Kimisawa-senpai?” Matsumoto asked curiously. “She was out Saturday too, right?”

Akira gave them a small smile. Seemed like his classmates approached him first. At least it was the nice ones. “She’s sick so she’s at home recovering.”

Namikawa covered her mouth in shock. “Oh no..! Is she OK? What is she sick with?”

Sharing a look, Ann smiled awkwardly. “Oh, she just...uh...got a cold! It’s probably from how hot it’s getting, and it rains all the time too!”

Matsumoto nodded her head in understanding. “Yeah, summer colds are the worst. I hope she feels better now…” Her eyes slid over to Akira and a slight hue lit her cheeks. “Did, uh...Did you go visit her, Kurusu-kun?”

Catching on, Ann grinned slyly. “Yeah, Akira, did you go visit her?”

Cornered by the two inquisitive ladies, he sweated. He remembered Matsumoto had been the person to ask Airi if she liked him, back during his worst week in Tokyo. Was she insinuating something? “Uh...yes?”

Namikawa sighed. “Matsumoto-chan, don’t bother him with your-”

“But I need to know!” She slammed her hands on his table and Akira jumped. Morgana squeaked
inside the desk from the sound but luckily no one else heard him. Eyes burning with passion, Matsumoto stared down at him. “Do you like Senpai, Kurusu-kun?” She whispered fervently. “Are you two together yet!”

Akira sweatdropped, holding his hands out in a placating manner. She was starting to scare him. “Uh...W-Why are you asking this?”

“Because!” She squealed, holding her hands to her cheeks dreamily. “Everyone can see how much you adore her! You haven’t left her side since you transferred here! You’re like a barnacle!”

He opened his mouth to reply but paused at her analogy. “...You’re saying I’m a parasite that slows her down?”

She stilled and laughed nervously. “Well, maybe at the beginning...’Cause, you know, you were that guy no one liked and she was the only one who was nice to you so it seemed like you just glued yourself to her-” She rambled on and on and he felt his shoulders slump the more she continued. Was he really a barnacle? “-But, she kind of attached herself to you too!”

He blinked out of his depressive stupor. “She did?”

She nodded. “Yeah. It used to be that unless there was a council meeting or someone asked for her help, she would immediately leave school, probably to work or something. Now she’s here more often ever since you transferred here.” Her cheeks reddened as she sighed dreamily. “You guys are seriously goals. That cute height difference, and the contrast of colors, how she’s like Persephone and you’re Hades who fell in love with the beauty of life...”

Ann covered her mouth, trying not to laugh at the analogy even as her shoulders shook.

Akira facepalmed. Now he was the devil who lured away the innocent young girl to be his bride in the underworld. This was why he didn’t talk to his classmates.

Rolling her eyes, Namikawa elbowed the tall girl. “Stop it, Matsumoto-chan.” She scolded quietly. “You’re making him uncomfortable.” Turning back to the transfer student, she gave him a shy smile. “If-If it helps, I think you would make a wonderful couple...”

He blushed, feeling his cheeks and even his ears redden at her words. “Uh...Thank you.” What else could he say? That he hoped their words would be true? That he dreamed about being closer to Airi? That he was selfish and possessive over her, almost unhealthily so? Maybe he really was Hades. The god had kidnapped and imprisoned the one who had captured his heart, after all.

He gazed down at his desk while the chatter of his classmates drifted away, his mind distracted by his heart’s desire. But the gods fell in love at the end. Could he and Airi have a future together too?

The door slid open with a slam and Ushimaru-sensei walked back inside the room, a thunderous expression on his face. “Back to your seats!” He roared at the teenagers. With a meep, Matsumoto and Namikawa returned to their desks as the teacher walked back to the front. “They didn’t even know who called me...” He grumbled. “Let’s continue the lesson.”

The last bell rang and Akira was about to get up from his seat when his phone buzzed in his pocket.

Ma: Are you available?
Ma: I want to confront that student we saw at Shinjuku the other day.
Ak: Sure.
Ma: Thank you. Please meet me at the student council room.

He gestured for Morgana to get in the bag without any of his classmates seeing, and shouldering his bag, he left the room and headed up the stairs.

“Akechi-kun was so cool, calling out the Phantom Thieves…”

“He’s right, who knows if the Phantom Thieves were hurting people.”

“Hey, how’s your job lately? You’ve been really quiet since you went to your first shift.”

“They finally let me go…”

“Maybe the Phantom Thieves changed Kamoshida into a bad person?”

“You actually believe they exist? But then again, that thing with that art guy…”

Ignoring the gossip that was always present in the hallways, he opened the door to the student council room and took a seat next to Makoto.

She gave him a small smile before checking her phone. “Thank you for coming. I know I asked both you and Airi to be here for this, but considering the circumstances, I can’t delay this.”

He nodded in understanding just as the door slid open, the same girl they saw at Shinjuku walking in languidly. Her black hair was pulled into a side ponytail, and the expression on her face implied she was exasperated by being called here. Plopping down on a chair, she browsed her phone boredly.

Akira and Makoto shared a glance before the council president cleared her throat. “Takao Eiko-san. You’ve been spending time in the red-light district lately, haven’t you? Myself, Kurusu-kun, and Kimisawa-chan saw you there a few days ago.”

Eiko rolled her eyes, still browsing her phone. “Kimisawa was there too? Ugh…”

Akira furrowed his brow. She didn’t like Airi?

Glancing at him for a second, Makoto continued. “Based on where you were heading, we assume you’re working at a massage parlor called the After School Salon.” She paused, trying to find a way to ask without sounding rude. “How is it, working there?”

Eiko looked up at her with a raised brow, putting her phone away. “Whaddya mean? It’s a cafe, not a massage parlor. They make me wear a costume and stuff, but that’s it. Oh,” She blinked. “And I don’t hafta do anything weird, if you know what I mean. It’s all totally legal.”

Crossing her arms, Makoto narrowed her eyes. “Hm...So you’re sure nothing strange is going on?”

Eiko nodded. “Yup yup, the worst I get is some weird old guys gawking at me.”

Makoto nodded slowly. “I see...Beyond that though, why are you working there?” She pursed her lip. “...How’s your financial situation?”

She raised a brow. “Uh, fine? I mean, I can just ask my parents for cash whenever I want.”

Taken aback, Makoto blinked. “O-Oh, I see…”
Akira furrowed his brow. Then why was she working there?

“But they’d totally bug me about what I’m buying if I did that.” Eiko continued. “That’s why I work at the salon. I get some good spending money, plus the guys who come in there like, mega pamper me.”

Makoto grimaced. “Mega...pamper?”

Eiko nodded happily. “It’s nice having people treat you like you’re special, y’know? I’m sure super honor students like you and Kimisawa-chan get that all the time though.” She glanced over at Akira. “Anyways...are you gonna tell on me? You even brought a witness today…” She paused. “Hold up, doesn’t that mean you guys were in Shinjuku together? Are you a threesome?” She grinned teasingly. “What’s up with that, Miss Prez?”

Akira sweatdropped. A threesome? “You have the wrong idea.”

Makoto nodded in agreement, a slight hue in her cheeks. “Right. It was nothing more than an errand I asked them to accompany me on.”

Eiko looked around the room. “Speaking of company...Where is Kimisawa-chan? She saw me too, right?” She snorted. “I woulda thought she’d be here to bug me about this.”

Makoto furrowed her brow minutely. “Why do you say that?”

Eiko rolled her eyes. “C’mon, she’s always asking people what their business is, and everyone treats her so nicely as if she’s like, a princess. Don’t you remember that rumor last year about her work? They said she had like, three jobs. She’s so…” She grimaced, a flash of envy appearing in her eyes. “Flawless.”

Akira raised a brow. So she thought of Airi as too perfect? Maybe at school she was, but outside of this building she was a different person.

Makoto pursed her lips. “Kimisawa-chan isn’t really like that. She’s very caring, as you know.”

Eiko pouted. “...It just pisses me off that she’s younger than us but she’s like, on a whole other level.”

The council president smiled slightly, knowing that until recently, she had been uncomfortable of their underclassman as well. “I can sort of relate…” She shifted her papers and placed her pencil back in its case. “As for you...I don’t plan on telling anyone.”

Eiko oohed, perking up in her chair. “I get it! So we’re like, protecting each other’s secrets? Oh crap,” She glanced over at Akira again, this time being able to recognize him. “I just realized your boyfriend’s that rumored criminal…” She grinned. “You aren’t so rigid, Miss Prez!”

Makoto sputtered at the accusation. “I told you, that’s not how it is! I was just worried you were getting wrapped up in some shady business, so I asked him for support.”

Eiko pouted. “Hmm, well whatever...Btdubs, I was wondering…” She pointed to the pencil case on the table. “Is that a Buchimaru-kun pencil case?!”

Makoto blinked. “Huh? You know Buchimaru-kun..?”

Buchimaru-kun? Akira looked down at the pencil case. He remembered seeing that design when he was younger but not recently.
Eiko beamed. “I had like, tonnnns of Buchi stuff back when I was a kid. What a blast from the past!” She paused, observing the dirt and scratches. “Wait, why’s it so beat up?!”

Makoto bit her lip and looked away. “Well, it was given to me when I was still in elementary school...I’d like to buy a new one, but they’ve stopped selling Buchimaru-kun merchandise.”

Eiko grinned. “OMG, this is too hilarious! The student council president has an adorable pencil case? My image of you has done like, a complete 360 today.”

Akira sweatdropped. 360 was a whole circle, meaning it didn’t change. She meant 180...

Makoto stared at her for a moment. “Um...isn’t that a full circle?”

Eiko shrugged. “Mmm, I dunno. I’m just real surprised. You don’t really look like the kinda person who’d be into that stuff. I mean, I always thought you were kinda like a robot, but I guess I just had to get to know you better.” She took out her phone. “Hey, why don’t we trade phone numbers?!” She asked enthusiastically. “I really wanna talk to you more about Buchimaru-kun...and your boyfriend.”

Akira resisted the urge to facepalm. Why did she keep thinking they were in a relationship? He wasn’t interested in the council president like that, even if he admitted that she was rather pretty.

He paused. He just realized everyone in their group was insanely good looking, even Morgana as he fell in the cute category. Was he himself also attractive? Airi said he was handsome, but she was the only one who ever said it, aside from that time in Shinjuku where those two men tried to accost him...

Makoto stammered as she took out her phone and they exchanged numbers. “O-Oh, uh...OK…” Her brain finally caught up to what she heard and she sputtered. “Wait, we’re not in a relationship…”

Eiko ignored her as she saw the time. “Oh crap, it’s this late already? I’ve gotta get to work.” She beamed. “I’ll send you tons of pics of my Buchimaru-kun collection later though.” Getting up from her seat, she waved as she left the room. “Bye byeee!”

They watched as the door slid close, leaving them alone. Placing her phone back in her pocket, Makoto sighed. “She was all over the place...Honestly though, I’m in shock.” She frowned dejectedly. “She thought I was a robot…”

He glanced over at her. He couldn’t help it. “Beep boop.”

She snapped her head toward him. “Don’t tease me!” She said disbelievingly.

“OK, OK…” He held his hands up in a surrender. “I’m joking. You only seem like a robot, but you can change.”

Settling down she smiled. “Yes. That’s why you’re helping me.” She crossed her arms. “You know, I believe what Takao-san said about me is how others think as well. I thought I had changed after the incident with Kaneshiro, but perhaps it wasn’t enough…” She turned to him. “That aside, it was almost inspiring to meet someone so distinct from myself. I’m going to try to look at things a little differently from now on.”

She smiled a bit. “And, well...I think that will help me break out of my shell.” She held up a fist determinedly. “I hope you’re ready. I’m going to show you how useful a senior honor student can really be.”
He smirked. “I’m counting on it.”

She smiled. “I’ll be interested to speak with Takao-san some more now that I have her contact information. Perhaps I can correct her misconceptions about us…” She shook her head uncomfortably at the thought. “A relationship, of all things…”

He snorted, leaning back in his chair. “Let’s not. I don’t…” He glanced away awkwardly. He didn’t feel that way at all toward her.

Blushing, she nodded. “Y-Yes, let’s keep it that way. I don’t have time for relationships and Airi is…” She looked away. “As sisters, I don’t want her to think of us in the wrong light.”

He swerved his head to stare at her in surprise. So she didn’t have a crush on the cellist? He thought with all the blushing and stuttering she had been doing that she had feelings for her, similar to how Mishima was. It seemed it was just him being paranoid…

A phone buzzed and Akira took his out, perking up when he noticed it was from Airi. She asked if he was free right now. Typing in his replies, he stood up from his seat. “I’m going to go then. Airi wants to meet up.”

Makoto furrowed her brow. “Is she well enough to be out? I visited her yesterday and she seemed fine, but…”

Akira sighed. “We can’t stop her, but I can at least make sure she’ll be OK if I’m there.”

She stared up at him for several moments before a small smile curled at the corners of her lips. “…I wish you the best of luck.”

Smiling back, he shouldered his bag. At least he knew she was supportive. “Thanks.”

Thank you so much to Hanahimus for this adorable art of Airi in a christmas outfit!!!! I wonder if she should be a Reindeer, or an elf, or a Mrs. Claus -winkwink-
Also, since we were all joking Airi should have Rin's outfit as her DLC, I drew it with my new tablet ;w;
TOMORROW IS THE DAY GUYS!!!! WOOOOOO

Chapter End Notes

Makoto rank 3

Question: Do you guys think I should go through 160+ chapters of material to change Akira's name? Or should we stick with Kurusu Akira?
Chapter Notes

GOD YOU DON'T EVEN KNOW HOW MUCH TROUBLE I WENT THROUGH THIS MORNING. I had intended to upload this way earlier but due to complications, am only able to do it now. I'll speak more of it in the end notes, but for now...

Merry christmas, everyone!! I hope you all are having an amazing day (unlike me) and I really hope this chapter is everything you've been hoping for for the last 8 months!! This is my gift to you all for being such an amazingly supportive phandom!

4/29/2019 edit: I received a copyright infringement on the song that's used in this chapter which is "Stand By Me" by Ben E. King, and I have therefore removed it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

----6/27, MONDAY, AFTER SCHOOL, YONGENJAYA BACKSTREETS.

Airi had decided to take another day off to recover. She was almost back to 100%. Her legs had stopped shaking and she was able to do regular things again, but nothing too strenuous, just a few simple stretches to keep herself flexible. With everyone hovering over her, she may as well just obey their wishes.

She opened the window in her room for the first time in weeks and breathed in the fresh air, the sunny rays warming her skin. Was it really over? It seemed so. He hadn’t come back since she took his Heart. The others would’ve told her if he did when she was unconscious. It was as if those last few weeks were just her trying to survive, day by day. She could barely remember what it was like to be free. To be free, huh…

She glanced over at her cello, a fine layer of dust collecting upon its otherwise pristine surface as it sat on its stand. Was she truly free of her nightmares? She had that breakdown in the bathroom on Saturday after all. She felt guilty that Akira had to be a witness to that, but...he never flinched away from her unstable behavior. He kept her sane. He stopped her from committing a really horrible mistake.

He took care of her as gently as he could, even when she was sure he had better things to do. He cared so much about her…

She bit her lip, holding a hand to her chest to feel her heart pounding underneath her palm. Her heart would speed up whenever she thought about him, and her chest would feel warm with something stronger than just friendship.

Just hearing his name would bring a smile to her face because he was one of the most important people in her life, but was what everyone was saying true? She clearly cared a lot about him, but was she in love with him..?

“You two seem pretty close if you’re both coming to school together everyday." Makoto commented, brushing some hair behind an ear. "You just transferred here though...I guess you two really click.”
“That looked so intense, he must’ve been glad his girlfriend was here to cheer him on.” The girl marveled at Big Bang Burger.

Yukimi reluctantly nodded. “Yeah, I had a feeling that guy behind you was your boyfriend anyway, but I had to try, right?”

Mina smiled back, the corners of her eyes crinkling just a little from age. “Of course, Kimisawa-chan! I remember it like it was yesterday. He said he wanted to show his appreciation to the first person who was kind to him.” She clasped her hands together dreamily. “It sounded so romantic...Are you guys a couple? You have to be!”

Matsumoto shook her head. “I need to write this out later...The point is! Give him a chance?” She grinned hopefully.

Ann rolled her eyes. “C’mon. He gave you an expensive hairclip on your birthday after knowing you for a week, he always hangs out with you, worries for you, he holds hands with you...” She listed off on her fingers. “And you’re always close to each other. How is that not a serious crush?”

“Hey, Kimi-chan! And Kimi-chan’s boyfriend!” Ohya greeted.

Hanasaki slinked up from behind her, peering at the new guest. “Oh? Isn’t this the boy who escorts you here sometimes? You’re together, right? You’re a good looking young man and she’s a very pretty young lady....”

“Right, cuz you already got a bodyguard with ya.” Nishiki snickered. “What’s that kid’s name? He was real protective over ya. I swear his eyes started flashin’ red like some kinda satan!”

Ann frowned disapprovingly, placing her hands on her hips. “Did you kick them out or something? I know Yusuke can be side tracked, but Akira would never leave unless you told him off.”

Makoto nodded. “He told me Friday that you were his most important person. I hoped he would’ve made good on his promise.”

Thinking back on it, he had always been the first one to offer help. He was always near her, he always hung out with her, and recently they always held hands. She in turn would defer to his decisions, would trust him to protect her, would go to him for comfort, would’ve killed to protect him. He was really important to her, and if Makoto was right, she was really important to him.

“But you were going to kill me for the one you love. I had threatened him as well, in a way.” Hisoka smiled sadly, a light beginning to envelop him. “In that sense, we are the same. The only difference is that you’ll be much smarter than me because you fell in love with a good man.”

Was she really in love with Akira? If even a murderer could see it, then...

She held a hand up to her chest. Had he stolen her heart like a true Phantom Thief?

Laughing slightly at the thought, she dusted off her cello and secured it in its case. She wanted to give it another try.

Changing into her dress and even clipping on her barrette, she shouldered the heavy instrument and left the house with a sigh of content. She was able to walk around freely now. No more stalkers, no more threats, no more murderers. For once, she was alone and she relished in her independence.

It was like a weight had been lifted off of her. Telling Akira about what happened with Rui had helped lessen the baggage, but after finally confronting and defeating her parents’ murderer, it was
like she threw a boulder off. She felt so light and free compared to just a few days ago. Could she share this feeling with him, too?

She pulled out her phone, ready to answer her own question.

Ai: Are you free right now?
Ai: I want to try playing my cello again.
Ai: I would love it if you stayed by my side.
Ak: Of course. Should I meet you at Shibuya?
Ai: OK!

She blushed, just now realizing how deep her words sounded. ‘I would love it if you stayed by my side...’ She bit her lip, feeling her cheeks burning with embarrassment but also affection. His answer was always yes. He was even the first to promise he’d never leave her.

Heart pounding in her chest, she traveled to Shibuya to meet up with him. He was waiting in the station square, fiddling with his phone and Morgana whispering in his ear. She smiled fondly at the sight and waved. “Akira! Morgana!”

He looked up at her through the throng of pedestrians and gave her that gentle smile she liked—loved as she walked up to him. “Hey. You look a lot better.”

“Hi mom!” Morgana greeted with a happy smile. “You look great now!”

She pouted. “Are you saying I looked ugly the past couple of days?”

Akira sputtered, waving his hands as the feline ducked back inside his bag. “N-No! Just, you know, you look like you’re feeling better and…” He paused, seeing her fight back a smile. “You’re messing with me again.”

She covered her mouth as she laughed. “Sorry. I am feeling better, and it’s all thanks to you.” She smiled softly. “I wouldn’t be here now without you.”

He smiled back, a slight hue in his cheeks. “I promised, right?”

She nodded happily, her heart fluttering at his words. He did.

They traveled over to Inokashira Park and to the same spot as last time, walking through the well trodden path lined with large maple trees. The sun shone brightly in the cloudless blue sky, only a slight breeze to cool the rapidly warming weather so early in the summertime. The lake shimmered like a jewel, and geese occasionally swam by in peaceful unison.

Unlike that day, she wasn’t feeling nervous at all. It was like her heart was free of any anxiety. There were no matrons here to smash her cello. There was no murderer out to get her. The only thing that mattered was the man standing to the side of the path, watching her with that same soft smile as she was about to do what she loved. Playing her music.

Taking out her cello from its case and making sure everything was tuned and ready to go, she took a deep breath and plucked the strings, starting “Stand By Me.” She felt the song was very appropriate, even though it wasn’t a particularly impressive piece to play, as her most precious person was here at her side.

She hummed along, singing the lyrics along with the music. Her English was accented but that didn’t matter. She knew what she was saying. "Oh Darling, darling..."
She let her bow drag across the strings as her fingers danced on the chords. She elongated the notes, letting them fade into each other to create a more harmonious melody compared to the peppy original. It came out of her so naturally, as if her very soul chimed in.

People were stopping to watch but she didn’t care. Let them watch. Let them see that she was now free.

There was now a crowd around her, people watching her avidly as she played the world famous song. There was even a couple who started dancing to the music, the man leading the woman into little twirls and steps.

Akira continued to watch her with that soft look on his face, the one that was reserved only for her. He gave her this new confidence, her chance, her life. She owed him so much.

"Stand by me..." She let that last note fade away and exhaled. She did it. She played her cello in public without flinching or crying or breaking down. No one had come up to take it from her. She was free of her fears.

The crowd erupted into cheers, everyone clapping at her performance. Smiling brightly, she stood up and bowed to her audience before putting her instrument back in its case. Unbeknownst to them, she’d always be grateful that they took a few seconds to cheer her on.

Noticing she was putting her cello away, the crowd dispersed, the park goers going back to their regular plans and walks.

Akira approached her with a breathless smile now that it was just the two of them. “That was amazing, Airi! You did it!”

She beamed and stood up from the wooden railing, cheeks stained with happiness. “I really did! It was all thanks to you.” She bit her lip, her cello case by her heels. “I never would’ve gotten this far if you weren’t by my side, so...stand by me, OK?” She grinned, pulling up the courage to kiss his cheek. She’d done it before as thanks, so he probably didn’t mind.

As she was about to, he turned his head at the last second so that their lips brushed instead. She stilled, heart speeding a mile a minute at the unexpected and intimate contact, but she didn’t pull away. In fact, she leaned in closer, pressing her lips against his dry but smooth ones and letting her eyes flutter close. This was her first kiss…

His mind blanked the instant her lips landed on his. The rustling of the trees, the flowing water behind them in the lake, the quiet chatter of other people, all of that faded away. They weren’t important.

He clumsily leaned in, this being his first kiss. He never thought it would mean much, but here he was, his heart thundering away inside his chest from the tender caress. This was more than he could ever dream of.

His lungs protested against the lack of oxygen and he tore away with a gasp, eyes glazed over. He slowly licked his lips, savoring the taste of her lip balm. Honey green tea. “Airi…I,” He swallowed, wetting his dry throat as his face heated up, his glasses cool against his skin. They already kissed. There was no better time to confess. “I think we can…” He stammered, his nerves almost getting the better of him but he persevered. “W-we can say that this has been...a long time coming.”

Biting her lip, she nodded shyly, face resembling a tomato. “Y-Yeah...We’ve always been so close
with each other...A-And you’re always with me, no matter what…”

Her eyes blurred as tears began gathering in the corners. He was always with her, especially during the most important moments of her life. It was only because of him that she was able to get this far.

She knew her answer now. “You always support me,” Airi whispered. "You help me so much, you care for me...And I care for you. I care so much...How could I not love you?”

Akira stilled, staring at her in shock. “...Did you say love?” He whispered breathlessly, not trusting his ears.

Airi nodded again and glanced away, not wanting to meet his eyes. “I know it’s a little forward since…” She hunched her shoulders, flustered at her own confession. “Well, we’ve never talked about our feelings like this and we’ve only known each other for such a short time, but-”

“Say it again.” He demanded, wetting his lips as his heart drummed harshly in his rib cage. He needed to hear it again, to make sure he wasn’t dreaming. “Say that you love me.”

She blinked, turning to look at him again and felt her cheeks burn from his heated gaze. “I...I love you, Kurusu Akira.” She confessed quietly, but the words had the same impact as a bullet.

He stared at her with wide eyes before ducking his head, hiding his eyes from her. Clenching his fists, he took off his glasses and put it in his bag.

She furrowed her brow, beginning to feel worried. Did he not feel the same? Was she being rejected? It was OK if he didn’t feel the same way because she didn’t want to force him to like her, but she didn’t think she’d ever love someone as strongly as she did him ever again...

Any pessimistic thought was wiped from her mind when he looked back up, his eyes shining with happiness and affection, solely for her. “I love you, Kimisawa Airi.” He breathed with elation, feeling as light as a feather as he finally uttered the words that had been imprinted in his mind and heart. “I’ve loved you for a long time now. Maybe even when we just met back in April, under that rainy sky. You gave me my first smile, and...I think that was what started everything.”

She blinked in surprise. “E-Even then?” They hadn’t even known each other’s names.

He grinned widely, just like the one he had on that roller coaster. Free and happy. Because of her. “Even then. Everything you did made me fall more and more in love with you.”

Her eyes clouded with tears at his sincerity and she couldn’t hold it back anymore. He returned her feelings. He loved her..

Launching herself at him, she jumped and encircled her arms around his neck, kissing him in earnest this time. His arms held her up by her waist as he kissed her back, his lips pulled into an ecstatic smile.

Neither of them were very experienced since this was their first, but they knew they loved each other through the feelings they shared.

Everything was all right now...

Akira and Airi are now in a relationship.
AIRI RANK EFFING 9 WOOOOOOOOO!!!!

And as an extra christmas gift for all you naughty naughty readers, "My Heart Is A Furnace" has updated!!! It's an extra long, extra steamy chapter, so please read it when you're done reading this one!
Second announcement is that I've opened an Instagram dedicated to all the art I make for this fic as well as all the amazing fanart you've given me! If you've sent me a piece any time in the past (I've collected them all, don't worry) let me know if I have your permission to post them! They're all going to be at airikimisawa on Instagram!

Story time: been nauseous and light headed for the past couple of days, and I woke up to no internet because the harsh winds outside knocked down a cable lol so I didn't know how to post this. Was gonna try through my phone but when I was dragging the select to copy and paste, google docs decided I wanted to delete all of it instead. Unfortunately for Iphone, there is no reversing changes made to the doc once you close it, and even if you didn't, you have to "shake" your iPhone?? wtf. Anyway, I got so fed up I wanted to cry, but I persevered and made it to my grandma's with my laptop just so I can post this. Appreciate me pls for i am the suffer. Every comment is a soothing balm to my lightheadedness.
Chapter 141

Chapter Notes

I wasn't going to update until next year (HAH) but I felt like I had to since it's the end of the year. This fic is now 8 months old, can you believe it? I'll talk more in the end notes!

Please enjoy what will now be a constant in this fic: Fluffy Aikira <3 Or should it be AiRen? Ohohohoo (still not happy with his last name but whatever, Atlus don't give no shits about what WE want)

WARNING: PTSD-ISH SYMPTOMS

They linked hands together on the way back to Yongenjaya. Even though they’d done it before countless of times, they couldn’t help but blush.

This was the first time they’d held hands as a couple.

Walking down the back streets as evening set in, they made it back to her house. The lights were turned on, meaning Yusuke was already home. Unlocking the front door, Airi turned to her frie-boyfriend with a timid smile. “See you tomorrow?”

Akira smiled shyly and nodded. “Always…” He hesitated, but after a moment of debating with himself, leaned down and pressed his lips against hers. Their noses knocked against each other, and the rim of his glasses pressed uncomfortably into her cheeks, but she found that she liked that. It wasn’t a skilled kiss, but it was all Akira, and that made it perfect.

She leaned back to go inside, but his lips followed hers and latched on, and she found that she couldn’t refuse him. Rather, she didn’t want to refuse him. Her hand reached up to clutch his shirt, feeling his thundering heartbeat underneath her palm. Her own heart was beating so fast she thought it might fly away to nirvana…

“Ohem.”

They broke apart and turned around, faces resembling tomatoes when they realized Yusuke had been watching them for quite some time. “Do not keep the door open for long.” He advised nonchalantly, not bothered at all by their closeness. “You will let in the insects.”

“S-Sorry, Yusuke…” Airi struggled to say calmly, resisting the urge to hide her red face in her hands.

Yusuke turned his gaze to his leader, whose face was burning with embarrassment, glasses reflecting the light so as to hide his eyes. “Akira, I am halfway finished with my piece. Might you be free sometime?”

Akira nodded uncomfortably. “Y-Yeah, whenever. Take your time.”

Yusuke inclined his head and headed toward the stairs but paused. “Oh, and...congratulations. I am
happy for the two of you.” He gave them a small smile before disappearing upstairs.

Shoulders trembling, Airi couldn’t fight it any longer and burst out into laughter. They hadn’t even been together for a day and had already embarrassed themselves in front of company.

Akira gave her an odd look as she continued to laugh, but couldn’t keep the smile off his face as a few chuckles escaped him as well. “Is-Is that how we’re gonna tell everyone we’re together? By…” He rubbed the back of his neck nervously. “By kissing?”

She stopped, feeling her face heat up at the thought. “Um…” How should they tell their friends? Ann and Ryuji had bet on them getting together a while ago...

Smile slowly falling as the silence prevailed, Akira glanced away in disappointment. “If you want to keep this a secret, I understand…I know other people at school are going to judge you for dating the guy with a criminal record…” He tried but couldn’t quite keep the bitterness out of his voice.

Try as he might, he could never forget the person in front of him was his class president who was admired all throughout the school. Him? He was just some guy from the countryside that everyone was wary of, if not outright scared because of his probation status. Their classmates were OK, but the rest of the school could tear them apart with rumors.

His heart clenched at the thought. He finally found his happiness and it could end right now…

Snapping out of her thoughts, Airi reached out for his hand, entwining her fingers with his. “I don’t need to keep this a secret, I’m not…” She paused, trying to find the right word. “I’m not ashamed of loving you. It’s just Ann and Ryuji were betting on us, and I kind of want to ruin it for them.”

He stared blankly at her for a moment. What? That’s all she was worried about? Not the fact that her reputation could be ruined by his?

Noticing his look of surprise, she smiled shyly. “I don’t care what other people say. I love you. That’s a fact that won’t ever change, so...stop worrying, OK?” She leaned up, standing on the tips of her toes to peck him on the lips. Even though she was still in her heels, he was still taller...

He automatically reciprocated, tilting his head down to accommodate her shorter stature. Her lips were so soft and warm and loving, the honey green tea flavor of her lip balm adding to her sweetness. He could get addicted to this, so very easily.

Kissing was much more intense and yet more relaxed than she thought it would be. He was a quiet and not too intrusive kind of guy, but the instant their lips touched, it was as if he dominated every one of her senses. Unlike earlier when she was too overcome with joy and elation, she could taste the coffee he had had on his lips, and she could smell the familiar scent of Sojiro’s curry around him, the complex spices adding to his mild shower foam. She could hear his little inhales through his nostrils over the roaring blood in her ears.

Though she kept her eyes closed as he deepened the peck and turned it into a full blown kiss, she would’ve seen his own eyes, half lidded in content and his pupils dilated the longer they stayed connected. Even though every J-drama she saw had the new couple go through weird stuff, it wasn’t awkward to be with Akira like this. Maybe it was because she was already comfortable around him, what with how close they had been since they met. He had already seen her at her worst and still accepted her. He was almost too good to be true.

Feeling her calves strain from tiptoeing, she reluctantly parted from him with a much needed gasp, gripping his white shirt jacket for balance as her lungs screamed for air. She glanced at the clock
on the wall, feeling her cheeks burn. “It’s getting late and we still have school tomorrow.”

He frowned, lips plush from their close contact. “Are you feeling well enough for that? Maybe you should take one more day off…”

She crossed her arms. “I’ve missed enough school, and Sen-nee-chan can’t cover for me forever.” She smiled reassuringly. “Besides, I’ve missed seeing you, and Ryuji, and Ann, and Makoto.”

He pursed his lips. “If you’re sure…But the second you start feeling faint, tell me or the others, OK?”

She resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “Yes yes. You don’t have to hover over me all the time, I feel a lot better now.”

Akira only frowned deeper. “You’re my...You’re my girlfriend,” He voiced that unfamiliar word with a flush of his cheeks. “I can’t help but worry.”

Airi blushed at the term. “Yeah...I’m your girlfriend and you’re my boyfriend.” She beamed. It felt official now that they said it out loud and it made her heart flutter. “…I love you.”

Smiling shyly as she confirmed it, Akira leaned down one more time to brush his lips against her plush ones, closing his eyes in bliss. She was so warm and full of love, just for him. She loved him. Someone actually loved him. Someone that he...that he loved in return.

He raised his arms, wrapping them around her slim waist and pulling her closer to his taller and broader frame. He wanted to keep this forever…

She whimpered into the kiss, the sound going straight to his groin and he knew he had to stop. Pulling away, he forced himself to take a step back and into the dark back streets of Yongenjaya. He held a hand over the lower half of his face in an attempt to hide just how flustered he was, and looked away shyly. “S-See you tomorrow…”

Holding a hand to cover her now very red lips, she waved. “Good night..!”

He turned away, walking down the street as he heard the door close behind him. Was he dreaming? It felt like a dream. His chest felt so light and free, as if the jail cell door had opened and light shined into the darkness. Even though it was night now, the skies dark and gloomy, he felt as if the sun was shining on his face.

He felt his bag rustle and he blinked, looking over his shoulder. He forgot Morgana had been with him the entire day. He usually went on walks when he hung out with others.

The feline popped out from the small opening he left in the zipper and shook his head in the open air. “Ahh…” He breathed in the fresh air. “It was stuffy in there…”

Akira smiled sheepishly. “Sorry. You could’ve came out.”

Morgana groomed an ear. “I didn’t want to ruin your moment. You two sound so happy to finally be together…” His ears drooped. “Would I be able to find love like that? I don’t remember anything from my past. I could’ve had a girlfriend, or a wife…” He slumped against a broad shoulder. “And Lady Ann and Ryuji are so close while I’m stuck as a cat…” He muttered inaudibly.

Frowning sympathetically, Akira reached up with a hand and patted the feline on his head. “If you work hard towards it, I’m sure you’ll turn back into a human…” He paused, trying to figure out his next words. “I...I’m not even sure I’m awake right now...but, you have a pretty big crush on Ann,
right? Just be patient.” He reassured as they turned the corner to the cafe. “If you work for it, you might steal her heart.”

Morgana hummed thoughtfully before pouting. “Of course I’ll work hard! I don’t want to be stuck in this form forever, a-and it’s not Lady Ann! I don’t know why you keep thinking it’s her!”

Akira only snorted. Denial wasn’t just a river in Egypt.

---6/28, TUESDAY, EARLY MORNING, YONGENJAYA BACKSTREETS.

He had woken up feeling weird, as if something amazing had happened, but his memories didn’t catch up to him until he was eating his breakfast curry. He was in a relationship now. It felt like he had dreamt it all...Had he?

His heart was pounding incessantly in his chest as he leaned against the wall outside Cafe Leblanc, the early morning sun shining down the alleyway. His clenched and unclenched his jaw, his tense hands shoved in the pockets of his uniform pants. This was his first official day as a taken man. He had a girlfriend now.

What did that all mean? He had never had anything even close to this and he was at a loss. The internet and J-dramas said he should cherish his partner and take her out on dates, but what did they mean? Where should they go on dates? Would she even be up for dates? Were they actually dating or did he dream it all up? He was definitely awake now and he had no idea if yesterday was just one big hallucination that he created out of sheer desperation.

Exhaling shakily, he looked down at his oxfords. He was so anxious...What if it wasn’t real? What if it was just his hopes getting the better of him? What if he dreamed up the soft looks, those sweet smiles, her luscious lips, her little gasps and whimpers when he wouldn’t stop kissing her, everything?

His bag shuffled and Morgana leaned out of the zipper. “I can feel how tense you are inside the bag.” He remarked with amusement. “Calm down. Mom loves you, so stop worrying so much.”

Akira nodded but didn’t quite listen, the words going in one ear and out the other. He wouldn’t know for sure until he saw Airi.

He checked his phone before putting it back in his pocket. It was almost time...

“You’re sure you do not feel dizzy?” Yusuke asked worriedly. “Any weaknesses?”

Airi sighed exasperatedly as she locked the front door behind them. “Yes, I’m fine.” She reassured for the hundredth time in three days. “You’ve seen me every day, I’m sure you can tell that I’m feeling much better now.”

He only pursed his lips as they began walking down the sunny backstreets.

Airi took a deep breath, letting it out with a long exhale. It felt good to be outside and normal again. Well, not exactly normal. She was in a relationship now.

She smiled shyly to herself, gripping the straps of her school bag. She had a boyfriend. She never thought she would ever find something as...as wonderful as a romantic relationship, with the person she trusted the most. She thought her future would’ve consisted of her working and paying
bills until she died. No time for friends, no time for boyfriends. It never occurred to her that they had been right next to her since April.

Her life had really turned around for the better, even with recent events. Was this her reward for having survived everything? It was a really nice reward...

Turning the corner to Leblanc, she froze in her spot once she saw Akira waiting like usual. He would usually be browsing his phone or chatting with Morgana, but today he seemed tense. His shoulders were hunched over and his head was held low as he stared at the ground, lost in his thoughts. His hands kept twitching at his sides, as if he wanted something to distract him from what was going through his head.

She bit her lip, feeling insecure at his restless state. In the three months they would meet up in the morning, he was never nervous or anything like this. Was he...regretting yesterday? She thought they finally came clean to each other. Did he not want to be in a relationship with her..?

There was only one way to find out, and it was better to say things than to leave it to fester in the dark like before.

She took a deep breath and smiled like usual, but Yusuke ended up interrupting her before she could say anything. “Good morning, Akira.”

Akira tensed, head snapping up to look in their direction but his gaze was only focused on her. His mysterious gray eyes, that were either stone cold in battle or a muted soft cloud when he was with her and their friends, were full of uncertainty and faint traces of hope behind his glasses.

Walking up to him, Airi hesitantly slipped a hand into one of his, smiling shyly up at him. “Good morning.”

He looked down at their joined hands, flashes of different emotions passing by on his face before his shoulders slowly eased from the earlier tension. Looking back up at her, eyes now full of love, he smiled gently. “…Good morning, Airi.”

Smiling wider at his affectionate gaze, she tiptoed to peck him on the lips. She felt an answering brush, letting her know he wanted this. Leaning back, she raised a sly brow. She couldn’t help but tease him. “Were you nervous?”

Cheeks reddening under his large glasses, he looked away and nodded. “Just a little...I keep thinking yesterday was a dream, but…” He glanced down at their still joined hands and let their fingers intertwine, holding on tightly. “I’m not dreaming, right? This is real?”

She nodded shyly. “It’s pretty real unless I’m dreaming too…” And she really hoped she wasn’t.

A polite cough interrupted their conversation and they turned to look at Yusuke who was further down the road, slowly blinking at them. “We will be late if we don’t hurry.” He informed them evenly as he shouldered his bag. “Please don’t delay.”

That was rather close to being scolded, and with red faces, the new couple hurried after him on their way to school. Everything felt different but still the same. They did what they usually did, just getting on the train and transferring at Shibuya. But they did so with shy and giddy smiles, hands brushing against each other.

They weren’t exactly experienced in showing romantic affection, and they knew their schoolmates on the same journey would see and it would get back to the two blonds. Yusuke observed all this with a tilt of his head, and Morgana only purred at seeing his leader and his mom truly happy.
Waving bye to Yusuke as he continued to Kosei, they got off at Aoyama-Itchome and walked the few blocks to school.

“Hey, there’s this article making the rounds online…” A student gossiped. “It’s called ‘Confessions of Boy M: A Tell-all on the Kamoshida Abuse Scandal.’ That’s gotta be Mishima, right?”

His friend nodded. “I read it! It all sounds so horrible…It’s no wonder the entire volleyball team consider the Phantom Thieves heroes. Kinda hard to bag on the Phantom Thieves after reading that…”

The student nodded. “You’re right. In fact, you might call them superheroes.”

Airi scrunched up her face as they overheard everything. “Wait, was that the article that you volunteered Yuuki-kun to partake in?”

Akira shrugged. “He was fine…A little scared of Ohya-san, but hey, he’s helping us, right?”

“That journalist’s articles sure are making a big splash.” Morgana remarked quietly, ears flicking around. “Her paper on Madarame’s apprentices had also been featured on the news. She would be the perfect way to get the Phantom Thieves name out there. We should take advantage of this.”

Akira raised a brow. “Get our name out there? We’re already making steady progress…”

The feline hummed. “Yes, but Ohya would help tremendously. I want the Phantom Thieves to be famous for more than just my own selfish reasons. The bigger our name is, the more our targets will hear talk of us.”

Airi oohed with realization. “And the more people who know of us and our work, the more they’ll come to accept us and Mementos would open deeper. I guess she could help…”

Morgana purred. “That’s right. We should go to that bar in Shinjuku and convince her to write more articles about us!”

Humming thoughtfully, Akira nodded. It would be useful to have her on their side. She could also cross-reference with Mishima on names and they’d have more important targets. They still had to do those two Mementos requests. Maybe today?

He glanced over at Airi. They had decided to let her keep going in to build an immunity, but she had just recovered. Maybe they could do these without her and she’d join them for the next ones.

Getting to school, they walked up the stairs and into their classroom. “Senpai!” Matsumoto skipped up to them, the tall girl towering over the cellist. “You’re back!”

At that, others in the classroom turned and perked up. “Welcome back, Senpai!” Namikawa greeted quietly, walking up beside her best friend. “How are you feeling?”

Akira moved past, his hand subtly brushing her lower back before making his way to his desk and taking a seat.

Blushing slightly at her boyfriend’s touch, Airi smiled at her classmates. “Good morning, Matsumoto-chan, Namikawa-chan. I’m OK now, thank you for asking.”

Otani leaned back in her seat to face her, snapping noisily on some bubble gum. “What were you out for?”
Her smile turned a tad awkward. What could she say? She was so stressed from her parents’ killer stalking her that she collapsed inside the metaphysical plane of Tokyo? “…The weather has been very weird, and I guess I haven’t been paying attention to my health since everyone’s been so worried at school.”

“S-Senpai!” Mishima rushed up to her, shouldering past Matsumoto who yelped indignantly. “Kurusu told me you were sick. Are you feeling better?” He fretted, head moving side to side, trying to find signs of her malady. “Do you need anything?”

Airi sweatdropped. “I-I’m OK, don’t worry.” She reassured. “Class is about to start, so let’s sit down, yeah?”

Agreeing with her, the other students went back to their seats. Mishima moved back reluctantly, his eyes trained on her back.

Unaware of his lingering gaze, Airi walked to her desk and finally sat down, turning to her neighbor. “Way to leave me to fend for myself.” She murmured, taking out her books and music note decorated pencil case.

Akira smirked as Kawakami-sensei walked into the room and started taking attendance. “You said we shouldn’t seem so close, Senpai.” He glanced to the empty desk in front of him, knowing Ann would’ve noticed their newfound closeness.

The model entered the room right before the teacher called her name. “Hey!” She greeted them breathlessly from her sprint, plopping down on her chair. “Welcome back, Airi!”

Airi beamed. “It feels good to be back with you guys.”

School ended for the day and Airi groaned quietly, packing up her bag. Her shoulders were aching, and her right hand was stiff. Had school always taken so much out of her? Maybe it was because she still wasn’t back to 100%. It had only been a few days after all, and even with Dr. Takemi’s amazing medicine, the body could only heal so fast.

Should she risk it and try to go to work? It had been a while now, and Hanasaki-san was probably getting worried.

Ann turned around in her seat. “Airi, want to visit Shiho?” She asked hopefully. “You haven’t seen her in a while and…well,” She looked away, out through the sunny windows. “She hasn’t been making much progress lately with her therapy sessions and they’re almost coming to an end.”

Airi furrowed her brow. “Wait, what happened? I thought she was doing OK…”

Ann sighed. “I’m not sure…I’ve been trying to cheer her up, but I’ve been having problems too, so I guess I’m not doing very well as her best friend.”

Airi softened. “Of course I’ll go. Maybe she got sick of seeing your face all the time.” She teased. “What problems are you having? Can I help?”

Ann pouted. “Hey, she should feel blessed to see my face!” She glanced over at Akira who had been listening to their conversation while scrolling through his phone. “Akira knows about this, but I’ve been having trouble with my shoots. Anytime I think I have a shoot booked, I get a message the day of saying they don’t need me anymore.” She sighed. “I don’t know if that’s just my agency being weird, or maybe they don’t want to shoot me…”
Just as she said that, her phone buzzed and Ann took it out, furrowing her brow as she read the message. “...Wait, what?! Mika?!” She stared in disbelief, typing in a reply. “At the Sky Tower...? Where’s that?!”

Airi blinked. “It’s in Asakusa. You’ll need to take the Hanzomon Line to get there.”

Akira leaned back in his chair. “A shoot with Mika, huh. Are you going to go?”

Ann frowned. “Well...They want me to go now.” She sighed. “Basically, this men’s magazine is running a Mika special to try and capitalize on her recent popularity. But apparently, she asked for me specifically to star alongside her for the shoot. I wonder why...”

He pursed his lips, remembering how two faced the other model was. “It’s a trap.”

She gaped. “Th-Then should I say no? Oh,” Her face fell. “But...I already agreed...” She sighed. “I guess I won’t be visiting Shiho today.”

Airi smiled. “It’s OK, I can go alone. Oh...” Taking her phone out, she texted someone. “Not going alone then.”

Akira frowned slightly. “Who are you going with?”

“Ryuji.” She answered, getting up from her seat. “I’ve been meaning to ask him to go anyway. He broke his leg before but he’s almost fully recovered now.” Except that time when they were running out of Kamoshida’s castle and he fell to the floor from his knee. Was he really healed? Or just out of practice? Maybe Dr. Takemi could give him an examination. “I’m sure he can give Shiho-chan some tips, and maybe if she sees someone who already recovered, she’ll be more motivated in turn.”

Ann brightened. “That’s a great idea! I’m sure Ryuji can cheer her up with his stupid jokes. Then Akira,” She turned to her leader. “Want to come with me to the shoot? Actually, I already decided for you.” She stood up from her seat and grabbed her bag. “Come on!” She hurried out of the room without waiting for him.

Akira sweatdropped and sighed, glancing over at Airi guiltily. He wanted to spend more time with her, especially now that they were together. He could still hardly believe it and he wanted to spend every moment to make sure he was still awake.

Noticing his look, she lightheartedly shooed him. “Go on. Ann needs someone with her.” She grinned. “Especially if Mika-san will be there.”

He smiled. “Right. No doubt drama’s gonna happen...” Glancing around the mostly empty classroom and noting that no one was looking in their direction, he quickly leaned over and pressed his lips against hers. He’d been wanting to do that all day.

She squeaked into the kiss, blood rushing to her face at his unexpectedly bold move.

Moving back, he gave her a shy but mischievous smile before getting up from his seat, and after Morgana hopped into his bag, left the room.

She stared at where he just was, her hand coming up to touch her lips that were tingling. Perhaps it was inappropriate to be showing affection in school, especially after they agreed to not flaunt it, but she really liked that. Was this Joker coming to the surface? Or had he always been sneaky like that and she just accepted it without a second thought?
“Yo! Airi!”

Snapping out of her thoughts, she turned around in her seat and saw Ryuji sticking his head in through the doorway. “Ah, I’m coming!” Gathering her bag, she quickly stood up from her desk and walked out of the room.

They both traveled from school to Shibuya, strolling to Ito Hospital. Airi stared with a guilty frown as Chiyo was still working at the reception, actions as mechanical as she remembered. She couldn’t save everyone. She had to come to terms with that.

Bypassing the ex-apprentice, she led Ryuji over to the elevators where they rode it up to the second floor. Once the doors opened, they walked over to room 203 and she knocked on the door. “Shiho-chan?”

“...Come in.”

Sharing a look of concern at the depressed sounding reply, she slid the door open. The hundreds of colorful paper cranes fluttered on the ceiling, the breeze from the hallway wafting in. Shiho was sat next to the window on a chair, staring out into the sunny sky. All her casts and bandages were finally gone, only a metal knee brace on her once broken leg. She didn’t turn to look at them, even as Ryuji closed the door.

Taking a few steps forward, Airi pulled a stool next to her, close enough to talk, but far enough to give her some space. She seemed...worse, than last time. “Hi, Shiho-chan.” She greeted softly. “I’m sorry I haven’t visited in a while. Some things came up and-”

“It’s OK.” Shiho interrupted quietly, still staring blankly out the window, the white clouds reflected in her dark brown eyes. “You don’t have to keep visiting me if it’s a problem. I’ll always be here.”

Ryuji scrunched up his brow, leaning against the foot of the bed. “But you look fine. You’re prolly gonna get out of here within two weeks or somethin’. Why’re you so down?”

Tensing up at the unexpected voice, Shiho finally tore her eyes away from the view outside and stared at him in surprise. “Sakamoto-kun? What...What are you doing here?”

He smiled awkwardly. “Airi invited me, ‘cause y’know, I broke my leg too. Um...” He rubbed the back of his head. “Sorry for not comin’ earlier. I should’ve, especially since...y’know. That asshole.”

Regarding him for a moment, Shiho shook her head. “No...it’s OK. I can’t expect everyone to come visit me.” She gave him a small smile. “Thank you though, especially for the duck plush.” She gestured to the brightly colored toy still sat on the bed.

He grinned. “Don’t thank me, I didn’t do anythin’. How’s your leg?”

She stared down at her braced leg and bent it, only wincing as her muscles pulled uncomfortably. “It’s OK...”


Airi watched with a small smile. It was good to see Ryuji was being considerate of the ex-volleyball player. Maybe it was because he knew what it was like to go through most of what she went through.
Shiho stayed quiet for a moment, just staring at her legs. “...I want to go outside.” She requested demurely. “All I’ve seen for two months is these white walls, white sheets, white floors...” She clenched her hands on her lap. “But I know I should stay inside until I’m completely healed.”

Airi and Ryuji shared a look. “Well...” The cellist smiled softly. “It won’t hurt to go out for just a few minutes. The hospital has a garden and I’m sure it’ll do you good to get some sunlight.”

Ryuji nodded in agreement. “Yeah. Sun’s pretty important, y’know. C’mon!” Launching himself off the bed, he held out a hand to the ex-volleyball player. “We got ya.”

Staring at the outstretched hand, Shiho slowly reached out and accepted his offer, gradually standing up from her chair with a wince.

They walked her to the elevator and took her to the first floor, unhurried as they had plenty of time and didn’t want to rush her. The glass doors slid open at the end of the long hallway, revealing the colorful garden that was just beyond the building.

Stepping outside for the first time in two months, Shiho looked up at the sun, still bright and shining in the sky even at 4PM, and took a deep breath, closing her eyes. There were a few other patients and nurses milling around, some using wheelchairs or walkers and some walking about freely. It was quiet, but unlike inside, it was missing the ever present feeling of oppressed despair.

There was life out here and Shiho clearly missed it.

Slowly exhaling, she opened her eyes again and without saying anything, began walking around with a limp, eyes darting from flower to flower and taking in the myriad of wonderful colors that had been absent from her life here in the hospital. They followed her silently, just providing their support.

After around ten minutes, Shiho finally stopped on the path, gripping her knee and face mired in pain.

Startled, Ryuji quickly took a hold of her shoulders and guided her to the nearest bench, setting her down to relieve her weight off her leg. “Don’t push it too hard.” He advised. “Trainin’s all well and good, but if you push it, you could set back your progress.”

Shiho grimaced, sweat dripping from her forehead. “Yeah...That’s what Dr. Fudo told me...”

Taking out a napkin from her bag, Airi dabbed her forehead. “Are you all right? Does it hurt?” She asked worriedly, taking a seat next to her.

“It always hurts...” She replied despondently, a muscle in her cheek twitching as her thigh screamed at her. “But...it’s better today. I think it’s because I’m outside. The hospital is nice, but...” She bit her lip, her bangs covering her eyes. “It’s like a prison here. Not just here, but all of Tokyo. Every time I look out the window, all I see are buildings, just closing in and...” Her breath hitched and she began to hyperventilate. “There’s too many bad memories, even outweighing all the good ones. I feel trapped, like I can’t breathe. I feel like I have to get out of here...”

Airi frowned morosely. “Shiho-chan...”

Shiho shook her head. “I know, it sounds stupid, but...”

“It ain’t stupid.” Ryuji interrupted firmly, her looking up at him in surprise. “You went through the worst shit imaginable, and that asshole’s barely suffering for it in prison. You don’t hafta make excuses about what makes you uncomfortable.” He softened. “If you gotta get outta here, then you
gotta get outta here. Ann’ll understand.”

Staring at him for several moments, her eyes misted over and she nodded, a stray tear falling down her cheek. “Yeah...Thank you, Sakamoto-kun, Airi-senpai.” She sniffed, wiping her eyes. “I was really conflicted about it because I feel like I’m causing trouble for everyone, but now that you said it...You’re right. If I’m not happy about it, I should do something instead of just...” She clenched her teeth. “Instead of just taking it like before...with Kamoshida.”

Airi widened her eyes. She could say his name now? She had come a long way in recovery. “I’m glad for you, Shiho-chan.” She smiled encouragingly. “You’re so strong.”

Shiho shook her head. “No...I used to be so weak, just accepting the abuse without complaint…” Her shoulders began to tremble. “...And when I was r-raped. It’s thanks to Ann, my mom, and you, Kurusu-kun, and now Sakamoto-kun, that I finally feel hope again.” Her eyelids fluttered, opening the dam and a wave of tears trickled down her face as she hiccuped. “Thank you...I’m being released by the end of next week, and then...we’ll be moving out of Tokyo.”

Biting her lip, Airi gathered her in a hug, letting the other girl cry it out on her shoulder. Ryuji placed a comforting hand on her back, and they stayed there as her walls fell, finally letting her soul heal in earnest.

Airi sighed as she walked out of the station in Yongenjaya, walking down the backstreets that were slowly filling up with adults, doing their nightly visit to the bars. She felt like she was older than she actually was, what with how much had happened recently.

But everything was slowly becoming better. Shiho was finally, really, recovering. Ryuji had matured ever since they became Phantom Thieves. Ann was more confident and direct about herself, not holding anything back. Yusuke was able to paint whatever he wanted without someone breathing down his neck about it. Morgana was slowly opening up to them as they helped him with his memories. Makoto was finally honest about her own feelings, doing what she felt was right instead of what others told her was right. Akira was letting his real self shine through the quiet mask he wore, not holding back a sassy remark or a soft smile for her.

And herself? She finally felt...right, in this world. Like she found her place in the universe, and that was with her friends, her family. With Akira.

It felt so right and natural to be with him that, if she was honest, it scared her a little. He was a great guy; the kindest, most caring handsome man she had the pleasure of knowing and being in a relationship with. What she felt for him was so intense, so powerful. But she couldn’t help but wonder; would they always be together? They were only teenagers, and lots of teenagers got together and broke up almost as frequently as they changed clothes.

Plus, he was only here temporarily for his probation. He would be going back to Mishima once March came. She would be without him for who knew how long until he came back. If they were still together by then. She hoped...She hoped they would be together for a long time.

Finally making it back to her house, she checked her mailbox and blinked, noticing she had two parcels inside. Taking them, she entered her house, locking the door behind her as she toed off her oxfords.

Walking over to the living room, she opened the first parcel, trepidation weighing her stomach.
There was no name or address that indicated a sender. Was this...Hisoka again?

Tearing the opening, she took out the papers and her eyes widened. The thin stack of paper hit the coffee table with a deafening smack. She stared at the words, the photos, barely being able to comprehend what she was seeing. Was she dreaming?

Pushing past the first page, the rest of the papers only repeated “I’m sorry.” This was from Hisoka, but how? How did he get this information?

Picking up the first page again, she tried to burn the words in her head. Atsuki Rui. Born in Teishin Hospital. Cremated and held at Aoyama Cemetery.

Airi took a shaky breath, tears blurring her vision. She finally got her answer. She finally knew where Rui was. She could finally apologize for living without her.

Wiping her face, she sniffed as she opened the second parcel. It was marked from the judicial offices in downtown. Taking the papers out, she quickly read the formally worded content. She was being summoned to court and it was less than a week away.

“Seto Hisoka will be retried for two first degree murders of Kimisawa Arihito and Kimisawa Akami as well as possession of an illegal firearm...The date is set for July 3rd. You are being asked to appear before the court and to submit your testimony. Prosecutor assigned is...” Her eyes widened. “Niijima Sae...?”

Chapter End Notes

This fic is 8 months old! I can hardly believe that just 8 months ago, I didn't know what Persona 5 was, I had never touched the Persona series, and I had never written a story! Now I'm married (COUGH TO AKIRA/REN/WHATEVERYOURNAMEIS P5-KUN) this story is over 700k words in the draft docs, and I have so many readers who support me and Airi!

I started this year on a really bad note where I was borderline suicidal, and it was only when my friend forced me to try her copy of P5 that I really began to look forward to life again. This game taught me a lot about life, society, and individuality that really hit me.

This fic came about because I felt passion for something again, and that was P5, specifically Akira. It was just a dumb, trashy fic that was supposed to pass the time and let me enjoy my fantasy of loving this beautiful handsome sexy (underaged) boy, but it's grown into an actual fic that people like?? I can still hardly believe that people want to read this.

A lot of my readers have disappeared over the months, either due to life or disinterest, and it makes me sad to not see their names in the comments in later chapters, but I'm getting new ones every day and it feels like a family. All of us wanting Airi and Akira to have their happy ending haha even if it's not really canon (or is it? Is Atlus going to phone/email me soon? Or just take her likeness to mold into whatever they want the P5 Aeon to be? Who knows ohohoho)

Just want to say that every comment is stored in my heart, and seeing all of you support this means a lot to me. Thank you for being one of my reasons for living. 2018 is here (and an anime and two games soon!) and I want all of us to live a life with minimal regret! Each day is a victory, and everything is an achievement, even just
surviving another day! Kind of tearing up as I write this asdhfgkld

I love you guys and see you in the new year!
Chapter 142

Chapter Notes

First chapter of the year! I've forgotten to track the stats of this fic but thank you so much for 33.3k hits and 865 kudos!! We've also hit 567 comment threads or 1316 comments in total, which is mind boggling! Also this fic is 500k+ words so...there's my life lol

I got so many lovely comments from all of you, encouraging me to keep going even if it seems like people aren't really reading or keeping up, and honestly, even though it kind of frustrates me that I can't see who's here unless they keep commenting, rest assured this fic is going all the way to the end! It's already more than 1/3 done!

Thank you all so so so much for your support and your acceptance and love, especially for Airi! My biggest fear was having this fic criticized because she's an OC and usually OC fics don't do well. I'm so happy every time I get a comment saying "Airi is beautiful I love her" "I just wish they would get together already!" "I ship Aikira all the way!" because like damn, this warms my heart.

I love you guys. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-TOKYO SKY TREE-

Making it through the crowds of tourists that swarmed the area, they walked into the large metal monument. It was the second tallest structure in the world, making it a very popular destination for locals and tourists. It shot up into the air like a javelin, and during the night, the crisscross fencing that made up its sides would light up in different colors.

Riding the elevator all the way to the first observation deck, the doors slid open and they walked over to the blocked off area, ducking underneath the rope barrier. There were already makeup artists, wardrobe coordinators, and photo assistants milling around the area, clearly for the shoot.

Ann sighed in relief. “All right, we made it!” She looked around. “Wait, where’s Mika..?”

The clacking of heels walked up to them and they turned around to see Mika, dressed in a purple chiffon dress and glasses on her head. “Oh, so you came for my special.” She remarked coolly.

Ann raised her brows. “You asked for me, right? Wow…” She marveled at the other model. “I barely recognize you. Did you lose weight..? Or maybe change your makeup?”

Mika raised a brow. “The theme for today’s shoot is ‘the elegance of women.’” So, I conditioned my body to be more elegant.”

Akira blinked. A woman could do that? She did look elegant, but the only one who truly fit that adjective in his mind was Airi.

Taken aback, Ann gave her an odd look. “Wh-What do you mean?”
“Controlling what you eat, how you move...That’s all.” Mika explained matter of factly. “It may sound easy, but it’s pretty tough. You have to write down everything you eat, making sure to check the nutritional and caloric content. I even hired a personal trainer to take special note of my diet and oversee my exercise regimen.”

“Whoa…” Ann breathed in awe. “That’s amazing! Does that mean you don’t get to eat double chocolate crepes?”

Akira facepalmed. Didn’t she know that regular models couldn’t eat anything like that?

Lips tightening at her naive question, Mika glared thunderously at the blonde. “Of course I don’t!” She snapped quietly, making sure none of the crew would overhear. “I’d get fat with just one bite of that stuff! Not to mention the other stuff I do! I take herbal medication, wear warming socks, do pilates and yoga…” She ranted. “Day after day...How many squats do you think I do in a week?! Ugh.” She rolled her eyes. “A natural beauty like you could never understand how much work I put into my modeling!”

Ann laughed, a blush staining her cheeks. “You know, it’s kinda embarrassing getting complimented like that…”

Akira stared at her. What. There was no way that was a compliment.

Mika scoffed. “Sorry, did I say natural beauty? What I meant was natural airhead.”

Offended, Ann glared at her. “Who are you calling an airhead?!"

Sweating from the animosity, Mika quickly took a step back and put on her meek facade. “Eeek!” She yelped, gaining the attention of the photographer and assistant. “Ann-senpai, stop ittt! You’re scaring me!”

“Mika-chan!” The photographer called out. “Are you OK?”

“Man, cat fights are scary…” The assistant whispered next to him.

Knowing that she couldn’t say anything without ruining her image, Ann only clenched her hands around the strap of her bag. “Grr…”

“Ann-chan!” One of the outfit coordinators called out to her. “You have to get into your outfit! This is being rushed for tomorrow’s issue, so we gotta move!”

Pursing her lips, she nodded and handed her bag over to Akira. She then walked over to the makeshift changing room, just a bunch of curtains on roller racks, and came out in a mature city style. The black leather jacket complimented the muted purple button up shirt dress, black tights covering her long legs and ending in black heeled ankle boots. Her hair was styled differently as well, her two pigtails taken out to be replaced by a half up half down style.

She walked over next to Mika in front of the windows that overlooked the city, and the photoshoot began.

Akira observed from the side, making sure to be out of the way for the camera crew. There were several softboxes situated around them, and the assistant held a portable flash as the photographer worked his magic. “This way, Mika-chan.” He coerced as his finger button mashed the shutter, Mika posing seductively to the lens. “Yeah, that’s perfect. That’s exactly the expression I’m looking for.”
Mika giggled happily as she cocked one hip, holding one arm above her head and giving the camera a sultry smile. “Wonderful, wonderful!” The photographer cooed.

Ann stood there awkwardly, having never worked with a mature style before and she was floundering. She glanced over at Mika and narrowed her eyes. “I see now...This is a test...” She whispered to herself. “Well, I’m not gonna lose..!” Holding an arm in the direction of the lens and placing her weight on her heels, she winked playfully at the camera.

The photographer sweatdropped, pausing in his tirade of photos. “Um, Ann-chan...could you try being a little...sexier?”

Smiling at the opportunity, Mika crossed one leg in front of the other, accentuating how long they were, and placed her hands on her hips, bunching the dress to show her curves. “You mean like this? She simpered.

He brightened and focused the lens on her again. “Oooh, that’s beautiful!”

Incredulous as the other model openly mocked her, Ann glared. “M-Mika?! Why are you doing this?” She whispered harshly. “I thought you looked up to me!”

Making sure her expression didn’t change, the older model answered her quietly. “You should have known that was just a lie...but I guess you’re just as naive as you look.” She sneered. “Anyway, stupid amateurs like you really piss me off. You better not drag me down, OK?”

Shocked at her venomous words, Ann could only watch stupefied as Mika went back to work, pasting that magazine worthy smile on her face.

The shoot soon ended and Akira walked up to Ann who was still glaring at the older model.

Mika was surrounded by some of the crew, all of them men, and she smiled pleasantly as she chatted with them. “Oooh, you know the president of that fancy car company? Introduce me, pleeeease?” She pouted cutely.

She turned to another person as they spoke to her. “Mm-hm, mm-hm!” She smiled. “The owner even invited me to dinner! Y’know, working with all of you just makes me so...happy!”

They continued to chatter loudly, and Akira watched Ann worriedly as she listened to the conversation with a conflicted frown. “...I’m heading home.” She announced quietly, walking over to the changing area.

His eyes followed after her more muted self and sighed quietly. It seemed like all her confidence just left her in the face of the more experienced opposition. It wasn’t like her to just...give up like that.

After changing back into her uniform, they left the Sky Tree and took the train back to Shibuya in silence, Ann never once looking up as she frowned to herself.

Walking over to the underground mall, she stopped next to the jewelry shop, sighing to herself. “Why did Mika ask for me..?”

Akira frowned sympathetically. “So she could show you up. It was obvious back during that other photoshoot that she was two-faced.”

She crossed her arms thoughtfully, brows drawn downward in agitation. “I see...Then she was just trying to be mean...” Her lips twisted, wanting to say something, but her face fell. “If that’s the
case, I probably deserved everything she did…” She murmured dejectedly.

Akira furrowed his brow. “Cheer up, Ann. It’s not the end of the world.” He reassured. “So what if she was more experienced? It’s not like you can’t learn. Maybe you can ask Airi and Makoto to go do some…” He glanced away awkwardly. “Girl stuff.” Airi was pretty good at being elegant while Makoto was mature. That could equate as sexy, right? Ann was definitely more comfortable being cute and sassy, so they could teach each other? Or...something.

“I’m…” Ann whispered, clenching her fists and ducking her head, hiding her eyes from him.

He looked at her quizzically.

With a loud groan, she stomped her foot and lifted her head, showing the blazing fire in her baby blue irises. “I’m so pissed off!” She gritted her teeth.

He sweated. Was she pissed off at him? He didn’t want to be whipped….Or did he. Well, not by her.

“Mika had to work super hard every day to get where she is now. She worked out, watched her diet, made friends with everyone…!” She listed off angrily. “She couldn’t rely on connections like I did...She didn’t become a model just for the heck of it. Her resolve, her knowledge, her fashion sense…” She clenched her fists. “They’re all on a totally different level from me!” She glared down at the floor. “Mika is amazing. Mika is...Mika is strong! But me? I’m nothing! Just thinking about that makes me so angry...I feel like I could explode!”

He sighed. “Ann, you’re not nothing. You’re strong too, just in a different way.” He reassured. “It’s not a bad thing.”

She scoffed, shaking her head. “I may be strong as Panther, but out there, during that photoshoot? I felt like a stupid baby Shadow being whipped. This whole time, I’ve just been pretending to model. It was like the clothes were wearing me…” She pouted. “I mean, that’s what I always thought being a model meant!”

She deflated, tired of being angry and humiliated. “…But I was totally wrong. A real model draws out the beauty of the clothes they wear...casts a stunning magic on them...A real model is flexible, beautiful…” She whispered. “And strong.” Straightening up, she locked determined eyes with him. “Well, I’ve had enough pretending! I want to be a real model...!”

Observing her for a moment, he smirked and nodded. “Go get ‘em, tiger.”

She nodded determinedly. “I’m not even close to her level...but that just means I have room to grow! I’m gonna take the world by storm…” She held up a fist. “Just you watch, Akira!”

He nodded, understanding her resolve. This was important to her and as one of his precious friends, he’d support her all the way.

Ann mussed up her hair. “I’m still so mad...!” She gritted her teeth. “This is the perfect time for sweets! But no, I won’t eat them! I mean,” She quickly corrected. “I will...but not today! You eat some for me, Akira!”

He sweatdropped. He didn’t like sweets and there was no Airi for him to hand it over to this time.

“Is everything OK with you kids?”

They turned around, seeing Mina peering at them curiously from behind the jewelry counter of her
store. “Oh, Kuru-su-kun! Takamaki-chan!” She greeted with a smile. “Long time no see! Are you two OK? You’re not on a date, are you? I thought you were with Kimisawa-chan.”

Akira blushed, about to reply saying he was with the cellist, but stopped himself at the last second. Airi hadn’t wanted to let Ann or Ryuji know yet to ruin their bet. He was so tempted to blurt it out though. “Uh no, we’re just friends.”

Embarrassed at being overheard, Ann waved awkwardly. “Hello Arisawa-san...Sorry for all the shouting.”

Mina smiled. “It’s all right. I was young and hotheaded once too, back when I used to paint. It’s getting late though, so you kids should go home! You still have school tomorrow.”

Nodding, Akira waved with a smile and walked out of the underground mall with Ann, saying goodbye for the day as they went their separate ways.

He was about to take out his wallet to hover over the turnstiles, but his phone rang out. Furrowing his brow, he took it out of the pocket, seeing it was a call from Ryuji. “Hello?”

“Hey! You free?”

He glanced around, trying to think if he had anything else planned today. “Yeah, think so. Why?”

“Let’s go for some Monjayaki. My treat this time now that we don’t have to eavesdrop.”

He pondered over it. He was pretty hungry, Airi’s bento at lunch being the last thing he ate. “Sure. I’ll meet you there?”

“Sweet! Cya then!”

Putting his phone back in his pocket, he walked over to the other train line that would take him to the same Monjayaki shop as last time.

Meeting the ex-runner outside, they quickly got a table and ordered a ton of food, grilling it on the hot stove in front of them.

Eating several bowls, Ryuji finally leaned back on his stool and sighed contently, patting his stomach. “Man, I’m stuffed! Pretty damn good, huh?” He grinned. “This one’s on me. Don’t expect it to happen too often though.”

Akira smirked, wiping his mouth with a napkin. It was a good meal. He’d never had a chance to grill food with friends before until Ryuji. “Did you get your allowance from Airi?”

Ryuji pouted. “No, it’s my own damn money…” He patted his pockets, trying to find his wallet, but paused when he didn’t feel anything. “Wait...Where’s my wallet...?” He shrugged. “Eh, whatever.”

Leaning back against the wooden slat walls, Ryuji crossed one of his legs on top of the other. “Oh by the way, I got a text from Takeishi…” He grinned. “He said the track team’s ditched Yamauchi. They’ve been practicin’ without him. They’re trying to get our old coach back too...The one from before Kamoshida. Looks like they’re finally walkin’ their own path.”

Akira smiled. “That’s great. Are you satisfied now? Since everything’s been solved?”
Ryuji nodded slowly. “Hm...Yeah, I guess so. Oh, and uh...” He paused. “They asked me to come back to the team.”

Akira furrowed his brow worriedly. “Don’t do it.” The last time he had been on the team, he had gone through traumatic abuse at the hands of Kamoshida. He wouldn’t want his best friend to force himself back and relive those memories.

Ryuji shook his head. “Dude, I wasn’t gonna. It felt kinda bad, y’know, rejecting them, but that’s not where I belong now.” He fell quiet for a few moments, taking a deep breath. “When you first came to Shujin, people were talkin’ so much shit about you. Airi couldn’t stop the gossip at all, even though it’s gotten better. But...”

He smiled. “You took it in stride, as if it didn’t matter. You just did whatever you thought was cool, and didn’t care what other people said about you. No matter how much shit they threw at you, you kept goin’. I think that’s why people kinda get pulled towards you, man.” He beamed. “Wherever you decide to be, that’s where you belong.”

Akira stared at him in surprise. They were friends, but to hear the ex-runner talk so highly of him, just because he decided to do what he felt was right... He was honored and proud to call him one of his best friends. A smirk slid onto his face and he nodded in agreement. “You’re right.”

Laughing at his answer, Ryuji grinned. “You’re so freakin’ cool. That’s why you’re our leader.” He settled down, the smile slowly fading. “Y’know...back before I met you, I kept makin’ excuses for why I couldn’t fit in.” He murmured. “It was always ‘cause of someone else. Kamoshida, the track team...Hell,” He scoffed. “I even blamed my dad. I was such a fuckin’ loser...But,” He sat up in his chair. “I’ve realized now...as long as I’m bein’ myself, I’ll always have somewhere I can fit in. It ain’t really the same place as before, but it’s damn good...” He softened. “I’m just glad I found it.”

Akira smiled, leaning his elbow against the table. “Same.” He was glad to have found him, found them. His group of thieves, his family. There was no other place he belonged, but he was more than fine with that.

They belonged with each other.

Ryuji grinned. “We got our own place. Next to each other...or ahead? Something like that. I ain’t gonna stop trainin’ though. I’ve still got a long way to go, and I’ve gotta show Shiho what a recovered leg can really do.” He stretched his arms in the air, sighing as he cracked his back. “Someday, I’m gonna show you speed so lightnin’ fast, you’re not even gonna be able to see me. Wait,” He paused, furrowing his brow as he rethought the line in his head. “But if you can’t see me, am I really showin’ you anything..?”

Akira snorted, taking his wallet out. “I get the sentiment, dude, don’t worry.” He smiled. “I’m sure I’ll see it soon.”

Chapter End Notes

Ann rank 7
Ryuji rank 9
----6/29, WEDNESDAY, MORNING, SHUJIN ACADEMY.

Walking into class, Airi tried to greet Ann but was ignored, the model too busy trying to crush her mechanical pencil in her hand, a deep frown occupying her face.

Giving her an odd look, she sat down at her desk and leaned over to Akira. “Did something happen yesterday?”

He snorted. “Boy, did things happen. It really was a trap.” He whispered, making sure they wouldn’t be overheard. “Mika invited her to the shoot to show her up, and Ann was...really upset.”

Airi oohed in understanding. “Well...I’m not surprised. When we met Mika-san, she was really serious about modeling, and to hear Ann say all those casual things probably made her a target.”

Morgana twitched an ear. “I’m sure Lady Ann will be able to get through this.” He meowed quietly inside the desk. “She’s strong.”

Kawakami-sensei hurriedly walked into the room, opening the folder and quickly taking attendance just before the bell rang, signalling the beginning of the school day. “I thought I was going to be late.” Kawakami-sensei coughed into her hand. “Customers were bickering in the convenience store this morning. A young woman wearing all brand clothing and an older man with gold accessories were arguing. Both were on their high horse, and even though they dressed fancily, it felt nouveau riche.”

She perked up. “Speaking of, the Japanese words for “high horse” and “nouveau riche” both originated as shogi terms. A lot of people aren’t familiar with shogi, but it’s good to know a little bit about it.” Turning around, she drew a shogi piece on the board. “Kimisawa-chan, have you seen this piece before? This character is the cursive form of a specific kanji. Do you know which one it is?”

Airi sat up in her seat, staring at the character. “Gold, right?”

Kawakami smiled proudly. “That’s right. This is the cursive form of the kanji for “gold,” which is written on the back of the pawn. In shogi, you can choose to “promote” your pieces under certain conditions. A weak piece like a pawn can become gold if you get it into the enemy’s camp, hence “nouveau riche.””

The class chattered quietly. “Wow, did you know that?”

“Does Senpai play? Maybe she could teach us...”

“Finals are coming up...”

“By the way,” Kawakami-sensei continued. “Nouveau riche like to wear expensive clothes because of a desire to be acknowledged. Once humans fulfill the basic needs of clothing, food, and shelter, our next desire is recognition. That’s why people try to make themselves seem bigger by flaunting their power through money.”
“Making yourself seem bigger…” Morgana pondered inside the desk. “Reminds me of a frilled lizard. I don’t think I’ve ever seen one though.”

Akira snorted quietly. “I don’t think you would unless you were in a desert.”

Once classes ended for the day, Ann turned to them with a frown. “Let’s go to the gym.” She demanded.

Taken aback, they stared at her before Akira furrowed his brow. “What?”

“You heard me. We’re going to the gym. All of us. Let’s go.” She stood up from her seat and shouldered her bag before walking out of the room, not waiting for them.

Looking at each other, they stood up and went after her, waving Ryuji and Makoto over when they bumped into them in the hallways. “Wassup?” The ex-runner asked as he followed them out of the building, heading toward the train station. “What’s got Ann in such a mood?”

Airi shrugged. “Something about going to the gym. She didn’t say why, but...I guess after that photoshoot, she’s motivated to work out..?”

He snorted loudly. “Ann? Working out? Didn’t think I’d ever hear those words together.”

Hearing that, Ann sharply turned around, fire burning in her eyes. “You got a problem with that?!” She roared fiercely.

Cowering behind the cellist, Ryuji sweated fearfully. “N-No..! Just...surprised..?”

Narrowing her eyes at him, she turned around and stomped forward toward the main streets. Makoto raised her brows. “She seems very angry...I guess we’ll be spending the afternoon at the gym then. Which one are we going to?…”

Taking the train to Shibuya, Ryuji led them over to the Protein Lovers Gym, requesting the elevator to take them up. Paying at the reception, they split off into the locker rooms, changing into their sweats.

Airi and Makoto stared as Ann tore her uniform off to replace it with the Shujin gym clothes, stomping out into the gym proper. “She’s…” Makoto began hesitantly. “VERY angry...Is this typical of her?”

Airi shook her head. “No...Akira told me that the photoshoot was a flop, so I guess that’s why.”

Makoto turned to her with a questioning look. “A flop? Ann seems very competent though. She has the looks and stature for it.”

Airi bit her lip. “Well...Ann’s parents are both famous fashion designers and she grew up around modeling culture, but...you see her eat sweets all the time and she never works out, yet she still has a sexy body.” She shrugged. “Mika-san was probably insulted by how effortless she had it and showed her up. You know how cutthroat the fashion scene is.”

Humming thoughtfully, Makoto changed into her workout clothes, a tight sports tank top and leggings that accentuated her toned muscles, before walking out after the model.

Airi put on the white Shujin gym shirt and took off her skirt and thigh highs, leaving her in her
black shorts. She hated sweating in the track suit, and this was her only option since this was such short notice. At least she had her converses.

Putting her hair into a tight bun, she walked out of the locker room, seeing Ryuji and Akira had already finished changing and they were all waiting for her near the treadmills. Akira had on a black tracksuit, similar to the school gym uniform, while Ryuji was in a faded blue shirt, sleeves rolled up to show his muscular biceps, and blue sweats bunched up to his knees.

She walked up next to her boyfriend and he turned to look at her with wide eyes, staring her up and down. “You wear this to work out..?” He asked quietly, stupefied at seeing her in such a revealing outfit. Her Shujin gym shirt was loose enough, but without the jacket, he saw with a blush that it stretched around her chest. Her shorts were the same ones she wore under her skirts and dresses, but without them covering it, it emphasized the curve of her hips and her pale legs.

Heating up at his gaze, Airi looked away. “Is...Is this not OK?” She asked shyly. “I don’t want to sweat in long clothes...”

Gulping nervously, Akira tore his eyes away. “It’s...It’s fine.” It was not fine. He was not going to be fine. His girlfriend was next to him, showing so much more skin than he’d ever seen. He wasn’t going to make it through this in one piece.

“Is Yusuke coming, too?” Ann asked curtly, pulling up her sweats to show her ankles.

Airi shook her head. “He said he was going to spend some time with Nakanohara-san and the other apprentices.”

Ryuji rolled a shoulder. “Well, he wasn’t gonna exercise anyway. This gym is pretty sweet, huh? Not too many people gettin’ in your way.” He grinned, gesturing to the empty workout room around them. “Anyways, uh...what’re you tryin’ to do here?”

Ann straightened up and held up a fist. “I want to slim down!” She announced determinedly.

He raised a brow. ‘Huh. You tried joggin’?’

She glared. “Aerobics alone aren’t enough! I want to tone up too, so I need to start lifting weights. Plus my shoulders are drooping, I wanna make my biceps leaner, and I need to straighten my back out!”

They glanced at each other and sweatdropped. “But, Lady Ann...” Morgana began from inside the bag, darting out onto the floor. “You’re perfect the way you are!”

“There’s no such thing as perfect!” She refuted. “Obviously I want to cut down on my waist size too...And firm up my butt and calves!”

Akira sweatdropped. “You’ve got some real guts to want to do all that...”

She nodded. “Mm-hm! I’m a guts demon!”

Ryuji scrunched up his face. “Uh, what the hell’s that even supposed to mean..? Anyway,” He frowned. “Motivation’s good n’ all, but you’re not gonna be able to move tomorrow if you do all that shit.”

Makoto nodded in agreement. “He’s right. If you push your body too hard, you could permanently damage your muscles.”
Ann pouted firmly. “Then you guys come up with a training regimen for me. Akira, Morgana, run with me. Airi, help me stretch. Makoto, teach me some aikido. Ryuji, plan how many sets I should do for what.” She clapped her hands together. “Please!”

Staring at her for a moment, Ryuji sighed. “You’re such a pain.”

Pouting, an idea came to her. Pushing her chest out, Ann posed provocatively and winked in his direction. “If you do that for me, I’ll go on a date with you as a reward!” She sang, pushing her chest out to entice him.

Reddening at the offer, Ryuji quickly shook his head. “I- Fuck that. I’m not goin’ out with you as payment. Quit thinkin’ you’re some sexy character in an anime.” He frowned. “It’s sad watchin’ you like this.”

Taken aback, she stared at him in surprise. “What?!"

“First off,” He began. “One of them sexy characters’d never come to the gym in their PE uniform.”

She sputtered. “How am I supposed to know that?! I’ve never even been to the gym before today!”

Makoto smiled sheepishly. “The PE uniform isn’t great for real exercise. They’re designed to make you sweat faster so it seems like you’re putting in work.”

Ann deflated. “Oh…” She blinked. “But if they make me sweat faster, then I’ll slim down faster!”

Airi bit her lip. “But that means you’ll lose more water than any actual fat...which isn’t healthy.”

Akira pursed his lips. How could they help her while also putting some sense in her? At this rate, she’d sooner injure herself on the elliptical than make any real progress.

Her phone rang and Ann pulled it out. “Oh, it’s my agency.” She accepted the call, listening to it with a smile. “Hi! Oh, yes. Definitely. Even a smaller article would be great!” The smile dropped from her face. “Huh..? It fell through? Yeah…” She answered dejectedly, mood completely ruined. “Uh, I guess that’s OK...Mm-hm…”

Ending the call, she looked down and frowned. “I was supposed to be in two magazines the month after next, but apparently one canceled on me.” She murmured demurely. “It was a black-and-white shoot, so they said I wouldn’t stand out.”

Airi frowned sympathetically. “I’m sorry, Ann. I’m sure there will be more opportunities…”

“Yeah…” Ann answered quietly. “It sounded like fun though. It was about the everyday life of models…”

Frowning at her sad disposition, Ryuji stepped up next to her and bumped shoulders. “Guess you just gotta find somewhere you do stand out then. Don’t give up just from that, where’d all your motivation go?”

Staring up at him in surprise, she brightened and nodded. “Yeah, there has to be somewhere my vibrant charm will shine, right?!"

Akira smiled. “There’s no doubt about it. We’re here to help you.”

Makoto and Airi nodded in agreement, and Ann beamed. “Yeah!”

“Speakin’ of magazines,” Ryuji grinned. “There was a real pretty girl in that one you said you were
starrin’ in. She’s got this innocent vibe, but she’s sexy too. Now that’s what real charm looks like to me.”

Ann frowned thoughtfully and crossed her arms. “...Were there photos of me too?”

He nodded. “Yep.”

Her face darkened. “...And did she have long, brown hair?”

He brightened, unaware of her worsening mood. “Yup, that’s the one! It got published today! You know her?! You gotta introduce me!”

Akira sweatdropped. Mika? She was pretty, but her personality was rotten. He didn’t think the ex-runner would like her once she opened her mouth and showed her true self.

Morgana shook his head in disappointment. “What an idiot…”

Clenching her fists, Ann glared harshly at the fellow blond. “Ugh, you dick! Of all the girls you could have been talking about, it just HAD to be Mika!” She groaned loudly. “Ugh, I’m so pissed!”

Befuddled by her anger, Ryuji only glanced around in confusion. “What’re you so angry about..?”

She only showed him her back, turning her nose up at him. “If you don’t understand, then I’m not going to tell you. C’mon, Makoto! You’re an aikido master, show me some stretches! You too, Airi! I remember you told me you did ballet before!” She stomped over to the mats and with hesitant looks, the other two lady thieves followed her, Morgana padding behind them.

“What the fuck…” Ryuji breathed, rubbing the back of his head. “Why’s she always yellin’ at me?”

Akira glanced over at him. “Don’t compliment her competition. We’re supposed to be her friends and she needs our support right now.”

His jaw tightened before his shoulders slumped. “Yeah...My bad. Let’s go help her then.”

They walked over to where the ladies were and took off their shoes before stepping on the mats. “Well…” Makoto began hesitantly as they sat down. “First, we’ll stretch our legs. Straighten them out and then try to reach your toes with your hands. Don’t worry if you can’t since you’re a beginner.” She then demonstrated the action, keeping her legs, back, and arms straight as she bent and easily reached the tips of her toes.

Airi did so as well, her flexibility from childhood helping her to bend further, being able to wrap her hands around the soles of her feet.

Grunting, Ann attempted to emulate them, but struggled to keep her legs straight as her muscles burned from exertion. “Ow...ow ow ow...!” She gritted her teeth as she forced herself to stretch further than she was capable of.

Frowning, Ryuji stepped up behind her and pushed down on her back, easing the strain. “Here. If it hurts too much then you should stop.”

Pursing her lips, she stayed silent, refusing to answer him but continued to stretch. It really was easier now with his help, but she wasn’t going to say it.

Morgana watched this with a dejected frown and walked over to Airi, stretching next to her instead
by extending his paws. She gave him a few scritches before she laid down on her back and held one leg up in the air, wrapping her arms around her thigh to stretch her hamstring.

Akira sat down and stretched as well, grunting as he reached his toes. He had always been flexible, how else was he able to spin and backflip in the Metaverse? But to keep this up in the real world was hard, and he couldn’t help but admire the two council members as they contorted their bodies effortlessly.

His eyes strayed, catching milky thighs before he quickly forced himself to look away, face reddening at his involuntary action. He shouldn’t be ogling her in public. He had already been yelled at once about permission, after all.

Once they were done with stretching, Ann moved back to the treadmills, jumping onto one and reading the settings with a frown. “Where do I press?”

Knowing she was still mad at him, Ryuji stepped up and wordlessly pressed the jog setting, and the belt underneath her feet began to cycle. He climbed onto the treadmill next to hers and began jogging as well, quickly breaking out into a sprint.

Akira joined them, turning on the treadmill next to him for Morgana, and they started running as well.

Makoto and Airi continued to stretch until each muscle was properly warmed up. “Since we’re here…” Makoto began, the cellist looking over at her curiously. “Why don’t I teach you some aikido stances?”

Airi perked up. “Oh, would you? I’ve been doing the motions inside the book, but having some hands on experience would be great. I’ll return it to you tomorrow.”

She smiled. “Thank you. Truth be told… “ She hesitated. “My father gave me that book when I was six. That’s when I started my first lessons, and he knew I would do better if I could study the book.”

Airi held a hand to her mouth. “Oh…I didn’t know.” She knew the book was important since it held so many creases, the pages turned over and over for years, but to know it was from her father? And she trusted her enough with it, even back when they weren’t really friends either? “…Thank you, Makoto.” She smiled softly. “I’m happy you trusted me with it.”

Makoto smiled back. “I wanted it to benefit someone else too, and what better reason than self-defense? All right,” She stood up and breathed out. “Let’s begin. Show me what you know.” She commanded, a hint of Queen slipping through.

Jumping up, Airi spread her legs evenly and slightly bent her knees and elbows, leaving her palms open. “Is this OK?”

Scrutinizing her pose, Makoto hummed. “…Bend lower.”

She did.

“Lower.”

Airi sweated and did as she was told, feeling her knees strain.

“Lower.”
She turned to stare at her incredulously. Any lower and she would be doing a split on the ground.

Noticing her look, Makoto smiled sheepishly. “I’m just teasing. You’re doing well. Let’s try to do some other stances…”

After running on the treadmill, Ann moved to the dumbbells, trying to lift 5 kilograms but to no avail. Ryuji groaned and followed after her around the gym, replacing the heavy weights and being her gym buddy by supervising her exercise so she wouldn’t hurt herself.

Akira panted as he continued to run on the treadmill, the machine reading he was going 10 mph. He was getting tired...

Morgana ran next to him, his paws and feline body helping him keep pace on his own treadmill. “C’mon!” He rooted. “You can do it!”

Breathing harshly, Akira tried to keep going but the front of his sneakers skidded against the moving belt and his life flashed before his eyes.

Oh no.

Tripping forward, his face smashed against the controls before the treadmill launched him off. Tumbling to the floor with a flail, he let out a pained groan and curled up into a ball. The humiliation burned more than the bruise that was rapidly forming on his forehead. At least his glasses didn’t shatter and stab him in the eyes.

Hearing the loud crash, Airi paused in her aikido lesson and her eyes widened. “Akira!” She rushed up to him, kneeling at his side. “Are you OK?!” She asked worriedly.

The others stopped in their exercise and hurried over as well.

He closed his eyes and hid his face with an arm. How much more embarrassing could this get.

“Dude…” Ryuji tried but couldn’t hold in his laughter as he stood above his fallen friend. “How fast were you goin’ to trip like that?!”

“Shut up…” Akira mumbled, curling tighter in a fetal position. “Stop looking at me…”

Sweatdropping, Makoto knelt down as well. “Are you injured? Do we have any medicine?”

Perking up, Airi stood and ran back to the locker room. “I do!” Quickly darting to her locker, she took her half empty tube of Recov-R from her bag and left back into the gym.

Ann and Ryuji had already resumed her training, and Makoto was at the water cooler, filling a cup. Akira hadn’t moved, in fact, he curled up even more into a ball, hiding his disgrace from the world.

Smiling sympathetically, Airi walked over and knelt beside him again. “Hey…” She called out softly. “Can I see? Please?”

He didn’t answer, but after a moment, he moved his arm and turned his head to pout pitifully at her. There was a large red bruise right in the center of his forehead, quickly turning purple underneath his dark curls. There was even a imprint on his skin of the RUN button, just mocking him further.

She winced and uncapped the medication. “Oh, Akira…” Squeezing out a generous amount, she
brushed his hair out of the way before applying the gel.

He winced, the medicine stinging like ice, but soon sighed in relief as it took away the throbbing pain.

Footsteps approached them and Makoto knelt down, holding out a cup of cold water. “Here, this should help.”

Reaching out, he accepted the cup with a thanks and quickly downed it.

Smiling with amusement, she moved back to the mats and began her katas, her movements as fluid and as natural as water. Walking over, Morgana watched her for a moment before he stood up on his hind legs, trying to mimic her movements with his paws.

Airi held in a squeal at the sight. He was so cute, sometimes she had to remind herself that he wasn’t really a cat and he wouldn’t appreciate it if she treated him like one.

Uncurling from his fetal position, Akira stretched out on the floor and groaned. “That was embarrassing…”

Airi turned back to him and huffed with amusement. “Maybe that’ll teach you to slow down.” She teased. “Are you OK though? Nothing else injured?”

“My pride…” He replied blankly, staring at the bright lights with something akin to hopelessness. “My face as the leader is forever damaged…”

She bit back her laughter. “W-Well, we still respect you. C’mon, let’s keep going. Ann looks like she’ll be done soon.”

In fact, the model was super red in the face, sweat dripping down her face as she tried the bench press and Ryuji holding up the barbell with her.

“…hurts.”

Airi blinked, looking down at him as his eyes glanced away. “What?”

Akira pursed his lips, not meeting her gaze. “…It still hurts.” He murmured. “Kiss it better…?”

Staring at him in surprise, she softened at his shy request. He could be so cute sometimes. Making sure the others weren’t paying attention, she bent down to plant a kiss on his now blemish free forehead before moving back. “There.”

Cheeks heating up at the curing touch, an idea came to him. Was this too forward? They’d only been together for two and a half days…but he wanted it, and if he wanted it, he should ask for it. “It hurts here, too.” He pointed at his lips.

Deadpanning as he was clearly lying, Airi rolled her eyes and bent down again, giving him a peck on his lips. He was pretty needy but she had no problem with that. It only meant he wanted her affections.

About to pull away, a hand reached up and held the back of her head, keeping her in place as he kissed her back. She clenched her eyes shut, trying to hold in her whimper as his lips moved against hers, in public! Their friends were around!

Reaching up to the hand on her head, she pulled it off and sat up, pouting at his red but smug face,
his mouth red from the “exercise.” “I thought you agreed to keep it friendly if Ann and Ryuji are around!” She whispered, holding her hands to her flaming cheeks.

“But I haven’t kissed you since this morning…” Akira countered quietly, finally sitting up from the floor.

Softening at his reasoning, she exhaled. “True…”

He perked up, about to lean over to take another kiss when footsteps approached them. They looked up as Ann hobbled over to them, collapsing on the floor as well. “My body…” She panted, gripping her calves. “Hurts…But for some reason…” Taking a deep breath, a smile spread on her face. “I feel...satisfied…”

Ryuji grinned and stood over them, his shirt sticking to his taut abdomen from his sweat. “That’s what workin’ hard feels like. Not bad, huh?”

She nodded, wiping some perspiration from her forehead. “Yeah, that was actually...pretty fun.”

Makoto and Morgana walked over as well, having noticed they were grouping up. “Are you tired, Ann?” The council president inquired, barely a drop of sweat on her.

She nodded. “Yeah, but it’s OK. I think it was because I have all of you here with me. I had to prove I was working extra hard.”

Smiling wider at her reasoning, Ryuji leaned back against a machine. “It’s simple stuff like that’ll help you keep pushin’.”

Akira smirked. “That’s good advice.”

Pouting, Ann grunted as she stood up, legs shaking from exertion. “Dammit, I wish I had thought of that…”

Ryuji raised a brow. “Uh, this ain’t a competition.” His phone rang out then and he took it out, eyes widening at the message. “For real?!”

They looked at him quizzically. “What’s wrong?” Morgana asked, tail waving behind him.

“Ma forgot to buy stuff for dinner,” Ryuji grimaced. “So I guess I gotta head home now.”

Makoto raised a brow. “You take the Meguro Line, right? I’ll go with you. I have to go home to prepare dinner as well. Sis is coming home tonight for a few hours.”

At the mention of a Sis, Airi shot up from the floor. She should ask.. “Ah, Makoto, can I talk to you for a moment?”

Makoto looked at her curiously but nodded, and the two went into the locker room. Staring after them, Ryuji shrugged and entered the men’s locker room, leaving Ann and Akira in the gym. Yawning, Morgana jumped back inside the bag and curled up.

“Ryuji just can’t say no when his mom needs help, huh.” Ann murmured. “…I’m actually a little jealous of the relationship they have.”

Akira frowned. “Because of your parents, right? But don’t they love you?”

She sighed. “Yeah, but even growing up, my parents were super busy. They always told me I was strong, that I’d be fine on my own. I was free...but I was lonely.” She stared dejectedly at the
padded floor, holding her hands behind her. “I’d make friends, but we moved a lot...and every
time, I had to start all over again. I actually got used to the loneliness…” She smiled. “But that all
changed once I met Shiho...The world seemed so hopeful…”

Akira smiled. “That’s good. You two are the best of friends.”

She beamed, cheeks red from his observation as well as her intense workout. “I heard her rehab is
going well...She’s going to be officially transferring schools soon too…” She straightened up,
squaring her shoulders. “I need to show her that I’m working hard...and that she doesn’t need to
worry so much about me.” She locked eyes with him, burning bright with determination. “That I
have you, Ryuji, Airi, Makoto, and Morgana to watch my back.”

“I’m sure she already knows.” He replied earnestly.

She grinned. “Right. She needs to see how much I’ve learned from her..!”

One of the locker room doors opened and Airi walked out by herself, dressed in her usual summer
dress instead of her workout clothes. Her hair was freshly washed, the wet loose curls put into a
sent me, so I’ll be going home too.”

Ann stretched her arms in the air, wincing as her muscles protested. “Same...I might have trouble
moving though. My legs are killing me.”

Akira huffed. “We warned you. Why don’t we walk you to your Line?”

Dropping Ann off at her Line, they took their own train back to Yongenjaya. Airi stayed quiet,
mulling over what Makoto had told her.

“What did you want to talk about?” Makoto asked curiously, taking off her tanktop and leaving her
in a sports bra.

Airi bit her lip, taking a seat on the shower room bench. “...I’m being summoned to court.” She
revealed, crossing her legs. “And your sister is the prosecutor.”

Makoto stilled, hand at the waistband of her leggings, before turning to her in disbelief. “What?
Why are you going to court? And Sis is assigned to the case?”

Airi blinked. So she didn’t know? “Well...I got the summons, saying that Hi-Hisoka is being put on
trial again. They wanted me to come in for my testimony. Your sister’s name was listed as the
prosecutor on the documents and the date is set for July 3rd. I thought you knew..?”

She sighed, resuming undressing. “I knew Sis recently finished compiling evidence for one of the
cases she’s working on, but I’m not privy to any of the details. I remember...” She paused,
furrowing her brow. “She phoned in on Monday, telling me she won’t be home that night and
talking about how ‘they finally caught him again.’ She was fighting to have the trial as quickly as
possible. That must’ve been when Hisoka was captured.”

Airi stayed silent. Did he submit himself? Or did he try to harm someone else, and the police
intercepted him?

One of the showers turned on, Makoto washing off within the covered stall, and Airi got up to do
the same. “What should I do..?” She questioned quietly, steam filling the individual stalls as hot
water rained down.
“...What do you want to do?” She heard Makoto ask. “If you’re being summoned, you should go...This is your chance to take your justice.” The water stopped in the next stall. “You took his Heart, but are you satisfied with that?”

She mulled over the question. Was she fine with just taking his Treasure? He was most likely a completely different person now compared to how he used to be. His own feelings and thoughts were changed, pure without distortions.

But no matter how his mind was now, he still had to pay for his crimes. She had suffered so much because of him. He had threatened her, threatened her friends, her family, her...her Akira. She would never forgive him for that, even if he was sorry for it. “...No. I want him to rot in prison. I don’t want him anywhere near me or anyone ever again.”

“Then why don’t one of us go with you?”

Airi paused. What? She turned off the water, draping the complimentary towel around her and walked out on the wet tiled floors. Makoto had already finished dressing, placing her braided hairband on her head. “What?” Airi blinked. “Go with me..?”

Makoto smiled. “To the trial. I’m sure I can speak for everyone when I say we would go anywhere with you to make sure you’re safe. If you need us, we will be with you.”

Airi gazed at her for a moment before smiling. “Thank you...”

She sighed. She didn’t know anymore. Everything was happening so fast.

Fingers grazed against her own before a hand wrapped around hers. She looked up, noticing Akira gave her a worried frown. “Something wrong?”

Airi smiled, leaning against his arm as they walked to Leblanc. “...I’ll tell you in a bit.” She didn’t want to keep secrets from them anymore, and they deserved to know.

Entering the small cafe, Sojiro looked up from the counter. “Oh, hey Airi.” He greeted. “I’m not givin’ you a cup.”

She huffed. He knew her too well. “I’m not here for a cup.” She took a seat on a bar stool, Akira sitting next to her. Digging into her bag, she pulled out the cover letter of the document she received yesterday and placed it on the counter.

Furrowing his brow, the barista picked it up and recoiled as he recognized the outline. “A court summon?”

Akira tensed from beside her. “What..? What for?”

She bit her lip and gripped her hands together on her lap, her nails digging into her skin. “...Hisoka was arrested again, and they’re doing a retrial. I’m being asked to give my testimony to the court on July 3rd.”

Exhaling harshly, Sojiro rubbed his temples. “...So they caught him again. It’s about damn time.” He muttered darkly. “Are you going? Do you need a ride?”

“Yeah,” Akira added immediately after, placing a hand on top of hers. “Do you want us to go with you?”

She clenched her jaw. “...Yes.” She confessed honestly. “If you don’t mind...I want to be strong
and face him alone, but…” The last time she had, she almost died. She wanted him with her. She would always want him to be with her.

Akira nodded. “Got it. I’m guessing Kawakami-sensei is coming too? Since she’s your guardian?”

Airi smiled wryly. “Anyone can give their testimony at court without their guardian, so no. I’d like it if just you two can come... It would mean a lot.”

Sojiro nodded. “I’ll make sure to close the cafe that day, and I’ll drive us to the court.” His eyes hardened behind his spectacles, though a glint of old hurt shined for just a second. “I gotta see ‘Hito and Akami’s murderer put away, too.”

She smiled, tears clouding her eyes. “Thank you.”

Chapter End Notes

Ann rank 8
Chapter 144

Chapter Notes

www.P5A.jp revealed key art for Ryuji, and...welp. A-1 quality lol I really do wish they stuck with Production I.G. who did the ingame anime scenes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-----6/30, THURSDAY, EARLY MORNING, SUBWAYS.

“It’s so hot and humid…” Ann complained as she fanned herself with a hand.

They were waiting for their train to school. The train platform was absolutely packed with commuting adults and other students that it felt almost claustrophobic. Adding in the sweltering humidity from last night's rainstorm, it made it a nightmare for everyone who were forced to wait.

She pulled at the collar of her polo. “I wish the rainy season would end soon.”

Yusuke idly swept his bangs out of his vision, completely unfazed by the humidity. “June is ending soon, and the rainy season with it.” He reassured. “However...That would mean the dry and hot season will begin in its stead.”

Airi grimaced. “I’m not looking forward to it. We’re going to need to install the air conditioning soon.” Which meant a more expensive electricity bill, but it would be worth it if she didn’t faint from the heatwaves.

Akira smirked with amusement. “Not a heat fan?” He teased.

She pouted. “No. If I could, I would want spring and fall weather forever.”

“Hey…” Ann began hesitantly. “We defeated Kaneshiro, so we can rest easy for a while…I guess? Should we try a trip to Mementos? We still have those two requests.”

Yusuke tensed. “You’re correct, and my classmate has recently shown up with more bruises and bandages. It would be impertinent for us to take care of his older brother posthaste.”

Morgana peeked out of the bag. “Mom, you should stay out of these two requests.”

Akira nodded in agreement. “I don’t want to risk your health.”

Airi grimaced, wanting to argue but she knew they were right. She still wasn’t back to 100%.

“OK...I should go back to work anyway. Be careful, all right?”

Once school ended for the day, the team escorted Airi over to her job at the flower shop before leaving into Mementos.

Though she felt sad that she was left behind for the first time since they became thieves, she was happy to be surrounded by flowers again. There was just something comforting about being around
so many different colors, and the scents helped bring her peace.

Hanasaki had greeted her exuberantly, bringing her in a hug and saying how much she had missed her. She had been surprised for a moment before hugging her back. She missed her boss too.

She then spent the shift making bouquets, specifically romantic ones. Tanabata was in eight days, and a lot of couples were getting ready to write their wishes for the important day. She shyly wondered if she and Akira would write something. They were still pretty new as a couple, and she wouldn’t mind if they didn’t, but it could count as their first official date.

It was almost 7PM now, meaning her shift had come to an end for the day. She wiped the sweat from her brow, the air conditioning in the mall not enough to combat the heat from the station proper.

“Kimisawa-chan!” Hanasaki waved her over, holding an envelope of her wages. “Here’s your pay for today, and I added in an extra from all the bouquets.”

Airi beamed, accepting the money. It felt good to earn her wages instead of slaughtering Shadows for it. “Thank you, Hanasaki-san.”

“Airi.”

Perking up at the familiar voice, she turned around. Akira was there at the storefront, hands in his pockets as he smiled tiredly. “Are you done for the day?”

Brightening, she went over and hugged him, leaning against his chest. She loved this new closeness with him. How she could just wrap her arms around him and it would feel so natural and right. “Yeah. Are you OK? Did everything go well?”

He hugged her back, resting his cheek against the top of her head, and sighed as he inhaled her calm scent. “Yeah, we finished it. Morgana’s off on a little errand right now, so it’s just us.”

She nodded, moving back to take off her apron.

With a sly smile, Hanasaki slinked up behind her. “Oooh?” She sang. “Am I seeing things, or is there something between you two? Don’t deny it~.”

Reddening, Airi held her hands to her cheeks and refused to look at her. “I...We…”

Akira looked down at her quizzically. “Do we have to hide it from her? She can know, right?”

Pursing her lips, Airi nodded slowly. “Yeah…” She shyly turned back to her boss who kept her giddy grin on. “Hanasaki-san, we got together a few days ago.”

Brightening, the flower shop owner clapped her hands. “Yes!” She cheered. “I’m so happy for you, Kimisawa-chan! And congratulations, you two!” Rushing to one of the flower racks, she picked out two gardenias and handed them over with a wink. “Judging by your reactions, you’re keeping it a secret, right?”

Heating up at the flower and its meaning, Airi nodded. Her boss was pretty perceptive. “Yes, just for now. Our friends had bet on us getting together so we want to ruin it for them.”

Hanasaki grinned. “I see. Well, I wish you both the best of luck together.”

Smiling, they both bowed slightly and left, deciding to walk around Shibuya for a while to get
Akira held out his flower to her with a gentlemanly bow, giving her a shy yet handsome smile. “For my elegant lady.”

With a very red face, she accepted and decided to braid them into her hair. “Thank you…” Gardenias usually meant “secret love” in Japan, but in the western world, it had an entirely deeper meaning. Did he even know what he was offering?

Walking through a graffiti-ed train underpass, they heard shouting and paused. Up ahead at the small park on the hill, a crowd of people surrounded the scene, police tape barring off the playground.

Walking closer, Akira tugged her to his side as they and several other onlookers watched a hysterical young man cry about how he was sorry as he was cuffed by the officers, three other people under arrest as well.

Akira narrowed his eyes, recognizing that face even as his eyes weren’t glowing yellow. This was Makigami Kazuya, one of their targets today in Mementos. So this was his base of operations.

“Fancy seeing you two here.”

Tensing at the familiar voice, they turned to see Akechi walk up to them with a small smile. “It’s getting quite late and as you can see, a formal arrest is happening.” His eyes trailed over them, noting how close they were, and his smile turned slightly bitter. “Oh, you were on a date then? I apologize that it had to be interrupted by something as crass as this.”

Akira raised a brow. “Why are you here?”

Akechi leaned against the cement wall of the underpass, watching with a thoughtful frown as the officers escorted the lawbreakers into the patrol cars. “…I just happened to be in the area when I heard all the commotion.” He confessed. “According to one of the witnesses, that person had suddenly started crying out of nowhere, screaming how they were the restaurant burglars that had been plaguing the area.”

He clasped his hands in front of him. “Other locals had reported the gang had used this area to meet up every night, and caused general distress. I wonder…” He murmured to himself. “No regular person would suddenly confess like that, unless they had their “Heart” stolen. Had the Phantom Thieves struck again..?”

The two Yongenjaya residents glanced at each other, knowing he had hit the nail dead on. “I’m not sure…” Airi began hesitantly, trying to steer him away from incriminating their alter egos again. “But, I think if those people really are the restaurant burglars, then I’m glad they’re being taken away.”

Akechi slowly nodded. “Yes, there is no denying that. Oh,” He looked up at her. “How are you, Kimisawa-san? The last time I encountered Kurusu-kun here, Kitagawa-kun informed me that you were out sick. Are you feeling better?”

She smiled, finding the genuine action surprisingly easy. Maybe it was because she was really seeing him for him, and not as Go-kun. Not like she remembered much about that brat anyway. “I’m much better now, thank you. I stressed myself out and drank too much coffee.”

His face smoothed out in understanding. “Ah, I see. I admit, I have done the same numerous times. I am glad you’re in much better health now.” His phone buzzed in his pocket and he took it out,
quickly reading the message. A stormy expression passed in his eyes before disappearing just as quickly as it came.

Airi blinked. Did she imagine that?

“...It seems I have to make a trip to the police station.” He informed them. “Since I was present at the scene, they’d like a formal statement. I’m off then.” He smiled. “Have a good night.”

Akira waved. “Good luck at the office.”

Waving back, the student detective left for the police station at Central Street. Now that the arrest had been concluded, the crowd dispersed, going back to what they were doing earlier.

Airi glanced up at her leader. “Was that one of the targets today?”

Akira nodded, and they continued on their way. “He was pretty warped. His younger brother got better attention from their parents so he fell in the wrong crowd.”

She nodded thoughtfully. “I see…” She sighed. “This will probably alienate him even more from his family, but I’m glad he’s going to face his crimes.”

Would Hisoka face his crimes too? Will the court listen to her?

----7/1, FRIDAY, MORNING, SHUJIN ACADEMY.

“Open your textbooks.” Inui-sensei commanded. “Today, we’ll be talking about “Records of the Three Kingdoms.” A variety of heroes battling for dominance- truly an epic time. Charismatic rulers and warlords with the command of a thousand men may have their own appeal...But personally, I think that strategists who support them can’t be ignored. Now then, Kurusu-kun.”

Looking up from his textbook, Akira sat up in his seat.

“In the book, Zhuge Liang of Shu is famous for his exploits during the Battle of Red Cliffs. But do you know what Chinese dish Zhuge Liang is credited for inventing?”

“Baozi?” He answered hesitantly. He didn’t usually eat Chinese food since it wasn’t common in his hometown, but the most common form he saw was baozi.

Inui-sensei nodded. “That’s right. The answer is baozi. At the time, one region would use a person’s head as an offering to quell an overflowing river. But Zhuge Liang made a baozi in a shape of the head as a substitute.”

The class murmured to each other.

“Wow, he got it right…”

“I’m kind of hungry now…”

“Wow, you must be really smart to be able to answer a question like that!” Morgana cheered quietly.

He rubbed the back of his head, smirking languidly. He had gotten every question correct ever since he came here. He really was smarter.

“These days,” Inui-sensei continued. “You can find baozi with cute faces on them. If you think
about their origin, it’s not too off the mark.”

“I never knew strategists came up with cooking, and not just strategies…” Morgana murmured. “Makoto’s our strategist. Wanna see what she can cook up? Maybe she can team up with mom.”

“And we can have that movie night…” Akira whispered with a smile. It was long overdue, and now with a new member, they definitely had to for some team bonding.

Both Ann and Airi had gone to visit Shiho, and Makoto seemed a little stressed over something. Akira didn’t have time to ask as she ducked into the student council room and began a meeting with the core council members.

Shrugging, he turned back and walked down the stairs, about to leave the building when a voice called out to him. “Hey!”

He turned around, seeing Ryuji run up to him before he slung an arm over his shoulders. “Let’s go get some ramen!” He grinned. “It’s been a while!”

Grunting at the heavy arm almost choking his neck, Akira smiled. “Sure. Ogikubo?”

Ryuji nodded. “Let’s run there!”

Akira stared at him incredulously. “Run? It’s like several kilometers away.” He argued. “Shouldn’t we just take the train?”

Ryuji waved away his concerns. “C’mon, think of it as trainin’! The ramen’ll be our reward!” With that, he dashed out of the building and down the street, not waiting for his leader.

Staring at where he just was, Akira let out a quiet groan. Just think of it as training…

He panted, almost stumbling as he came to a stop in front of the ramen store. That “run” had taken him an hour and a half to get here. Maybe he was becoming another one of those “lazy city folk” because he wished he took the train instead.

Ryuji was already there waiting for him, wiping the sweat off his brow and a big grin on his face. “Hey! Took you long enough! C’mon,” He gestured inside the tiny restaurant. “There ain’t too many people so we can grab some seats!”

Gasping for breath, Akira straightened up with a sigh, trying to calm his racing heart. “R-Right…”

Entering the small establishment that was 80% kitchen and 20% seating, they squeezed past the already filled seats and took a seat on the far end of the counter, ordering two ramens. The middle aged chef immediately got their order ready and placed the two steaming bowls of broth and noodle in front of them.

Inhaling the delicious aroma, Ryuji sighed with content. “Ahhh. This is the perfect way to refill after some training. By the way,” He turned to look at him. “The track team’s up and runnin’ again. Yamauchi got taken down pretty quick.”

Akira raised his brows. “That was fast.”
Ryuji snorted. “Not fast enough. You know Takeishi’s mom is the PTA prez, right? He told her everything. After that, she came stormin’ in with the other parents and forbid the whole scoutin’ plan.” He grinned, breaking apart his chopsticks. “Wish I coulda seen the look on Yamauchi’s face. I mean, the school can’t ignore the PTA. And as a result, the track team’s back. Our old coach’s fillin’ in for now.” He held a fist up triumphantly. “Man, it serves that dick right! What a great feelin’! I think they might even go far in the meet.”

Akira smiled, taking a pair of chopsticks from the dispenser as well. “I’m happy for you, but we can’t fall behind either. We gotta work hard to help everyone.”

Ryuji beamed. “Hell yeah!” He glanced down at his bowl and cursed. “Aw crap, the ramen’s gonna get soggy. Let’s eat!”

They quickly chowed down on the homemade noodles, closing their eyes in pleasure as the cha siu practically melted in their mouths. They spent the next few minutes scarfing it down, even as new patrons came in.

Slurping up the rest of the broth, Ryuji sighed and put his empty bowl down on the counter. “Phew, that was awesome…”

Akira nodded in agreement, wiping his mouth with a napkin. There was care and love in these bowls, and the exquisite flavors blended well to create an amazing meal.

“To tell the truth…” Ryuji began quietly, staring down at his crossed legs. “I was scared of facin’ those guys straight up. I couldn’t stand how much they hated me.” He confessed, downtrodden. “It only just made me think of how stupid I was…” He clenched his hands, but let them fall limp again. “Most of all, it made me remember how I lost my place with them.” Shaking his head, he turned to look at his leader. “Hey, this ain’t like me, but…” A hope filled smile spread on his face. “I managed to change ‘cause you were here helpin’ me. I got you all wrapped up in this shit, but you stayed with me ‘til the bitter end…You didn’t abandon me. So…” He rubbed the back of his head. “Thanks, man.”

Akira stared at him for a moment before softening. This was his best friend. The guy who, when he didn’t even know his name, had stood up for him in Kamoshida’s cell, and had almost sacrificed himself so he could get away. This was the guy who helped make him feel welcome at school, who made his days less dull, more interesting, more alive. This was the guy who fought beside him in the Metaverse, who helped him get stronger. “Of course. You’re my best friend.”

He held out a hand, and after a moment, Ryuji beamed and high fived him. “Haha, it’s funny, huh? This started out as us trainin’ for the Phantom Thieves. How’d it end up like this?” Squaring his shoulders, his eyes turned serious. “Either way, it’s my turn now. If anything comes up, you tell me. I’ll help you with whatever you need.” He promised. “You’re my best friend too.”

Smiling widely, Akira nodded. They had each other’s backs no matter what.

His chest pulsed and Ryuji gasped, holding a hand to his heart. “Wha..?” A warmth bloomed from his soul, and Captain Kidd’s skeletal cackling was slowly replaced with a monkey-like snicker, Seitan Taisei riding in on his cloud.

A smile slowly spread on his face, widening into a cheek aching grin as he finally realized his true potential. “All right! Now I have that off my chest, let’s do this! First up: the Phantom Thieves! I’ll be countin’ on you, Leader. And you can count on me too!”

Staring at him curiously, Akira shrugged and nodded, getting his wallet out to pay. He’d know
what was up later.

I ended up drawing this right after the dancing trailers came out lmao it's not the best quality because I have no idea what I'm doing but hey at least the proportions are correct. Do you guys like when I share my own art for this fic? Or should I keep it strictly on the instagram profile?

Chapter End Notes

Ryuji rank 10!

In Hanakotoba: Gardenias - secret love
In Western flower language: A way to confess your feelings, the recipient is lovely
and beautiful, used often in wedding bouquets -winkwink-

so something really cool ended up happening two days ago. Xander Mobus (Joker’s VA) and his girlfriend Morgan were streaming on twitch and he was kind enough to do little voice requests! I got him to say "Elegant, watch my back!” as Joker which totally made my whole year. It's immortalized on airikimisawa on instagram as a story highlight if you want to check it out!

Just...just one step closer to making Airi real coughcough
He got back to the cafe once evening hit. Ryuji had gone home whistling a jolly tune. He was clearly happy about something but Akira didn’t know what exactly. Maybe it was just his oath? His phone buzzed in his pocket.

Y: It seems the key to the burglars’ treasure reached Makigami’s younger brother.

Morgana purred. “Mm-hm! I snuck in and left it there without anyone noticing.”

An: Oh, and there was a post saying the culprit was arrested.
R: I’m sure his little bro’ll be shocked to hear he got caught.
An: I hope they can at least get along again after he has the change of heart.
Ai: If he ever gets out of prison.
Ak: Who knows what may happen.
An: Well either way, I think it should be better than how things were before.
Ma: It isn’t likely, but they have the chance to reconnect now.
An: Anyway, that takes care of those restaurant burglars!
An: It felt a little empty without Airi there.
Ai: I’ll definitely join next time.
Ak: Within reason.

Once Sojiro left for the evening, Akira got up to the yellow public telephone. He’d been getting worried for Kawakami-sensei. She had been coughing for almost two weeks now, and it didn’t seem like she was getting better. In fact, she was getting worse. Airi had mentioned this to him earlier, that she overheard her coughing in the teacher’s bathroom. She was getting worried too and he knew he had to do something.

Calling the maid, he requested her over again, sitting down to wait.

Ten minutes later, the maid appeared in her usual fluffy uniform, and they walked up to his room. She covered her mouth as she coughed before approaching him on the couch. “Hey...you know how you listened to my story the other day? You listened to...my secret. I’ve been feeling more at ease since then.” She looked away. “I’ve never been able to tell anyone about it, even Airi, so…”

She smiled awkwardly. “I figured I should actually do some housekeeping today, to say thanks…” She covered her mouth as she yawned, bloodshot eyes tearing to provide some much needed moisture. “Sorry...I need to take a break…”

He furrowed his brow worriedly. “Want to rest a bit?”
She smiled and held her hands near her face. “I’m so touched to hear that you care for my well-being, Master…” Her shoulders slumped and her arms fell to her sides as she groaned. “I’m at my limit. Sooo exhausted…” She covered her mouth as she coughed again, this time sounding more severe than the last few days. “I can’t stop coughing…”

Akira only stared in concern. She was definitely getting sicker. “Have you seen a doctor? Mine should still be at her office if you want to do a checkup…”

She shook her head. “No, I’m fine. Thanks…” She was about to say something else but a cough left her mouth, and she covered it with a hand as her body was wracked with tremors, trying to hold them back. Once they receded, she forced a smile on her face and placed a hand on her hip. “Haha, just kidding! I just wanted to slack off a bit. I mean, there’s nothing left for me to hide from you, so the truth comes out, you know?”

Her smile turned softer. “Now that I think about it… I’m glad you’re the one who found out about me being a maid. If Airi had found out first, I probably would’ve shut her out after that…” She glanced around the room, noting the always present dust particles that floated in the air. “Are YOU going to be all right in this dusty room? And have you been eating well? I know Airi feeds you everyday, but you need to eat fresh vegetables on your own, and none of that instant stuff.” She lectured. “Vitamins are super important! You’re going to turn out like me if you don’t take care of yourself!” She winced as her legs spasmed from hours of standing and moving around. “I guess I should get more sleep. I feel all achy…”

Akira blinked. “Are you working that hard? You should really take a break.”

She pursed her lips. “Takase-kun’s guardians said they need more money, so...I had my boss give me more shifts. I had to beg him for them, but…”

He frowned, eyes darkening at the news. They were still extorting her? And for larger amounts? He should mention this to Airi. Maybe she could talk some sense into the teacher. “Don’t overdo it.”

Kawakami smiled cutely. “Oh, it’s fine! Nothing you should worry about. I feel more at ease now that I have someone who knows what I’m going through…” She exhaled. “I’m talking about you, you know. I’m glad Airi knows as well, but we’re both too busy to really talk things out. You’ve been requesting me out of your own choice…” She softened. “That means a lot.”

Relaxing, he nodded with a smile. “It’s no problem. I’m glad to help you, Sensei.”

Her watch beeped and she cursed. “Uh-oh, time’s up…” She covered her mouth as she coughed, the stress piling on her already weighed down shoulders. “I have to get to my next job, so I’m going to head out.” Gathering her skirt, she curtseyed. “Thank you for using our service…” She muttered tiredly before walking down the steps and out of the cafe.

He stared after her before frowning. She was going to collapse at this point. He didn’t want her to be like Airi.

Morgana jumped down from the rafters. “She’s getting sicker…” He remarked quietly. “Should we do something?”

Akira nodded, getting up from the couch. “Let’s visit Airi and tell her what’s up.”

Letting the feline jump into his bag, he left the cafe, making sure the door was locked, and traveled the few minutes over to Airi’s humble abode. Walking up to the front door, he rang the bell,
waiting for it to open. He knew someone was home since the lights were on, and with Hisoka behind bars again waiting for the trial, they had nothing to fear.

The door opened a few moments later, showing the love of his life’s beautiful face as well as a gust of cool air from the AC. Airi brightened, dressed in a black tank top and short sweatpants. “Akira! What are you doing here?”

Unable to help himself, he stepped forward and wrapped his arms around her, reveling in her presence. He missed her, even though he had seen her only six hours ago. Just inhaling her calm scent seemed to soothe his fatigue and problems away.

Blinking at the warm embrace, she wrapped her arms around his waist, making sure to nudge the door closed since the AC was on. “Akira? Did you need something?”

Dissatisfied, he loosened his clutch to look down at her with a frown. “Do I need something just to visit you?”

She tilted her head and smiled, the action tinged with confusion at his look. “No..? But, it’s a little unexpected. Do you want some tea or..?”

He sighed, slumping on her shoulder. “I just want you…” He confessed shyly. He was still new to this whole relationship thing, and he wasn’t sure what boundaries he could cross and when, or even what those boundaries were. Personal space was one of those things he completely threw out the window when it came to her, and vice versa. If he was ever uncomfortable around her, he couldn’t remember.

Blushing shyly at his words, she leaned against him, smelling the comfortable aroma of Leblanc’s coffee and curry around him. “I love you.” She whispered earnestly. “I really really do…”

He exhaled, relaxing at her statement. “I love you too…” He murmured, reaching up with one hand to tilt her chin toward him, and leaned down, closing his eyes in content. He was in love.

She smiled into the kiss, even as the rim of his glasses pressed uncomfortably into her cheeks. It was just another factor that she accepted if she wanted to kiss him. She still didn’t know why he wore them so often, especially since they weren’t prescription, but it didn’t really matter. Just being able to be so close to him sent her heart aflutter.

“Ahem.”

They broke apart and turned around with red faces to see Yusuke leaning against the stairwell, observing them with a thoughtful frown. “While I am happy for the two of you, is it not uncomfortable to stay at the foyer? There is the rest of the house at your leisure.”

At that, Morgana jumped out of the bag and slinked a little a ways, turning back to give the couple an uncomfortable look. “You guys are so in love I want to puke from the sweetness of it all...not that I’m not happy for you.” He sweatdropped. “It’s just awkward being in the bag while you two go at it.”

Blushing furiously at his choice of words, Airi covered her cheeks. “S-Sorry…”

Akira coughed awkwardly, making sure the lights reflected off his glasses to hide his embarrassment. To be honest, he had gotten so used to Morgana riding and sleeping in his bag that he never even asked if this made him uncomfortable. It was certainly uncomfortable for himself in class since the feline was right next to his crotch but he had gotten use to it. Just like he had gotten used to Morgana being in every moment of his life.
Observing them for a little longer, Yusuke walked into the kitchen and grabbed a full container of calbee chips, tearing off the lid before walking back upstairs. Curious, Morgana followed him, leaving the couple alone on the first floor.

Taking off his shoes, Akira walked over to the living room and sat down on a chaise, placing his bag next to him. Airi followed him in, plopping down next to him and curling her legs up. “So what’s up?” She asked quietly. “If it’s about the trial on Sunday, you don’t have to come if you don’t want to. I know it might bring back bad memories…”

Though she would absolutely appreciate it if he did. In the Metaverse, she was powerful, more powerful than she would ever be in reality. But over here, Hisoka was physically stronger, and he represented everything that had went wrong in her life. Facing off against him on this side of the living was…terrifying. She was barely holding herself together at this point, trying to deny it like she did when she was being stalked.

Akira furrowed his brow. “Of course I’m going. Even if it brings back bad memories—” From only four months ago, no less. “I’d go for you.” He wrapped an arm around her shoulders, bringing her closer.

Biting back a thankful smile, she leaned in, resting her head on his shoulder. “Thank you.”

He rested his cheek against the top of her head. “Of course.” He murmured into her freshly washed hair. He would do anything for her, even go back into a courtroom. Just to keep that light.

They sat in silence for a while, just basking in each other’s company and their newfound closeness, before Airi opened her mouth again. “So...why did you come then? You have a reason for everything.”

He huffed. That was true. He had no time to just fool around. Every moment of his day was meaningful, whether it was strengthening himself or bonding with friends. “...Kawakami-sensei’s gotten sicker.” He informed quietly. “She told me Takase’s relatives are asking for more money.”

She tensed, her relaxed state instantly disappearing at the news. “What...?” She clenched her hands, wrinkling her tank top. “How could they...It’s been years since he died, are they that greedy to use his death as a reason for easy payouts?” Her guardian and older sister was suffering from continued blackmail. How could they help?

An idea came to her. “Did she tell you their names?”

Akira shook his head. “Damn…” She cursed quietly. “I wonder...if they have a Mementos chamber.”

He blinked in surprise. “You think so? They are pretty relentless about this...Maybe I could ask next time. Or you could.”

Airi pursed her lips. “I’ll do it. I can’t leave all this for you to do yourself.” She had some sort of responsibility to this. It was time to help Takase like he had helped her, and that was by helping their teacher and her older sister.

Akira smirked slightly and nodded. “Gotcha.” His smirk morphed into a frown. “The trial is on Sunday, right? Are you ready...”

She bit her lip. Was she ready? It was only a week ago that she...she almost committed murder. That she almost became just like him. A monster. Not human.
The hand on her shoulder squeezed reassuringly, and she snuggled up to her boyfriend. She didn’t know if she was really ready, or if she would truly ever be ready, but with him at her side, she felt that she could do it. “...Yes. I’ve already prepared my suit. It’s not the best quality since I can’t really afford better, but it should be fine.”

He froze. “Suit?…” He didn’t have anything like that in his closet. Could he ask Boss?

Unaware of his inner turmoil, she nodded. “Want to see it? I have it hung up and ironed already.”

See her in a suit? Akira perked up at the offer. “Sure, Ms. Kimisawa.” He teased. “Take me to court.”

Reddening at his playfulness, she got up and walked upstairs, him following after her into her bedroom. The suit was just a regular plain black blazer and pencil skirt with small slits on the side. The shirt itself was a white cotton button up. She wasn’t required to wear a tie, but she was required to wear black heels so she had those already prepared in the entryway. “Well…” She gestured to it, hung up on the door of her wardrobe. “What do you think? Formal enough?”

He scrutinized it, reaching out to peer at the inside of the blazer. “These aren’t name brands, right?”

She huffed. “Of course not, I wouldn’t be able to afford name brands. These are from the stores in the underground mall.” She informed. “I get a pretty nice discount since I work there.”

He nodded, humming thoughtfully as he held up the outfit. “It looks appropriate. Can I...see it on you?”

She gave him a long look. “...You’ll see it for hours on Sunday, don’t worry.”

He smiled sheepishly, rubbing the back of his head. Caught red handed.

A thump was heard through the wall and they turned their heads toward it. The Study was next door, and they knew Yusuke and Morgana were in there.

Sharing a look, they walked out of the bedroom and over to the Study, door firmly shut. Airi knocked. “Yusuke? Morgana? Everything all right?” A muffled shout could be heard from inside, and she slowly opened the door, peering in.

The artist was stood in front of his canvas, blotches of white, red, and black paint all on the tarp underneath but none on his person.

Morgana was sat on the computer chair, eating the rest of the abandoned calbee chips and observing the teenager in front of him. Ears twitching at the sound of the door opening, he turned to the two of them. “He’s finished his painting.” He informed. “Gotta say, it really does remind me of Mementos.”

Hearing him speak, Yusuke turned around and perked up, gesturing for them to come in. “Come! Akira! This is the completed form of my draft.” He stepped to the side, letting them see the large canvas unobstructed.

The painting consisted of black waves, akin to those during a storm. They rolled back and forth like a cycle of darkness, splattering of red around the corners adding a tinge of malice. In the middle was one large spiral, threatening to suck them in. If they tilted their heads, they could see it as an eye, ever watching and ever present.
“I would like your honest opinions...if you would.” Yusuke requested evenly, though a slight tremor in his voice indicated he was nervous about their reactions.

“It’s enigmatic.” Akira noted hesitantly, never having been someone who paid much attention to art.

Airi nodded in agreement, staring at the canvas. “It’s...definitely like Mementos. The coloring is wonderful and very accurate.”

Morgana jumped down from the chair and onto the floor, padding closer to the easel. “You’ve outdone yourself, Yusuke.” He meowed. “Is this really your art?”

Appeased, Yusuke smiled satisfactorily as he swept some of his bangs out of his vision. “…Hmph, of course. You were observing me not a moment ago. I do not paint for the sake of others’ comprehension, however.” He turned back to the painting. “This is how I choose to interpret the idea of “desire.” It is the foul charm held deep within the abyss of the heart…”

He crossed his arms. “To be honest, I believe my ability to capture desire so elegantly is all due to our Mementos forays. I have grown to understand the intricacies of the heart in a way I had once thought impossible…” He straightened up. “I intend on submitting this piece to an upcoming public art exhibition.”

Airi raised her brows in surprise. He went from painting almost nothing to submitting a piece to an exhibit? “Really? Isn’t it a bit soon?”

He shook his head. “Nobody has seen the abyss of the heart in such a raw manner before…” He chuckled. “The discourse will be fascinating. More importantly,” He held up a hand in the air. “It shall be the spark that revitalizes my slumbering art career!”

Akira smiled at his enthusiasm. It was nice to see the usually reserved teenager let himself be who he was. He always held himself back in public, probably because people judged him as weird. “I can’t wait.” He said honestly.

Yusuke perked up at his answer and smiled contently. “Indeed. I expect you to accompany me for the moment it is finally revealed to the general public.”

Airi smiled secretly. He hadn’t asked her but she was fine with it. He probably wanted to bond with their leader like the rest of them had. While he had been part of the group longer than Makoto, he was the first member to join since the Phantom Thieves came together and didn’t consider himself as close to the core group with the exception of herself.

Yusuke grasped his chin thoughtfully. “Hm, I’m sure this will be a most sensational experience for those who opt to undergo it. A raw, unbridled look into the depths of the human psyche…” He looked up at his leader with a small smile. “And I was the one who was able to bring it to life, all thanks to your assistance. You have my sincerest gratitude.”

Akira smiled and nodded. “I’m glad I was able to help. When is the exhibition?”

Yusuke crossed his arms. “It’s within the next few days, July 5th I believe.” He smiled to himself. “I deeply anticipate the public reaction at the exhibition…” He began muttering to himself, and sharing a look, the three non-painters left the room, making sure to close the door behind them.

Akira walked downstairs and sat down on the small ledge at the entryway, putting his shoes on. Morgana slipped into his bag, nuzzling the small interior that was his second home away from the cafe.
Airi watched with a smile, leaning against the wall. “I’ll try talking with Nee-chan tomorrow about Takase’s relatives. Maybe she’d listen to me…”

Getting up from his seat, Akira turned to her and nodded. “Got it. I’ll see you tomorrow morning?”

She beamed. “Always.”

He smiled in return and leaned down to give her one more kiss, the last one for today. He really was addicted.

She tilted her head up to lessen the strain on his neck, and after a second, gathered up the courage to part her lips, letting the tip of her tongue brush against his mouth.

His eyes flew open and he made a surprised sound, not expecting the touch. Feeling heat creep up his neck, he clenched his eyes shut and nervously parted his lips, letting their tongues touch for the first time.

Grabbing his shoulders for balance, she explored his mouth, letting their lips and tongues dance together in unison.

Quickly getting the hang of it, he wrapped his arms around her waist and leaned closer, towering over her smaller frame. He wasn’t expecting for this to turn into a french kiss, but the feeling and texture wasn’t as unnerving as he thought it would be. In fact, it was kind of nice to be this intimate.

She whimpered as he pushed himself past her lips, dominating her little game. She thought she was the pervert, but really, he was the perverted one. Even if he was innocent in mind, his body wasn’t as his tongue demonstrated for him. She could hardly believe they were each other’s firsts...

“AHEM.”

Their eyes snapped open at the interruption, reminding them that there was a “son” in the vicinity, and they quickly broke apart, faces red as a string of saliva connected their lips for a second before it snapped, the remains landing on their chins.

Quickly covering her face, Airi turned away. “U-Um...goodnight!” She squeaked, refusing to meet his gaze.

Wiping his chin of his drool, Akira nodded awkwardly and turned to open the door, avoiding Morgana’s judging look from his shoulder. “G-Goodnight…I love you.” Hunching his shoulders, he sped down the dark streets.

“I love you too!” He heard from behind him and he smiled ecstatically, even as his face burned from embarrassment. He loved hearing her say it. He didn’t think he’d ever get tired of it either.

“Jeez, you two…” Morgana muttered exasperatedly, and Akira sweatdropped.

He really had to keep himself in check.

Airi held her hands to her cheeks and smiled blissfully. She was so in love, it was crazy.

Closing the front door, she walked up to her room and straightened her suit again. She could hardly believe she had a boyfriend who was willing to do so much for her. He was going back to court for
her when he had been unjustly criminalized the last time he was in one. She’d have to thank him for being so brave.

She could hear Yusuke moving around in the Study but ignored it. He would go to bed whenever he wanted.

Slipping into her bed, she exhaled and closed her eyes, tugging the Jack Frost doll in her arms. Akira had said Kawakami was getting worse with her health. Could she do anything to help? Or at least convince her to stop paying the Takases? The Takase she knew for only a few months wouldn’t have wanted this. Sometimes she still couldn’t believe he was gone…

“Yo, Airi!” Takase grinned down at her, thin arms holding a bunch of plastic bags filled with cheap onigiri and convenience store bentos, slamming the rusty and splintered door behind him and rattling the paper windows inside their small apartment. “We got lots this time!”

Airi, nine years old and all gangly limbs, looked up from her watch over one of the sleeping kids and smiled slightly. She was still haunted by the deaths that surrounded her, but with how much she had to contribute here, she rarely had time to think about her parents or even Rui. “That’s good. This kid’s going to need it if he wants to break his fever.” She looked around curiously. “Where’s Nishiki?”

She had been left behind to keep an eye on the younger kids. There were only three so it wasn’t much, but they had to eat so much food. The older kids had disappeared, so it meant it was just her, Takase, and Nishiki taking care of these three orphans. Unwanted. Unseen. Unloved by all except by each other...

Placing the bags of food onto the beaten table, Takase wiped his forehead and sighed. “He wanted to grab a beer…” He scowled. “We’re not even fourteen and he’s already doing this stuff.”

Airi sighed, changing the towel on the younger kid’s forehead for a more cool one. “Whatever. As long as he’s not abandoning us, he can do whatever he wants. Did any of the obaa-san show up today?” They were the elderly in San’ya who were too old to work and too poor to live. They were able to keep this little sanctuary for them by taking the small stipends from the government.

Takase deflated and looked away. “No...It’s fine though, we can’t bother them too much.” He gave her a small smile. “We have each other.” He patted her head comfortably like a big brother would to his little sister. “Me and Nishiki can take care of this, and once I turn fourteen, I can get a real job for us! I can get two jobs!” He grinned hopefully. “Then we’d have real money! We won’t have to starve, or try to save electricity…” He rambled on and on.

Airi only smiled, bittersweet at what he dreamed of. It was hard to have suffered like that, but they had had each other. If only she had never told him to go with his relatives...

Chapter End Notes

Kawakami rank 6
Yusuke rank 2
Chapter Notes

900 kudos wow <3 thank you so much!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

----7/2, SATURDAY, MORNING, SHUJIN ACADEMY

“Let’s get started with class.” Chouno-sensei stated, perusing through her folder. “How far did we go last time?”

The announcement bell chimed and everyone looked up in confusion.

“...Is this on? -cough- Chouno-sensei, please come to the faculty office at once.”

Chouno-sensei raised a well threaded brow. “What could this be..?” She sighed. “I’m off to the faculty office, so make sure you study on your own.” She sashayed out of the room, sliding the door behind her, and the entire class broke out into conversations, completely ignoring her orders.

Airi tapped her pencil against her notebook, ignoring how Akira was making lockpicks with just a folder in front of his desk. She’d leave him to do his thing, even though half the class was probably aware since there were metal shavings underneath his desk.

A shadow fell upon her and Airi looked up, seeing Mishima standing in front of her desk with a nervous smile. “Hi, Airi-sen- err, Airi.” He stammered. “How have you been? I know you said you’re OK, but...”

She smiled reassuringly. “Don’t worry, I really am OK. I just had a stressful week and overdosed on caffeine is all.”

He nodded slowly. “All right...Um, if there’s anything you need, you know you can ask me, right?” He rubbed the back of his neck. “Y-You’re really important to me, so that’s why I’ve been trying hard to become stronger...”

She beamed, not realizing his intent. “You’re important to me too, Yuuki-kun! I’m glad I have such a good friend who looks out for us.” She winked secretly. Us meaning the Phantom Thieves of course.

He reddened. “Y-Yeah! I have a bunch of new info to give to Kurusu soon, but don’t work too hard!” He stressed, giving her a stern pout. “You can lean on me!”

Akira glanced up from his half finished lockpick before dismissing it. He had nothing to worry about. Airi was already his and Mishima had proven that he didn’t care as deeply as he made himself out to seem.

Ann watched them curiously over the top of her fashion magazine. Like she had promised herself, she was taking modeling seriously. She was eating correctly by requesting bentos from the cellist now, learning to pose, and even taking aikido lessons from Makoto. As of now, she was studying
up on the forms and body language of each model, taking in how they cocked their hips to emphasized their rear and how they bent forward to let their bosom hang, making them seem larger. She knew there was photoshop involved, but the pose was 100% the model’s.

Airi smiled, trying to placate her classmate. Why was he being so insecure about his role as their support? “Of course, Yuuki-kun, I know that. I hope you know you can count on me too, so if anything’s bothering you, I’ll listen with an open mind.”

He hesitated, looking as if he wanted to say something, but shook his head instead. “I have to get stronger...I have to be cooler…” He muttered to himself. “I need to be worthy of you…”

She furrowed her brow, not hearing any of what he said.

Ears twitched and Morgana peeked outside of the desk and at the Phan boy, blue eyes narrowing. “...You should see what that Mishima kid is up to.” He whispered to his leader. “He’s acting weirder…”

Akira frowned. Was it because of those bullies last week? He had seemed to crumple into himself at their comments, but then bounced back once he promised himself to become stronger. But what was his definition of strong?

The door slid open again and Chouno-sensei walked back in, shaking her head. “What could that have been about? Well, let’s resume class. Get back to your seats, please!”

After school, Akira excused himself, saying Makoto had asked to speak with him about something and left the room.

Airi nodded, a slight niggling in the back of her mind, but dismissed it. Makoto wasn’t in on it but she wasn’t stupid. There was no doubt she saw how close they were at the gym. She most likely already knew they were together, and Airi trusted Akira. She didn’t doubt for a second that he loved her.

Ann had already gone off to the gym with Ryuji today, so it was just her in the class, along with some other classmates. She idly wondered if the two blonds were getting closer even without her intervention.

More importantly, Kawakami-sensei was still at the front of the classroom, packing up her folders to leave. Her face was drawn from exhaustion, her concealer unable to hide the puffiness of her dark circles, and she had been coughing relentlessly all day.

Airi bit her lip. There was no way she was going to last. She had to talk to her.

Getting up from her seat, she started walking after the teacher as she left the classroom, but stared in horror as her guardian’s eyes fluttered closed and she fell against the floor in a heap, her papers landing around her. “SENSEI!”

Running up to her, Airi quickly composed herself and utilized the minimal knowledge she learned from Dr. Takemi, checking her vitals. Placing two fingers on the paler than usual neck, she felt the erratic heartbeat, beating strongly and then weakly. Leaning closer, she listened to her teacher’s breathing, her lungs rattling as if it was drowning in fluids. Opening her eyes, her pupils shrunk,
meaning she didn’t have a concussion, but that still left everything else.

Other students began gathering in the hallway, pointing and whispering toward the unconscious teacher and Airi quickly took out her phone, dialling 119. “Hello?! I have an unconscious person! Second floor of Shujin Academy, Aoyama-Itchome. Please hurry!”

The operator reassured her an ambulance would be there in a few minutes and asked for the status of the patient. “Her heart rate is erratic...and her breathing sounds like she has a lot of fluids...she’s been coughing for two weeks now...” She answered shakily. “Yes...She’s been working overtime...”

A siren could be heard in the distance through the open windows and she perked up. Footsteps marched up the stairs and the students moved out of the way for the paramedics to come through, whispering to each other about what was going on. One of the paramedics knelt next to Kawakami’s unconscious body and began checking her vitals, noting them with a stern frown. “She’ll need to be transported to the hospital.” He informed. “Are you family?”

She bit her lip. She wasn’t supposed to say this in school, especially with so many of her fellow students around, but...her sister was in danger. “Yes, she’s my guardian.”

He nodded and gestured for the other paramedics to lay out the stretcher. Carefully lifting the teacher, they placed her on the cot and lifted her up. They began carrying her out and the crowd of teenagers parted for them again.

“Did you know Kimisawa was Kawakami-sensei’s ward?”

“I had no idea...”

“Did they keep this a secret?”

“You think this is why she’s got such good grades?”

“What?! No way...right?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised...She was too perfect from the start. Trying to seem all goody two shoes.”

"Too nice, too perfect...She's too good to be true. I wonder if she's even human..."

“Can you guys shut up? Kawakami-sensei collapsed. Kimisawa-senpai clearly cares for her.”

Biting her lip at the gossip, Airi ignored them, even Matsumoto who began defending her. She didn’t really care what they thought about her. Their praise had always been empty, though she only started noticing after Akira had transferred here because her class actually began to converse with her about things that weren’t related to school. They actually liked her for her and not just because she was chosen as the most responsible.

But that didn’t matter right now. The only thing that mattered was her teacher’s well being.

Landing on the first floor, she followed the paramedics through the hallway and out of the school building proper.

“Airi!”

Hearing the familiar voice, she turned around, tearing up as she saw Akira run after her. “What’s going on?” He asked before his eyes caught the unconscious person on the stretcher and they
She nodded and bit her lip. “She just...” She breathed shakily. “She just collapsed...I was going to ask her about her health, and then all this happened...” She covered her face, trying to hold back the tears. She didn’t want to think about the teacher dying. She didn’t want to think of anyone else dying. Please, no more death. She was so tired of people leaving her...

Warm arms wrapped around her shoulders, pulling her into his chest. “Don’t worry, I’m sure she’ll be fine.” Akira reassured quietly. “We can always get Dr. Takemi to check her if the hospital isn’t enough.”

She nodded, the action making her wipe her tears on his polo. But he would never leave her. He promised. “Yeah...”

“Miss, are you coming with⁈” The paramedic shouted from the ambulance. “We need to hurry!”

Tensing, she quickly tore herself out of his embrace and turned to them. “My apologies, I’ll be right there!” She turned back to Akira who gave her a reassuring nod, and she teared up. Not caring if anyone sees, she stretched up to press her lips against his. She really needed something to ground her right now, and this was all she could ask for.

He leaned in, trying to convey all his faith and comfort through their kiss, before taking a step back, giving her a soft smile. “I’ll catch up. You go on ahead.”

Nodding, she ran down the steps and into the back of the ambulance, the doors closing behind her as she climbed into a seat next to their teacher. With a start, the vehicle drove away in the direction of the hospital and Akira stared after it. He knew Kawakami wouldn’t be able to go on for much longer, but for her to collapse so soon?

“Was I imagining things? Or were you two...kissing?”

Startled, he turned around to see Makoto whose eyes were wide with surprise. He forgot she followed him out of the council room once they heard the sirens. “That...” He hesitated, trying to come up with an excuse. “You were totally imagining things.”

She gave him an unimpressed look and crossed her arms. “Don’t lie to me. I know what I saw. I suspected as much on Wednesday when we went to the gym and saw how close you two were.” She smiled approvingly. “I’m happy for the two of you.”

He smiled with relief. “Thanks...Uh, don’t tell Ryuji or Ann. Airi wants to ruin their bet.”

She smiled with amusement. “Ah, Ann had told me about it. Well, rest assured I will not be talking about this to them. You should hurry to the hospital.” She gestured down the street. “I’ll be here for a while longer so please update me on Kawakami-sensei’s condition.”

He nodded and shouldering his bag, began running down the streets toward Aoyama Hospital.

Airi grasped a limp hand, sitting stiffly on the stool. Once they arrived at the hospital, Kawakami was transported into a clinic room and medical staff was immediately on the case, closing the curtains behind them.
Airi had stood by a few meters away to let them work, wringing her hands together worriedly. So many scenarios went through her head: Hearing that the teacher didn’t have much time, they couldn’t save her, who was her next of kin to receive inheritance...She didn’t ever want to hear them. All she wanted was her family to be healthy and happy, no matter what.

After twenty minutes or so, the doctors slid the curtains back and informed her Kawakami was exhausted with pneumonia. She would’ve been fine if she hadn’t pushed her body so far, and now all she needed was rest and intravenous fluids. They left the room shortly after and here she was now.

It was a typical patient room, complete with a cot, a cabinet with a water boiler and a small TV, as well as a vase of fake flowers. The walls were a barren white to simulate a sterile environment, and the air stung of antiseptics.

Airi slowly breathed out, trying to expel all the tension from the last hour. This was just like four months ago when she sat by Mishima’s unconscious body after he was hit by Kamoshida.

She bit her lip, taking in the sallow features of her guardian, and how her hospital clothes that they changed her into made her seem even smaller on the bed. “Please...Nee-chan...Please be OK...”

Oxfords clacked against the lacquered tile floor and she looked up. Akira walked up behind her after closing the door and placed a hand on her shoulder. “How is she?” He asked quietly, scanning the teacher for any signs of sickness.

“They said she has pneumonia...” She answered dejectedly. “It shouldn’t have gotten this bad, but she’s been working so hard...” She clenched her hands on her lap, wrinkling her uniform skirt. “This is all their faults...If they weren’t asking for so much money, she would’ve have needed to get another job.” They treated Takase terribly, they didn’t seem to care he died, and they had kept extorting her guardian for more money even though it wasn’t her fault. If she had to blame anyone, it was them.

A quiet groan could be heard from the bed and their heads snapped up to see Kawakami slowly crack open her eyes. Gradually regaining consciousness, she moved her head on the pillow, trying to figure out the blurry images. “Where am I..?" She coughed, the sound as wet as jello.

Airi breathed out a sigh of relief. “You’re at Aoyama Hospital...” She informed. “You collapsed after classes ended and I had to call for an ambulance...”

Akira furrowed his brow worriedly. “Sensei, I told you not to push it so far...”

With a wince, Kawakami slowly sat up in the bed, Airi quickly moving to help her up. “I’m just a little overworked. No need to make a big deal about it...Haha...” She laughed weakly before coughing violently into her hand.

Frowning worriedly, Airi rubbed her back, trying to help her with what little she could do. Clearing her throat of any phlegm, Kawakami grinned. “But thanks for coming all this way to visit me. It’s really nice of you two.”

Akira frowned. “Of course we’d visit. We’re worried.”

She huffed, looking away from the both of them. “Ugh, how could I collapse at a time like this? I really need to make some money. How am I going to make today’s payment..?”

Airi furrowed her brow. “Nee-chan...About Takase’s relatives, if they’re pressuring you so hard-”
“Tch, there you are!”

The private patient curtains slid back, revealing a middle aged couple. They both wore sneers on their lined faces and they were dressed in admittedly very nice clothing, though the style was a little old fashioned. The man who rudely barged in crossed his arms and walked up to the bed. “What’s going on, Kawakami-sensei?!” He scowled. “I called the school but no one answered.”

Taken aback, Kawakami could only gape. “Takase-san! You contacted the school..?!”

Airi tensed and searched their faces, finally seeing faint traces of her deceased “brother” in their features, even after five years. These were his aunt and uncle? The ones who treated him terribly, forcing him to get three jobs and to forsake his education?

She clenched her fists, about to get up but a hand on her shoulder kept her in her seat. She looked up at Akira who gave her a warning look, subtly shaking his head.

“Well, you weren’t answering your phone!” The uncle retorted. “And when I thought you finally answered, it was a nurse who told us you were here.” He frowned disapprovingly. “It’s really an inconvenience for us when you miss a payment, you know.”

The woman soothed her husband. “Now, now, it’s not like she wanted to collapse…” She turned to the teacher in bed. “But our credit card payment is coming up soon, so we’ll need you to transfer the money.” She smiled sickly, a greedy glint in her eyes.

Kawakami only bowed her head. “I-I’m sorry…”

Akira looked on with a blank face. If he played this right, they could gain some sort of information that could help them. “Who are these people, Sensei?”

Kawakami turned to them. “These are Takase-kun’s guardians, the ones I mentioned before. They took care of him…”

Takase’s uncle glared at the two teenagers. “Who are these kids..?”

“They’re my students.” She answered quietly. “They came to visit me…”

He snorted. “Messing around with more students, huh? And another boy at that.” He laughed callously, the sound akin to grating metal. “You never learn, do you?” He shook his head in mock disapproval. “Tsk tsk…and after all you did to him…”

Kawakami only further slumped her shoulders. “I’m sorry…” She murmured again.

“So?” Takase’s aunt raised a brow, holding her hands daintily in front of her face in an attempt to seem more mannerly. “When are you going to transfer the money?”

“I should be able to send it out tomorrow…”

Glaring harshly, Airi shot up from her seat. “Don’t pay them.” She commanded quietly. “They don’t deserve anything from you.”

Akira nodded in agreement, glaring darkly at the couple. “Don’t you have any shame?” He asked coldly. “Asking a hospitalized woman for money…”

Takase’s aunt glowered at them. “Stay out of this!”

Takase’s uncle crossed his arms. “You kids shouldn’t act so tough. Our precious nephew and
adoptive son, Taiki, died because of this woman. Honestly, she should’ve been fired.”

Flinching at his callous words, Kawakami hunched her shoulders. “That’s not…”

“Or maybe he died because you two forced him to get three jobs.” Airi retorted coldly, not even trying to hold back her temper. She had told him to go with them, thinking it would be better if he had real guardians, and for what? For a life of slavery?! Takase died because of them. “What kind of guardians are you?! A real guardian would never have let a child exhaust himself like that! They would’ve cared!”

Taking a step forward, the uncle towered over her intimidatingly across the bed. “Watch your mouth, you little bitch.” He threatened. “This woman killed our son and she still doesn’t know her place, continuing to teach dumb kids like you. We need her to show some remorse for what she did to him.” He grinned greedily. “In a material and undeniable way!”

His eyes hardening, Akira took a step forward as well, tucking Airi behind him. No one was going to threaten her again. If he had any doubts about taking their Hearts, they were gone now.

Clenching her fingers around the sheets, Kawakami nodded submissively. “...I understand. I will pay you…” She whispered in defeat. “So...please stop treating them like this.”

The aunt hmphed. “It’s not like we’re trying to extort you. But who was it that convinced Taiki to start studying when he needed to be working?” She simpered. “The schoolwork on top of his part-time jobs overwhelmed him, which led him to that accident...Poor Taiki.” She dabbed at her dry eyes. “It’s almost like he was murdered!”

Kawakami flinched, clenching her eyes shut at their accusations.

Airi clenched her teeth, a hand gripping the back of Akira’s polo as a handle on her rage. She was so angry right now. If anyone was to be blamed, it was them. He should’ve been studying hard, enjoying a normal student life, but instead he was forced to work as a slave for these selfish adults.

Observing the teacher’s silence, the uncle sneered. “So you no longer feel regret? In that case, perhaps we should sue the Board of Education...Or should we have a chat with your school? Either way, your days as a teacher would be over.” He turned around in the direction of the door. “Well, we’re looking forward to receiving your payment.” The couple left, closing the door behind them with a slam and the small room was left in silence.

Clenching her hands, Airi went and struck the wall with her fist. “Dammit…” She cursed furiously. “Damn them…”

Kawakami only closed her eyes. “Stop, Airi…” She whispered tiredly. “It’s fine. I just have to figure out a way to make more money…”

Deflating at the sight of her sister, posture defeated, she took a seat again. “Nee-chan, please, you don’t have to keep doing this…” She pleaded, reaching out to grab her hand. “They’re just greedy assholes who’re using Takase’s death to extort you.”

Kawakami slowly shook her head. “No...It was my fault to begin with.” She murmured. “I guess transferring to our sister company is the only way…”

Akira frowned, resting his hands inside his pockets. “Sister company?”

She nodded demurely. “...It’s a company affiliated with the one I’m working at now. I can make a lot more there.” She clenched the sheets. “You can...pretty much guess what type of services they
provide, right? That’s the only way I can make more money…” She chuckled bitterly. “I’m sorry, Airi. It seems like your guardian is only going to embarrass you more…”

Airi stared at her in horror. Prostitution? Selling her body just to pay them off? For how long? How long would she do this? Until she couldn’t take it anymore..? “No...Nee-chan…”

Looking up at them, Kawakami forced the fakest smile they had ever seen. “You know what? I’m gonna stop worrying about it! The money? I’ll pay it. I’ll do everything Master tells me to do~.” Her face fell. “…Meow.” She muttered dejectedly. “…I’m so tired. All I really want is...a way to apologize to Takase-kun. So if his guardians demand money,” She closed her eyes. “Then I just have to pay them…”

Airi stared at her in disbelief. “And for how long will you pay them? Forever?” She sighed. “Just...Just take this time to recover, OK?” She picked up the chart at the end of the bed. “It says you’ll be released tomorrow morning. You had pneumonia, Nee-chan…”

Kawakami obeyed. “…I’m going to get some rest. Get home safe, both of you, OK?…” She laid back down on the bed and turned away, hiding her face from them.

Giving her back a worried look, they muttered “get well” before leaving the room and walking out of the hospital.

Once they exited onto the streets, Airi let out a loud groan, uncaring that people were beginning to look. Whatever. There wasn’t any point to seeming mannerly or kind right now. She just couldn’t care for silly things like that anymore when her guardian was being blackmailed and about to be forced into prostitution.

Akira stared sympathetically, letting her vent her frustrations.

Biting her lip, she turned to him. “Can you request her tomorrow night?” She asked quietly. “No doubt she’s going to go straight back to work. We have a small window of time before her transfer request goes through, and…” She wrung her hands together. “I don’t want her to have to sell her body…” She confessed morosely. There would always be the darker side of society, she knew and accepted that, but what she refused to accept was her guardian and sister to have to tread down that path.

He nodded. “Yeah, I don’t want her to have to do that either. Tomorrow’s your court case though, is there enough time..?”

She gave him a weak smile. “It’s in the morning, and it shouldn’t last past 4PM...If you’re really worried though, you don’t have to come. I’d rather you help her than to have to waste your time on me. I’ll have Sojiro-ojisan, so-”

Frowning, he stepped forward and wrapped his arms around her, silencing her with his lips. Her eyes widened and she stood frozen, not expecting him to have done that in this moment.

Leaning back, Akira gave her a firm look. “I’ll always be with you, OK? You keep trying to give me a chance to back away as if I have better things to do than to be at your side, but you’re the most important person to me.” He stated steadfastly. “There’ll be plenty of time after the trial to call Sensei over.”

Her eyes moistened at his confession and she nodded, sniffing as the tears began to fall. She just couldn’t help it. Today had been so stressful. “Thanks...I love you.”

Smiling softly, he leaned down to give her one more peck, wiping the tears away with the pad of
his thumb. “I love you too.”

He took the train with Airi back to Shibuya before reluctantly parting ways, saying he had some errands to run.

She gave him a small smile before the train doors closed and it sped down the tunnel, out of his view. Morgana had joined them outside of the hospital since animals weren’t allowed and didn’t want to go anywhere near the antiseptic building. He had gone back to Yongenjaya with her, saying his leader’s business was to be done by himself and wanted to spend some time with his mom without him there.

First, he had to go buy a suit. He didn’t mail his own here with the rest of his clothes because he didn’t think he’d need it and he didn’t dare contact his parents to use express delivery for it. They probably wouldn’t even answer his calls. Well, his mother wouldn’t. He had a slim chance with his father, but with how busy and cold he was, their relationship consisted of nothing but blood and the law at this point.

Sojiro also didn’t have a suit in his size, or would even lend him one if he did since all of his were name brand, so it was up to himself to acquire one.

Taking a deep breath, Akira walked around the underground mall, browsing the stores. His casual black blazer should be good enough, and he could use his white shirt jacket as the button up, as well as his school oxfords. That left a tie and some slacks.

Floundering at the multitude of storefronts, he walked up to the only one he was really familiar with. She could help, right?

“-hope you have a nice day!” Mina smiled as she handed over the little gift bag to the customer. Turning to the new patron who walked into her shop, she perked up when she noticed it was him. “Oh, Kurusu-kun! Welcome! Are you here to buy some jewelry again?” She wiggled her brows playfully.

He blushed, his eyes catching the shine of the rings in the display counter and shook his head. That wouldn’t be for a long while. Maybe...Maybe one day. He hoped. “N-No, actually I’m here to ask if you could help me..?” He asked somewhat shyly. It wasn’t like he knew the ex-apprentice very well, and she was older by at least ten years. “I need a tie as well as a pair of black slacks that are formal enough for court. Do you know if any of the stores here would have those at a decent price?”

She grasped her chin as she tried to think. “Hmm...You can get them a couple stores down. Just tell them I sent you and they should give you a discount.”

He sighed in relief. “Thank you, Arisawa-san.”

She smiled. “You’re welcome, Kurusu-kun. Do come back if you need any jewelry though! I’m sure I have a ring somewhere for a special someone.” She winked and he reddened as the implication. “R-Right, thank you.”

After purchasing the things he required at the mall, he stuffed them into his bag and walked up into humid Central Street, heading down the stuffy alley and into Untouchable. It was time to fulfill his
end of the deal.

Sighing in content as the cool air conditioning blasted him as soon as he opened the door, he walked up to the counter where Iwai was sat at, magazine in hand. He looked up at the sound of the door opening and raised a brow. “So, you’re finally here.” He remarked coolly, throwing the magazine onto the counter and getting up from his chair. “Just in time too. I’m gonna meet with a guy at the diner right now.” He explained. “I need you to sit close by. When I give you the signal, call me. The signal is when I cough, got it?”

Akira nodded in understanding. “Right.”

Iwai gave him a long look. “Don’t fuck this up.” He warned before jumping over the counter and heading to the door. Locking it behind them, they walked over to the Diner where Akira went up first. He nodded to Yukimi who was working the late shift. “Hey, can I get a private table? Close to the back?”

She blinked. “Uh, sure. Guess you’re doing one of your shady things, huh?” She guided him over to one of the booths.

The diner was packed at this time of night since it was a Saturday, with lots of older patrons and families occupying the seats. She guided him near the motorcycle display where only one man in a snake printed shirt was sat at, and gestured at the booth adjacent to his. “Is there anything you’d like to order?” Yukimi asked politely, putting on her waitress persona.

“A coffee, please.” Akira requested as he took a seat so his back was facing the intimidating man. He was most likely the contact Iwai had mentioned.

She nodded and walked over to the kitchens to prepare his order. Just a minute later, she appeared again with his drink and set it down on the table. “Enjoy!” She winked before walking away to tend to the other patrons.

He slowly took a sip, savoring the bitter flavor. Not as good as Sojiro’s, or even his own now, but it’ll do.

He sat there nervously for a few minutes before he spied the airsoft shop owner walk into the establishment and toward his direction. He wasn’t given even a hint of a glance as Iwai walked past him and took a seat into the booth behind him.

“Hey! Mune-san!” The thuggish man greeted exuberantly and the two exchanged some words. They ordered coffee as well and Yukimi only smiled politely, getting their orders. “A diner, huh?” The man began. “I thought only old farts come to places like this. You’ve really changed, Mune-san.”

Iwai chuckled. “Hey, don’t knock this place. It’s pretty decent, and cheap too.”

The man scoffed. “Ha, this comin’ from the guy who beat the crap outta fifty rival gang members!”

Akira felt his eyebrows raise up to his hairline as he heard them talk. That guy beat fifty rival gang members? And he sold them realistic airsoft guns? How badass was this man?

“You don’t need to exaggerate.” Iwai refuted calmly, taking a sip of his coffee.

“Anyways, what’d you wanna talk about?”
“Oh, right. How’s Tsuda-san doin’?”

“Same as always. Why, what’s up?”

“Oh, nothing. Just saw him ‘round the other day.”

“Hold up, didn’t you two cut ties when you left the family? Why’re you askin’ about him now?”

“I mean, we were both young...I just figured it’s about time we bury the hatchet. I can’t just go up n’ talk to him though...”

Akira furrowed his brow. So Iwai used to be in a “family,” most likely yakuza then. Had he been aware of Kaneshiro’s scams? Did he know Nishiki?

“Ohhh, I getcha. You’re still tryin’ to uphold the ol’ code of honor, huh? OK, I’ll tell him you wanna meet up!”

“No, you fool. I just wanna end up in the same place at the same time. It’s gotta look like a coincidence.”

“In that case, Shibaura might work...Y’know we’re talkin’ about redevelopin’ it.”

“Shibaura...” Iwai coughed and Akira perked up. Was that the signal? He took out his phone and dialled his number, letting it ring.

“Huh? You sick or somethin’?”

“Nah, it’s just a cold.” His phone rang and he took it out. “Hello? Yeah, how’s it goin’?” He spoke into the call, Akira remaining silent just a meter away. “What? Your order’s all wrong..? My bad, I’ll get back and take care of that straight away.” Iwai took the phone away from his mouth.

“Sorry, I gotta run. Work shit. Let’s talk some other time, yeah?”

“Mm, seeya.”

Standing up, Iwai left the diner and Akira floundered. What should he do now? The booth behind him squeaked, implying the guy had shifted in his seat and he pursed his lips. “...Don’t hang up.” Iwai’s voice whispered through the phone and he tensed. He never ended the call. “Masa’s still on the phone, right? Just stay quiet so I can hear what he’s sayin’.”

“Tsuda-san. It’s Masa.” The thuggish man spoke into his phone, unaware that he was being eavesdropped.

Akira rotated his head, just enough to glance at him through the corner of his eye.

“Iwai was askin’ about you. I did just like you told me though.” Masa stated before his eye caught the phantom thieves leader’s. “The hell’re you lookin’ at...?” He asked threateningly.

“I was daydreaming, sorry.” Akira apologized before turning back into his booth and held his phone close to him, but far enough that the mic would pick up any passing conversation.

Masa shifted back in his seat, dismissing him. “Nah, it’s nothin’. Just some weird kid starin’ at me...Anyways, Iwai prolly heard about that deal of yours and now he’s tryin’ to squeeze some cash outta you...” He stiffened. “Oh, sorry! No, it’s...Yes. Sorry...Yes, I understand.” Hanging up, he gestured for Yukimi. “Hey, waitress! Gimme the bill!”

“Right away, sir!” She answered chipper-like, smiling a fake smile to appease the gangster.
Once he left the restaurant, Akira relaxed slightly. “Well?” He spoke into his phone.

“A deal? Sounds like there’s some weird stuff goin’ down.”

“What should I do now?” He asked quietly, mindful of the ex-apprentice nearby. She had already gone through enough and didn’t need to be dragged into this.

“You’re all good for today. I’ll have to thank you in person some other time.” He huffed. “At any rate, I honestly wasn’t expectin’ too much outta you, but it looks like you’re gonna actually be some use to me. I’ll be countin’ on you, kid. Why don’t you order somethin’ nice as a reward? Oh, and bring me the receipt so I can pay you back for it.”

The call disconnected and he stared at the screen. He just helped an ex-Yakuza member spy on another Yakuza member in public. He was definitely on the other side of the law now. And pay him back? Could he maybe ask him to pay for his slacks?

Chapter End Notes

Makoto rank 3
Kawakami rank 7
Iwai rank 2

Next chapter will be rank 10 for Airi and the reveal of her Ultimate Persona!! I’m really excited to finally show her!
Chapter 147

Chapter Notes

We're here! Airi's rank 10 and Ultimate Persona reveal! I know a lot of you have been theorizing what could be her next Persona, and they were all really good ideas! I'm happy you guys put in so much thought <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

---7/3, SUNDAY, EARLY MORNING, YONGENJAYA BACKSTREETS.

She took in a deep breath before slowly letting it out, straightening the black blazer. Today was the day. She was going to appear in court in order to send Hisoka back to prison, hopefully forever this time.

She bit her lip, staring at her reflection in the mirror. Her hair was put up in a professional bun, not a single strand out of place. She had even applied a full face of makeup, making sure her eyeliner was thin and just a hint of brown eyeshadow.

Applying a nude pink lipstick to her lips, Airi dusted off her pencil skirt and black stockings before walking downstairs. Yusuke was about to go out to transport his painting to the exhibit in Ueno, so he was already up and making breakfast for the two of them.

She took a seat at the dining table where eggs, grilled salmon, and miso soup was waiting. “Thank you for cooking.”

Scooping two bowls of rice, Yusuke walked over and took a seat across from her. “Of course.” He murmured. “You're certain you don’t require my presence? I…” He hesitated, conflicted between his personal interest and her wellbeing. “I can...wait, for the next exhibit.”

Smiling fondly, she shook her head. “It’s all right. I already have Akira and Sojiro-Ojisan with me, and I want you to finally achieve your dreams.” She beamed. “That’s what big sisters are for.”

He smiled shyly, a piece of hair falling in front of his eyes. “…You’re right. Thank you, Aneki.”

After a quick breakfast, he left with his painting, having hired a van from the museum to transport it.

Making sure her outfit was impeccable, she slipped into her black heels and shouldered her bag strap. This was it.

Locking the door behind her, she walked over to Cafe Leblanc. Sojiro and Akira were already waiting for her, both dressed in professional black suits. Her brows lifted and she looked her boyfriend up and down, admiring how his black slacks emphasized his long legs, and how his blazer enhanced his broad shoulders, making him seem more mature in age than he actually was. Sojiro too looked rather smart, but he was usually dressed in a white blazer anyway so it wasn't too big of a difference.

Hearing the clacking of her heels, they looked up at her and nodded a greeting, Akira’s eyes
roaming over her body with appreciation. She smiled slightly, holding the files in her hands. “Good morning Sojiro-Ojisan, Akira.”

Sojiro waved a hand. “Mornin’, Airi. You ready for the trial?”

She gripped the files tighter. “...Yes.”

He gave her a look of concern before conceding and turned to walk down the back streets. The two teenagers trailed after him down the somewhat deserted alleys, too early for more than the occasional elderly person to be walking around. “...You look really beautiful.” Akira murmured quietly, a slight hint of red on his face. “I knew the suit would look good on you.”

She smiled shyly at his compliment. “Thank you. You look rather handsome today as well.” She eyed his lack of a bag. “Is Morgana staying in today?”

He nodded. “He didn’t want to be caught by the scanners.” They fell into a relative silence, not wanting to talk about inane things right before something important.

Sojiro lead them over to his buggy and they opened the doors, sliding into the back seats while he took the wheel. Starting the car, it rumbled underneath them for a while, just warming up the engine, before he stepped on the gas and began their journey on the tokyo freeways toward downtown.

Airi stared out the window of the admittedly small car, biting her lip as her heart kept beating erratically. The court case was to begin in two hours, and she had to be there an hour early to be briefed on proper conduct and whatnot, and the pressure was heavy on her shoulders. She didn’t want to mess up or anything.

Kawakami had texted her as well to say she was about to be released from the hospital, but didn’t clarify her actions after that. She was trying to distance herself again in preparation of switching to the sister company.

They had a couple of days before she handed in the paperwork, so hopefully Akira could convince her. So much was happening that she almost forgot it was time for finals soon on the 13th. Her life was such a mess at this moment...

A hand reached over to lightly grip her own and she turned her head. Akira glanced at her from the corner of his eye and smiled softly. “I’m here.” He reassured quietly, giving her hand a squeeze. “I promised, right?”

Unbeknownst to her, her shoulders relaxed from their tense state and she smiled back. But one thing went right, and that was him. “...Yeah.”

Sojiro glanced at them through the rearview mirror and only raised a brow.

Arriving at the district court, they parked the car next to the complex and stepped out onto the busy streets. This part of Tokyo held all of the city’s and even the country’s most important buildings, including the National Diet Building just a few blocks to the west of here as well as the Imperial Palace to the north. They could even see the tops of the historical castle over the treeline.
The streets were impeccably clean, and only a few trees and greenery to add some color to the gray pavements. Everywhere they looked were steely faced adults in black suits, power walking with briefcases holding the most important documents in the country to their destinations. There was even the occasional foreigner going to and from the embassies, as well as wealthy tourists visiting the cultural buildings.

Airi had never felt so out of place in her off-brand suit and her obvious lack of money, her rose colored hair standing out like a beacon in a sea of monochrome.

Clenching her jaw, she followed after Sojiro into the looming gray building that looked more like a stone monolith, reaching into the sky. This was only the district court for felonies, with the Supreme Court building just behind it.

The doors slid open for them and their shoes clacked against the cold marble floors. They looked around the windowless lobby and noted the security officers, the harsh white lighting shining down to cast intimidating shadows across their blank faces. Their dark eyes never moved from their persons.

Tense, they walked up to the reception where a stern woman was sat, well manicured nails typing on her computer at the speed of light. “What is your business?” She asked curtly without even looking at them.

“We’re here for the trial of Seto Hisoka.” Sojiro answered just as shortly, his usual frown set even deeper into his lined face.

She glanced up at them through her cat rimmed glasses and raised a brow. “That case is confidential and only those who are involved in the trial may attend. Do you have any documents that would prove your entrance?”

Taking a deep breath, Airi stepped up and handed her the folder that was mailed to her half a week ago. “Here.”

Taking it, her sharp eyes scanned the documents before nodding begrudgingly. “…The trial is to be held in room 3-1. Take the elevator after the security screening and it will be the first room to your right.”

Airi bowed. “Thank you.”

Akira glanced around tensely, feeling extremely uncomfortable in the cold and unforgiving environment. He was getting flashbacks to four months ago when he himself was dragged to juvenile court, and he knew these security guards would be able to take him down. The guns on their hips proved it.

The three of them walked through the metal detectors and up to the screening area that led to the rest of the building, standing stiffly as they were patted and wanded down. Akira barely held in a grimace as his personal space was violated but stayed silent, letting out a quiet sigh of relief once they let him pass. It was a good thing Morgana hadn’t come. He wasn’t sure how he would’ve explained sneaking a feline in.

Sojiro only stood there with a bored look as if he had gone through this type of protocol thousands of times, and only rolled his eyes when he was cleared.

Airi bit her lip, trying to hold in her anger as the very male officer patted her down, his hands lingering at her waist and hips for just a second too long. Oh, how she wished she could just
summon her scythe and beat the shit out of him. Now was not the time to test her patience.

Pursing his lips, the officer seemed to want to say something but she stepped toward another officer, one who seemed much more serious about his job than his co-worker, and let him wand her down. He gave her a look of understanding and proceeded to do his job, scanning her before letting her through.

Exhaling harshly, she walked past to the elevators and pressed for the lift. Sojiro looked like he wanted to say something but after a moment, closed his mouth, not commenting on the blatant sexual harassment but resorted to glaring at the guard who was now being quietly chastised by his superior.

The elevator arrived a few seconds later and they rode it up to the third floor. Like the lobby, the hallway was windowless, as if it was more a prison than a government building. Rows of doors lined the sides, leading into where people’s lives were decided. Not a single soul was around except for the guards that were stationed at each exit, even next to the elevators.

Stepping off, they walked to courtroom 3-1 and entered the small trial chamber. There was a small audience area where they took a seat, and they looked around the dead silent room. The judges, three of them, were sat at the judge’s desk, beady and experienced eyes reading the documents for the case. There were two court reporters sat in front of them, fingers ready to type what they heard, but not listened to.

The prosecutor’s and defendant’s tables were empty, and Airi wondered if they were in the right room when the door opened again and an impeccably professional woman stepped through. Her long dark gray hair was combed to the side, framing the left side of her face. Her black suit with gold accents enhanced her slim body, and the very air around her gave off a stern and unforgiving aura.

His eyes widened and Sojiro sputtered. “Wait, she’s your prosecutor..?!”

Akira blinked. It was the woman he saw three months ago in Leblanc. If he remembered correctly, she mentioned she knew someone who went to the same school as him.

Cold red eyes examined the room, stopping on them, and the prosecutor walked over to their seats. “Sakura-san.” She greeted formally. “I wasn’t expecting to see you here, but considering your past connections, I shouldn’t be surprised.” Her gaze moved to lock eyes with similar red ones. “And Kimisawa-san, correct? My name is Niijima Sae, and I’ll be the prosecutor for this case.”

Akira stared at her in surprise. Niijima Sae? This was Makoto’s sister?

“I-It’s nice to meet you, Niijima-san.” Airi stammered out, intimidated by the older woman. Now she knew how Makoto felt to be under the gaze of such a commanding person. And she had to live with this every day? “Is there anything I should know?”

Sae crossed her arms. “To be frank, you’re not needed to convict Seto. This trial is more of a formality.” She glanced over at the judges who seemed to be finishing up their preparations before moving back to the cellist. “But your testimony will influence his sentence.” Her gaze hardened. “I hope I can count on you, a victim of his actions, to help lock him away for good. Him being released the first time was outrageous to hear about, especially after reading the details on his arrest. My justice, and yours by consequence, shall prevail today. I will win.” She inclined her head to them, noting Akira’s presence, before walking up to the prosecutor’s desk and placing her briefcase down.
Their eyes could only follow her figure, brows raised up in surprise. Akira leaned over to his girlfriend. “She’s scary.” He whispered hesitantly.

Airi could only nod, both awed and intimidated by such a hardworking woman. Makoto had compared her to her before, but holy shit, there was no way she could ever match up in intensity.

She replayed their conversation in her head before furrowing her brow and turning to the barista. “Wait, Ojisan, you know her?”

Sojiro grimaced, leaning back in his seat. “She’s a customer occasionally. Recently, she’s been askin’ about my old job and about Wa…” He paused before shaking his head. “Never mind. It’s just strange how she’s the person in charge of this case. How deep is she tryin’ to dig?…”

A gavel struck against the sound block, gaining the attention of everyone else in the room. A door to the side opened and a police officer walked through, Hisoka trailing after him with his hands cuffed in front of him.

Airi could only stare. She really only saw him for a few minutes that day in Shibuya, but there was such a huge difference between then and now. He was skinnier for one, his already lean figure now wasted to skin and bones underneath his green inmate uniform. His black hair hung limply in front of his gaunt face, and his shoulders were weighed down with his sins.

But what she could recognize, and also didn’t recognize, was the present smile on his face. It was the same as she remembered, the day when he murdered her parents, the day he confronted her in Shibuya, and even inside Mementos. But there was one fundamental difference, and that was the absence of insanity. All that was left was guilt and...peace?

One of the judges cleared his throat. “The date is July 3rd, 20XX, at 9:05AM. The trial to commence is for one Seto Hisoka, age 40, for two first degree murders of Kimisawa Arihito and Kimisawa Akami, as well as unlawful possession of a firearm.” He spoke monotonously, the court reporters typing his exact words into their computers. “Please take a seat at your respective stations.”

Sae was already seated, briefcase opened in front of her with all the documents she needed to convict him.

Hisoka was guided over to the defendant’s chair and he sat down without noticing the audience, bowing his head submissively.

“But then…” The judge shuffled his papers. “Let me go over the details of his crime. Ten years ago at 12:45AM June 24th, 20XX, you shot a 9mm bullet into both Kimisawa at Yongenjaya with an illegal pistol, instantly killing them and orphaning their child, Kimisawa Airi, but not before Arihito called the police. Arihito who was your co-worker at the time, had no marks on his record or any reported cases of misconduct. The same for Akami, whom you had no affiliation with. And again, you have been found with an illegal firearm on your person. What say you in your defense?”

Hisoka only kept his head down, staying silent.

Pursing his lips, the head judge turned to the prosecutor. “As the defendant will not speak, I will move to the prosecution. Niijima-san, please begin.”

Standing up from her desk, she bowed respectfully. “Yes, your Honor.” Straightening up, she turned to stare coldly at the murderer in the room. “Seto Hisoka, you were immediately tried on June 27th, 20XX ten years ago, just three days after you murdered an innocent couple, and was
sentenced to life in prison at Fuchuu Keimusho. Your crimes were apparent and all the evidence, blood work, fingerprints, paper trails, all of them pointed to you. It was obvious.”

She narrowed her eyes. “And yet you were released after ten years as a free man, not even to parole first, with an “investigation” into the crime. It’s clear this was a mistake as you are now back in yet another courtroom. You have also acquired an illegal firearm on two accounts. You have learned nothing in those ten years and you will continue to learn nothing. Prison is the only place you belong. In fact,” She turned toward the audience, her red eyes locking with red eyes. “I would like to call Kimisawa Airi to the stand as witness.”

Tensing, Hisoka snapped his head in the cellist’s direction, eyes wide with shock as he never expected to see her again.

Swallowing nervously, Airi stood up, her legs trembling. Did she really have to? All these cold eyes, all these adults, just using her to get what they wanted…

A hand pressed against the small of her back and she glanced down to the side. Akira smiled encouragingly and nodded.

Taking a deep breath, she walked over to the stand, renewed with confidence. She could do this. He was at her side. He was watching her, making sure she was safe. She was strong, but she was stronger with him.

“Kimisawa-san, please describe to the judges what exactly happened that night on June 24th, 20XX ten years ago.” Sae requested. “If at any point you feel uncomfortable, we may stop the trial for a break.”

Airi nodded jerkily. “R-Right…” Taking another deep breath to calm her heart, she delved back into her dusty memories, the ones that had become the source of her nightmares. “It was just after a Yongenjaya community talent show. We- my parents and I, stopped at a sweets shop to celebrate. After about two hours, my mother and I left for home first, not waiting for my father to catch up.”

She swallowed, trying to dislodge the rock in her throat. Calm down. "On the way back, we heard a click and...and my mother tensed up. Hi-Hisoka appeared out of an alley, a gun in hand, and he threatened us for my father. My father caught up and they began talking, I don’t really remember what about-” She was lying here. She knew it was about those papers, but there was no point in mentioning that here. The law would only complicate things. This would be solved by a phantom thief.

“And my father dialled 110. Hisoka even insisted on it. Then when the sirens came closer, he…” She gripped the stand, her nails digging into the fake wood. “He shot them...and he said he would come back for me.” She mentioned blankly. And he did. “Then the police arrived and took him away…”

Crossing her arms, Sae nodded approvingly. “Thank you, Kimisawa-san. You may return to your seat.”

Nodding timidly, Airi turned and walked back to the bench, almost collapsing into Akira’s side. His arm curled around her, holding her protectively to him, and she slowly exhaled. That was nerve wracking on a level she had never experienced, but she did it. She got through without crying, without stuttering...

The rest of the trial went by in a flash, complicated words and terms flying over their heads as Sae fought to prosecute him. The whole time, Hisoka only stayed silent, closing his eyes in resignation.
Before Airi could even comprehend it, the main judge smacked his gavel against the soundblock. “Due to the overwhelming evidence present from past and present cases, as well as Nijjima-san’s compelling argument, we have come to a decision. Seto Hisoka, you shall be sentenced to spend the rest of your days in maximum prison.” He narrowed his eyes. “Since you have already spent a considerable amount of years in Fuchuu and was still let out, you will be transported to Shizuoka. Case dismissed.”

With a flourish of their judicial robes, the judges and court reporters immediately left the room. Hisoka was to be escorted back into the jail room, but not before he stopped and turned in her direction.

Airi stared blankly, shoulders tense in preparation.

With a gentle smile, he bowed lowly for a few moments before straightening up and walked to what entailed the rest of his life.

Once he was out of view and the door slammed shut, she let out her breath and felt all her strength leave her. She would’ve collapsed onto the floor if two strong arms hadn’t caught her. She couldn’t believe it. It was over. It was really over now. She won. He was gone, forever this time.

She was really, finally, truly, free.

The arms around her waist tightened and she blinked, looking up at Akira who stared down at her in concern. “Airi? You OK?” He asked quietly in the mostly empty courtroom.

Was she OK? She was… “I’m OK...No,” She shook her head. “Better than OK. I’m...I’m fucking ecstatic.” She felt a grin grow on her lips. “I’m so happy I could cry.”

He snorted and reached up with a thumb, wiping away a wet trail from her cheek. “You already are.”

She blinked, finally feeling the water drip down her face. She hadn’t even noticed. She was just so happy, she could barely comprehend it.

Just over a week ago, she was fearing for her life and everyone around her. She had been drowning in darkness, unable to breathe under the paranoia and stress of the situation.

She had one light though, and that was the person who was currently holding her. She would never have gotten through those tough few weeks if he hadn’t been at her side almost constantly. He helped her, he cared for her, he loved her...She couldn’t ever imagine a life without him now.

He was just there in every aspect of her day. When she would see a gray shirt, she would think of his eyes. When she looked up at the night sky, the heavens so black it was almost blue, she thought of his hair. When she would care for the flowers at the underground mall, specifically the peonies, she would think of his lips.

Everything reminded her of him. She had lived because of her parents’ sacrifice, Rui’s...and now his love. She had found a new reason to live and she couldn’t be happier.

Wrapping her arms around his neck, she tip-toed even with heels on and kissed him, trying to convey her gratitude, her joy, her love to him. It was all for him.

He leaned down and closed his eyes, kissing her back.

“Ahem.”
Breaking apart, they looked over with red faces at both Sojiro and Sae giving them amused smiles. “If you’re finished,” The prosecutor began. “This courtroom has to be cleared for the next trial. I also have another case to resume, so my time is cut short.” She gave her a small but restrained smile. “Congratulations, Kimisawa-san. Your testimony helped put that murderer back behind bars for the rest of his life.”

Taking a step back, Airi bowed at the waist. “Thank you, Nijima-san. It was because of your argument and your quick work that this trial even happened.” Straightening up, she beamed. “I’m truly grateful that it was you who took this case.”

Raising a brow at the sunny smile, Sae nodded. “Of course. It would be remiss of me to let a man like that be free to terrorize people. I do all I can to win every case.” Picking up her briefcase, she gave them a nod before turning to Sojiro. “Sakura-san, don’t think I will be dropping my inquiries just because I have other cases. Now that I’ve confirmed your connections to both Kimisawa Arihito and Seto Hisoka, you’re the only person left who can tell me what I want to know.” And with that, she left the room, leaving the three alone.

Akira furrowed his brow. “What did she mean by that?” Was she digging into their past jobs? What was their past jobs anyway? Something about the government.

Sojiro only grimaced and sighed harshly, holding a hand to his temple. “She’s definitely determined to get what she wants…” Shaking his head, he turned to them with an amused smirk. “Sooo...judging by that display, you two are definitely together now, huh? Took you two long enough.” He teased, smirk growing at their red hot faces. “Thought you’d be dancin’ around each other for all eternity.” He clasped a hand on Akira’s shoulder, ignoring his cough at the impact. “Glad you finally manned up.”

“Th-Thanks, Boss…” Akira stuttered, trying to hide his embarrassment from his guardian but to no avail. If he was honest, he was actually kind of...happy that the barista was teasing him like this. His own father had never cared once he began preschool, saying that he had to be a man now and a man did things alone. Boss was almost like a dad...

Placing a hand on Airi’s shoulder as well, Sojiro guided the two of them out of the courtroom and out of the stiflingly tense building, automatically relaxing as soon as they reached outside. “Since it’s only 1PM right now, why don’t we go somewhere?” He suggested languidly. “I’m not in a hurry to get back to the cafe…”

Biting her lip, Airi turned to him. “Um…” She began hesitantly. “I was thinking we could maybe...go and tell my parents about this.”

He stilled, giving her a look of concern. “You sure? You haven’t been since you were a kid, right?”

She nodded, a small smile resting on her face. “My visit is long overdue, and...they deserve to know. They deserve to know that they can rest peacefully now.”

Akira rested his hands inside his pockets. It seemed Hua Po was right. He really was going to visit the parents. She giggled quietly inside his soul, her voice much quieter than Arsène’s. He idly wondered how it felt for the gentleman thief to share his space with so many other Personas, but then again, Arsène was him, and all of these Shadows became his Persona, so...they were all him. Or something like that.

Putting it out of his mind, he smiled. “Should we go now?”

Eyes darting between them, Sojiro sighed heavily. “All right...I wasn’t planning on seeing them for
a while, but since we’ve got time…” He gestured over to the parking lot.

Dropping them off at Shibuya, Sojiro went to find a parking spot closer to Aoyama. Japan, for all its advancements in society and technology, still wasn’t very car friendly compared to how well received bikes were.

Since they were in the area, they went to the underground mall and picked up a bouquet of iris, Airi wrapping them up in a white plastic covering. Hanasaki only stepped aside with a smile, already noting their somber outfits, and let them take the flowers for free.

Bowing as thanks, they left and walked to Aoyama. It wasn’t really that far, and the walk let them clear their heads even in these bustling streets filled with pedestrians and noisy storefronts trying to attract tourists. The farther they walked from Shibuya, the quieter it became until the only noise was the occasional car passing by and a bicycle bell ringing to let people know to get out of the way.

Turning the corner, they saw the owner of Leblanc already waiting for them at the entrance of the cemetery. Sojiro looked up at their appearance and rolled his neck. “Hey. Let’s get going…”

With the mood subdued, the two thieves followed the barista in through the entrance office and into the memorial grounds. Akira managed to snag a bucket and filled it with sacred water, making sure none of it spilled.

There were a few people around, most likely giving off wishes before Tanabata, but Sojiro only continued on deeper into the cemetery.

Airi followed, memorizing the path they were taking. She had only been here once when she was seven years old, and barely even remembered where their marker was. She remembered that she spent the time in a daze, tears silently streaming down her face with a younger Sojiro behind her, as well as a bald man, a woman with a short black bobcut, and a few others. She wasn’t a loud crier even back then. But she was making up for it now.

Climbing up the stone steps, they stopped at a more spacious part of the cemetery and in front of a granite marker. Sojiro furrowed his brow at the somewhat clean surfaces and recently wilted red spider lilies. “Who..?” He grimaced. “Don’t tell me…”

Airi stared blankly. It had been cleaned, and she knew a certain someone had purchased red spider lilies from her shop just three weeks ago. Had Hisoka really been remorseful, even before she took his Heart..?

Stepping forward, Akira gently placed the bucket on the ground and took a step back. “Airi?” He voiced quietly, gaining her attention.

Shaking her head, she gave him a small smile before handing the bouquet to him, then turning back to the grave. This was her duty.

Scooping some of the water out, she poured it over the stone, making sure it washed away the little dirt and grime it had accumulated over the weeks. Then she threw out the old flowers and scrubbed the surfaces thoroughly, accepting only the best for her parents. It was the least she could do for being such a bad daughter. For having never visited these past ten years.
The barista and his ward watched silently a couple steps back, not feeling appropriate to talk when they could clearly see how important this was to her.

Exhaling, she leaned back, finally done with her task. Walking up to her, Akira held out the bouquet of iris to her and she accepted them, giving him a smile as thanks.

Turning back to the grave marker, she took a deep breath. “...Mom...Dad...” She bit her lip. “I’m sorry for never visiting...I only ever talk to your portrait inside the house, so...this is a little new.” She laughed slightly. “Um...I’ve been well. I eat correctly and I make sure to exercise so I’ll be healthy. I get the top grades in my year, and...I’m not sure about my future yet, but I do know one thing about it...”

She lowered her voice, making sure her companions wouldn’t hear her. “I do know that Akira will be there...He’s such a good person. I’m sure if you could meet him, you would only have good things to say...” She smiled softly. “He’s been helping me ever since he moved here, just being a good friend and now...my boyfriend...” She beamed, a stray tear escaping down her face. “I wouldn’t be here without you guys...without him. I always thought I had to keep going because you guys died for me. Everyone kept dying around me...”

Her eyes darkened. “I thought I was cursed, or I wasn’t human. Who could say I am when people tend to die around me?”

She closed her eyes. If she was honest, she was still struggling with that question. What defined a human? Her physiology? Her mental capacity? Morgana had told them that their Personas would’ve been their Palace rulers if they became distorted. Jeanne was a representation of her. A barefaced, immaculate, and cold woman who was still chained down. What did that say about her? That her sense of self wasn’t as defined? Or maybe she hid her real self so well that her mask became one with her face.

“Anyway...I’m just here to say Hisoka is back in prison. He was released due to someone’s orders, or at least that's what he told me, and he stalked me for weeks before he began threatening my friends.” Her smile turned serene, the same one she wore when she killed Shadows. “I made sure to take his distorted desires. He was a sobbing mess at the end, and he never even answered my question about the papers....Speaking of papers, dad, he mentioned that you were part of some weird project...You never told me anything about your job, so I had no idea you had been researching the very same thing I use now to help people...”

She smirked wryly. “Maybe you influenced it, you and this Wakaba woman, or maybe you doomed us all with your experiments...” She sighed. “Either way, I’m glad that I’m finally doing something meaningful in my life. I get to play my music again, mom. I’m going to make sure to help everyone I can with my cello. The music- the love that you gave me...that Akira has given me.”

Her eyes fluttered closed. That’s right. She lived for them. As long as she had them, everything would be fine. They kept her grounded to her real self; her bright, somewhat awkward, mostly kind, slightly perverted self. She accepted it. She wouldn’t be here without them, without him. She would do whatever it took to protect them.

They were hers.

Finally standing up, she dusted off her skirt and turned to the two men who stood a few feet away with a smile. “Sorry I took so long.”

Sojiro shook his head, hand on his hip. “Don’t worry about it. You deserved some time with them.”
Walking up to the marker, he knelt down and clapped his hands twice, praying for his friend and his wife. A moment of silence passed before he stood up again, groaning as he popped his back. “Ugh, I’m gettin’ old…” He sighed, staring down at the stone, his aged eyes tracing the kanji strokes. “Y’know...Did I ever tell you I hit on your mom?”

She raised her brows. “You did? I mean I don’t blame you because she was gorgeous, but…”

He snorted. “Hoo boy, she definitely was. When I met her, I didn’t even know she was ‘Hito’s wife. She just showed up in front of the building as if she was waiting for someone, and I just had to make a comment.” He smirked languidly, gazing at the marker with sad but fond eyes. “I wasn’t a taken man then, and she seemed available. She slapped me of course, and that was right before your dad walked out of the entrance too. We got into a huge argument.”

He chuckled. “That was probably...eleven years ago, before we ever started working together in the same department. Those were good times…” Sighing, he turned away after one last glance. “I’m gonna head back. May as well open the shop for a little while. I’m sure you two can find your way home.” He waved a hand before walking down the steps and toward the entrance.

They watched him leave before Akira turned to her. “May I?” He gestured to the grave and she nodded. “Of course.” She smiled shyly. “I’m sure they would want to meet you.”

Smiling hopefully, he knelt down and clapped his hands twice. “Kimisawa-san, Kimisawa-san, my name is Kurusu Akira.” He introduced himself quietly, bowing his head respectfully. “I’m...your daughter’s boyfriend. We’ve been friends for a few months now, and she’s been that person who’s always at my side. I owe a lot to her for always supporting me, even when everyone else around us was scared of me, and...I love her. I don’t know what the future might hold, but I promise.”

His eyes hardened with resolve. “I’ll protect her. Please rest well knowing that I’m at her side.” He bowed again before standing up and dusting his slacks. He meant every word he said. He was going to stay by his light until his life gave out, or she pushed him away. She meant everything to him.

Tearing up at his words, Airi brought a hand up to cover her mouth. Did he even realize what those words sounded like? It was practically a marriage proposal. A man who went up to the woman’s parents and promised to take care of her. Clenching her eyes, she bit her lip. If that’s what he really meant, then...she was more than fine with that.

As he turned to her, she launched herself at him, wrapping her arms around his broad shoulders. “I love you.” She whispered shakily. “You better stick by those promises. You made too many to break.”

Chuckling, Akira returned her embrace. “Yeah, don’t worry. I meant every word, so...Just as I said I’ll stand by you, I hope you’ll stand by me too.”

She beamed and took a step back. He meant every word, huh. Maybe she should start planning their wedding then.

Taking his hand, she led him down the steps to the columbarium walls. He made sure to take the bucket as well as he stumbled behind her. “Where..?”

She didn’t answer him, but once they arrived at the monument, she began looking up and down at the names. He stood back, watching her curiously. Who was she looking for? Didn’t they visit everyone?
She moved onto another wall, her eyes scanning hundreds of kanji characters. Where was she? Which one was…

Her eyes landed on a crusty and dirty plaque and she stopped, kneeling in front of the lower left section.

Akira stepped up behind her, peering over her shoulder. “Who is it…?” He tried to see through the thick layer of dirt, but all he could make out was the Kanji for “Atsu.”

Hearing a sniffle, he looked down at Airi and his eyes widened at the sight of tears running freely down her cheeks. He quickly knelt next to her, putting the bucket down, and enveloped her face with his hands. His thumbs rubbed the corners of her eyes, accidentally smudging a little of her eyeliner even though he tried to be careful. “What’s wrong? Who is this?” He asked worriedly. Who was she crying for?

Airi raised her hands and covered them over his, closing her eyes as she leaned into his touch. She didn’t say anything and he didn’t ask, wanting to wait until she was ready.

After a moment, she opened her eyes again and slowly pulled his hands away. She turned back to the wall and reached out for the ladle in the bucket. Taking a large scoop, she splashed the plaque with the sacred water, washing a little of the grime away. The rest persisted and she had to take the sponge out of the pail to scrub diligently at the nameplate.

Akira watched quietly as the characters slowly showed themselves, and his eyes widened once he read the entire name. Atsuki Rui. This was Rui..?

Exhaling shakily as she confirmed it, she let the sponge fall from her hands and she reached out, hesitantly touching the carvings with her own hands. “Rui…” She whispered. Her friend. Her beautiful, cheerful, and innocent friend who died too early. Who died for her. “I finally found you…”

Another tear slipped down but she didn’t notice, too overcome with emotion at finally reuniting with her former reason to live. “I’m so sorry, Rui…I’m so sorry you had to die.” She choked out, voice cracking from crying so much today. “I’m so sorry you had to die for me. You should’ve lived. I wish so hard sometimes that I could’ve traded places with you.”

Stiffening, Akira snapped his head towards her in shock and horror. She had wanted to die?! Unaware of the turmoil that was happening beside her, she continued. “I always thought you deserved to live instead of me. What was I? I was just some stupid brat who didn’t care about anyone or even herself. You were the one who helped me, who helped everyone…If you hadn’t come into my life, you would still be alive…” She smiled, her lips bittersweet. “But then…I wouldn’t have this new life. I wouldn’t have gotten so strong without you. I wouldn’t have forced myself to keep going because I felt guilty that I stole your life from you. I wouldn’t have these wonderful friends who are my family, I wouldn’t have tried to save Shiho-chan…I wouldn’t have met Akira.”

He stilled at her confession, his anxious thoughts slowly fading the more he listened. He never knew she carried this sort of guilt around with her. Anytime he saw her, it was always a sweet smile, or a worried frown, or even conflicted anger, but to know this survivor’s guilt had always been there...

He slowly reached out and grabbed her hand, intertwining their fingers. He wanted her to know he was here. He would be here to support her like she did him, and he wanted to be one of the reasons
she kept on living. Maybe that was selfish of him, but so long as she was alive and here, he’d do everything he could to keep her.

Feeling the warmth of his love through their hands, a small but peaceful smile spread across her lips. “I wouldn’t be here, helping others like you helped me. I wouldn’t be here as someone who tried their best to be kind and understanding like you. I wouldn’t…” Airi tightened her grip around his palm. “I wouldn’t have found such a wonderful man.” She confessed shyly, feeling his fingers twitch at her admission.

“I wouldn’t have such a handsome, caring, and loving person as my boyfriend…I’m still sorry you had to die, but…” She took a deep breath, straightening her shoulders. “I’m not sorry I lived. Not anymore. I love you, Rui. I hope…I hope you’re having a good time in the afterlife, and one day we’ll see each other again. I hope you saw your parents again if they’re there, and that you’ve met mine, and that you’ve met Takase too…”

Unable to hold it in, she began crying again, the drops wetting the cement ground. “A-And you don’t have to worry about me. I eat well, and I study well, and I have a family now who really care about me. I care so much for them too, and we’re going to make sure no one else ends up like you…” Choking, she brought a hand up to cover her face, trying to wipe away the tears.

A strong arm wrapped around her waist, tugging her into a chest, and she leaned in, hiding her face in his suit jacket.

He rubbed her back comfortingly. This was just like four months ago on the rooftop, right after Shiho’s incident. He tilted down to kiss the top of her head as he felt a wet spot blossom on the front of his jacket. They had grown so much since then, and so much closer too. He was going to try to fulfill that promise, that no matter what, they would save this world. Every little person who was mistreated, abused, neglected, looked down on…the Phantom Thieves would be their heroes.

Because no one had been theirs.

Sniffing, she leaned back and wiped her eyes, uncaring that she was probably smudging her makeup. “Sorry...I always cry on you…”

He smiled lightheartedly. “Don’t worry about it, seriously. I make sure to buy clothes that are super absorbent so you can cry all you want.” He joked.

Airi pouted, wiping the rest of her tears. “Are you saying you want me to cry more?”

He looked away. “Only if I’m there to comfort you…” He confessed sheepishly.

She huffed with amusement, the sound wet from all her crying. “OK, you can be my human tissue.” Sniffing once more, she sighed, tired but also at peace with herself. “But...thank you. I really want to thank you for coming with me today. To court, to my parents’ resting place, to Rui’s…” She smiled warmly, eyes still a little watery. “You didn’t have to…”

He only smiled fondly. “I wanted to.” He uttered those words that were so dear to them. “As long as you’ll have me, I’ll always be with you. We’ll all stand together.” He smiled confidently. “We’re the Phantom Thieves, and the world is ours to take.”

Sniffing, she nodded, smiling happily at his words. “Yeah...I promise. I’m going to stand by your side no matter what. For all of us.”

A warmth emanated from her heart and she gasped, holding a hand to her chest. What...?
Heartbeats pulsed around her, and she unconsciously closed her eyes. The sound of chains breaking echoed in her ears as Jeanne finally raised her arms up high, now unshackled by the past, a smile gracing her face for the first time. With that smile, her facade cracked, showing that it had been a mask all along.

With a warm ray of light, the beautifully pale white Countess was replaced by the gong of a bell, signalling the arrival of a god. Robed in the imperial colors of amethyst, carmine, gold, and ivory, Xihe floated down from the heavens, her warm motherly eyes covered with a sheer purple veil. With her came six out of the ten suns, her little children glowing in yellow, pink, red, light blue, dark blue, and purple around the golden disc of light. The red glowed so strongly...

Her eyes fluttered open and Airi gasped, seeing Akira looked down at her curiously, unaware of the soft red glow that shimmered beneath his skin before disappearing. He was... He was the red sun? Did that mean the other suns represented the rest of their group?

Her Persona had changed, now free and unchained to be what she had been meant to be. A person who could truly care for her family, a mother who cared for her children. She really was team mom now.

Beaming at the revelation, she tilted her head to kiss her boyfriend, him kissing back despite his adorably puzzled face at her glee.

Life... was really changing. She couldn’t wait to see what the future would bring, especially since she had him at her side.

Her red sun.

“A vow hast turned into a blood oath... Thou hast awakened to the ultimate secret of The Aeon, granting thee infinite power.”

“May you break these chains…”

Getting back home once evening hit, Airi toed her heels off in the entryway and winced as her feet finally had a chance to stand flat on the floor. Wearing restrictive heels like these were painful, and it meant a long soak later.

Placing her keys and bag on the dresser, she headed up the stairs. Opening the door to her room, she bee lined straight to her bedside dresser, pulling it open. Photos met her face; the ones that Hisoka had left around her house and job.

Taking them out, she knelt down on the floor and only took in a shaky breath as she passed off the photos of her parents’ time of death as well as the ones from the institution. He had photos from then, but how...? Now that she tried to remember, the police dropped her off there. Sojiro had admitted he had lost her location until last year, so no one knew where she was...

She furrowed her brow. Something seemed so suspicious about all of this. She didn’t remember the name of the institution, but it had closed down after Rui’s murder and she was left out in San’ya. Nishiki and Taiki had taken her in after that to their homemade orphanage, and it was just surviving day by day after.
If it had closed down almost ten years ago, then how did Hisoka get these photos? They were freshly printed, meaning the original files were saved somewhere. Out of the five photos of the institution, only one was of her as the focus, so...did that mean someone had been monitoring the entire orphanage? But why? The only other kid she knew was Go-kun and he...

She sighed, her head beginning to hurt from today’s stressful court case and then crying her eyes out. She didn’t want to think about this right now, especially when she had finally gotten her justice...

Putting them to the side, she smiled softly at the photos of her and her friends. Even though these were taken without their knowledge or consent, it highlighted just how happy she was with each and every one of them. How she laughed with Ann at Shibuya, how she mothered Ryuji with studying, how she bonded with Yusuke over the short time they’d known each other, how Makoto trusted and relied on her like a sister, how she spoiled Morgana with snuggles, how Akira...how Akira loved her.

She traced her fingers over his face in the photos, taking in how he gravitated to her side, and just how close he always was to her, even in these shots. She never wanted to forget these bonds...Her suns that shone the darkness away.

She barely remembered her life before her parents’ deaths, only small moments kept alive by the old photo albums in the Study that she had yet to touch. Maybe...maybe she could start collecting photos?

She smiled hopefully. Who knew what was going to happen in the future? If she learned anything these past couple of weeks with her almost dying, it was that nothing was for certain. She had to take things into her own two hands so that life would change. Memories faded after a while unless she had proof that would imprint it in her mind.

She closed her eyes and held the photos of her friends, her happy parents, memories of good times, to her heart. She never wanted to forget. She would protect and care for them with all of her being.

No one would take them from her ever again.

“Ai-chan.”

Airi paused from her homework and turned around to her mother. “Yes, Kacchan?” She asked innocently, big rubies blinking up at her.

Her mother smiled down at her, her own cello case strapped to her back. “I have a show tonight so I won’t be home. Sojiro-kun can watch over you for the evening.”

Airi pouted. “But Sakura-san smells! And all he does is talk on his cellphone.”

Her mother laughed. “He does smell, doesn’t he? Must be from all the cigarettes.” She crouched down, conscious of her case hitting the floor. “I’m sorry I can’t be with you tonight, but I’ll make it up to you by bringing you ice skating again!”

Airi brightened. “Really?! Yay!” She turned shy for a moment. “Um...do you think Touchan will be able to go with us this time? Or at least my cello recital?”

Her mother’s smile turned sad. “...I don’t know, Ai-chan. You know your father is hard at work. We’re lucky Sojiro-kun doesn’t work the same job even if he does work in the same building...” She sighed and gathered her small daughter into her arms. “You’ll understand one day.” She winked. “Being an adult sucks.” They shared a giggle. “Now, be good for Sojiro-kun OK? And
remember.” Her smile turned mischievous. “What do we do to people who try to hurt or belittle you?”

Airi grinned. “Total annihilation!”

Her mother laughed. “That’s right! To any who try to hurt you or your friends. Being a Kimisawa means to strive for what is important for you. Your father and his research, me and my music…” Her hands tickled her daughter’s sides. “And you and whatever you choose!”

Airi tried to hold in her laughter as she wiggled away from her mother’s grasp. “OK mom, I got it!” She beamed. “I want to make people happy! I want my music to help people when they feel sad or alone, because no one should be sad or alone! And if my music doesn’t help, then just me is OK!”

Her mother looked down at her with a soft smile. “That’s my girl…You’re so wise for your age.” She leaned in and planted a loving kiss on her forehead. “I love you, Ai-chan. Never forget that.”

“Never forget that you’re loved and that you must love. It makes you human.”
Xihe's design by me (1/23/18 UPDATED WITH CORRECT DESIGNS)
To explain the design:

Its a slightly modern tang dynasty style dress, comprised of 4 layers. Squiggles are supposed to be embroidery (again, art is not my forte). Her hands are never shown, so you can think that she doesn't have hands. The large gold wheels represent the sun, while the crows are a throwback to the legend when the suns were 3 legged crows. Her hair is long and white, held up in a complicated tang dynasty bun and the rest falls down her back. She has sun motifs and flowers all over her design. Her neck has a mottling of dragon scales, and her bottom half is of a eastern dragon tail, as a throwback to her dragon carriage.
Xihe: Pronounced "Shi-huh," is a solar deity in Chinese mythology dating back before 2100 BC. She was known as the mother goddess of ten suns, back when China operated under a 10 day week cycle, with one sun per day. Xihe would escort them into the sky on a dragon carriage before they all converged in the Valley of Light at the end of the week. One day, tired of the same routine, the ten suns shone in the sky all at once, almost burning the world in their light. They were shot down by a human hero, leaving the one and only sun left in the sky. Xihe disappears from myth after this, with mythologists theorizing that she was too distraught at seeing her children die.

There's very little information about her, but I actually remember her legend back when I was a child. I wanted Airi's Ultimate to be light based and sun deities were exactly what I was looking for. I had originally wanted to use Amaterasu because sun goddess + sister to Susanoo who is Yusuke's Ultimate, but then I played P4 and realized they already used Amaterasu so I had to find another sun deity.

As I'm sure you've realized, the 10 suns will be representing each member of the Phantom Thieves, with the last sun representing the confidants. Red: Akira, Yellow: Ryuji, Orange: Akechi, Pink: Ann, Lavender: Haru, Dark Purple: Yusuke, Dark Blue: Makoto, Light Blue: Morgana, Green: Futaba, and Teal/Turquoise/Greenblueshadethingy: All the confidants.

The art shows the complete set, but as of right now in the story, Airi only has six suns as said in the reawakening paragraph. Xihe stays as a bless skilled + support based Persona, and her attributes changed to accommodate her new form.

As Jeanne: Null Bless, Str Nuclear, Wk Curse
As Xihe: Abs Bless, Rst Fire, Wk Curse

Current Skill set:
Kouga
Makouga
Diarama
Mediarama
One Shot Kill
Marakukaja (new)
Recarm (new)
Evade Curse (new)
Chapter 148

Chapter Notes

It's Yusuke's birthday today!! He was officially born on January 28! Happy Birthday, artboy <3

Also thank you for 35.9k hits and 932 kudos!! holy shit guys <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

----7/4, MONDAY, MORNING, SHUJIN ACADEMY.

Akira spent all of last night once he dropped Airi home trying to convince Kawakami not to give in to those relatives. She had shown up to work again right after being released from the hospital but even though she seemed better, she still coughed occasionally. She knew she shouldn’t do it, but the guilt had tightened the noose around her neck and she ended up paying more.

He put his foot down and finally told her plainly that she was only a slave to them. That they were only using her as a free wallet with Taiki as their convenient excuse.

Kawakami bowed her head and said she knew, and that she’d think of alternatives. She didn’t really want to sell her body. She wanted to be a good teacher who paid attention to all her students, even “delinquents” like him.

Earlier this morning, she came up to the two of them and quietly told them to meet her later at the Student Guidance Office. She would tell them what happened with the Takases. Until then, school had to go on like it usually did.

Chouno-sensei rolled her eyes at the front of the room. “It’s already July, huh? I hate the rainy season, but when it ends it’s just hot...The humidity is what kills me about Japanese summers.” She sighed. “I miss the dry heat of California. Not to mention, July and August both have thirty-one days. Summer is long…” She looked around the room, stopping on Ann. “Ms. Takamaki, do you know the reason why July and August both have thirty-one days?”

Ann perked up. “Oh, isn’t it because someone arrogant said so? Like, an emperor?”

Chouno-sensei laughed and clapped. “Great! That’s right. The months of “July” and “August” are named after the Roman emperors Julius and Augustus. Augustus named a month after himself, just like Julius. However, he felt like he would be losing if his month was shorter than Julius’s, so he added a day.” She sighed. “It’s a mystery why men are so stubborn and prideful over silly things like this.”

“Hey, did you know this? I didn’t!”

“Wow, Takamaki-chan’s getting so smart…”

“Well,” Chouno-sensei smiled languidly. “As far as you’re all concerned, you’re just lucky to get a long vacation. But before that, you have exams.” At that, the class let out a collective groan. “Now now, don’t start despairing already. I’m sure Ms. Kimisawa will help out like usual. They start on
Once the bell rang for lunch, most of the students headed out of the room to the cafeteria or even the courtyard to spend their free period. For Akira and Airi however, they were headed to the student guidance office. Some students stared at the class president, whispering to one another, and Airi grimaced. Was it due to what happened on Saturday? Did the information about Kawakami being her guardian spread that quickly? It seemed like her reputation was slowly going downhill.

But so long as she had her family, she didn't care. She was just Airi to them, not "class president," a "too perfect person," or even an "invisible child." She was happy with that.

Walking down the hallway, they headed inside the student guidance office to see Kawakami already waiting for them. “Hey.” She greeted them. “Sorry to be so quick about this, but it’s about Takase-kun’s guardians…”

Airi bit her lip, sliding the door closed. “What happened with them?”

Kawakami took a deep breath. “I told them...that I’m not going to pay them any more money!” She declared with a smile. “I’m quitting my part-time job too! Although I’m still in talks with my boss about it.”

Airi brightened. “You are?” She launched herself at the older woman, encircling her arms around her. “I’m so glad...I thought you wouldn’t ever see sense.”

Laughing slightly, Kawakami hugged her back. “I wouldn’t have if I didn’t have you two brats bothering me about it day and night.” She teased before taking a step back. “I’m going to devote myself to being a great teacher! No matter what others say, I won’t waver.” She rested a hand on her hip. “It’s all thanks to you guys, and especially you, Kurusu-kun. Thank you for giving me such good advice and for convincing me to really open my eyes.”

Akira smiled. “You’re welcome, Sensei. I’m glad to have helped you. You told me I remind you of Takase, so…” He shifted his feet. “I’m sure he wouldn’t have wanted you to keep paying his relatives off. I know I wouldn’t.”

She softened. “Yeah...I know now, Takase-kun would be appalled that I’m in this sort of situation.”

A knock on the door interrupted them and they looked over. “Kawakami-sensei, you have a guest.” A staff member informed them through the thick panels. “The Takases are here…”

Their eyes widened. What?

The blood drained from her face and Kawakami took a step back. “They’re here? At school..?!”

The door slid open and the middle aged couple stomped in with thunderous expressions on their faces. Airi took a step back, knowing if she got any closer, she might just hurt them regardless of the consequences. She glared darkly at them however. They came to the school just to harass her guardian?

“How long are you gonna make us wait?!” The uncle bellowed with his arms crossed over his
The aunt glanced over at them and sneered. “Tch, these kids again?”

Akira narrowed his eyes at their rudeness. “You know it, lady.” He replied back cockily.

She turned her nose up at them. “How rude...I guess a student is only as good as his teacher. Obviously you lack a proper education.”

Airi glared at them from behind her boyfriend. “Or maybe you two are the rude ones, interrupting our conversation as if you have a right to be here.” She retorted coldly. “Kindly leave our Sensei alone. She’s actually loved, unlike you.”

An ugly scowl twisted the aunt’s face. “You no-good hussy...Don’t mouth off to your betters!”

The uncle glared at the teacher. “You thought you could just call and say you’re not going to pay anymore? Who do you think you are?”

Taking a deep breath, Kawakami squared her shoulders and finally met them on equal grounds. “It’s what I decided, for Takase-kun’s sake.” She declared steadfastly. “I’m going to make sure there won’t be any more students like him, who.”

“So you’re just trying to get out of your responsibility?” The aunt raised her voice. “I bet you don’t even care about Taiki! How are you still a teacher?” She lamented, holding her hands near her chest. “Maybe we really should sue the Board of Education! Are you OK with that? A teacher who caused her student to die would surely cause a scandal.”

Enraged, Airi clenched her hands. “She’s done more for Taiki- Taiki than you two ever have.” She remarked tightly. It was strange to use his first name since she had only ever known his last name, but she had to separate him from them. They didn’t deserve anything of Taiki’s.

Kawakami narrowed her eyes. “I’m not going to run or hide! I’m going to spend my time taking care of my students, who you are bothering.” She raised her chin. “If you want to take legal action, then go ahead. Regardless, I’ll continue teaching. I’ve decided that that’s the best apology I can make to Takase-kun.” Her eyes hardened. “Paying money to you two is not the solution, to say the least!”

“Hmmm…” The uncle sneered. “Along with suing you, maybe I should tell everyone about your little secret...You know, about your little stint as a sex worker while also being this girl’s guardian.” He jerked his thumb in the direction of Airi whose eyes had widened at his information.

They stared at him in shock and horror. “How did you..?!” Kawakami gasped.

He raised a brow. “Oh? So I’m right, am I?”

She took a step back, now realizing he had tricked her into admitting it. “What?!”

“I mean,” He continued coolly. “The amount of money you’re paying us can’t come from just a teacher’s salary. From personal experience, guardianship of an orphan doesn’t give any money either. Well?” He smirked. “Shall we head on over to the faculty office?”

Akira glared at them. “How did you find out about her guardianship?”

The aunt chortled from behind her husband. “How else? We visited the school on the same day she collapsed and heard all the gossip. So many students were just shocked to learn Kawakami-sensei
was actually Kimisawa’s guardian. We of course just had to learn all about it.” She smiled, a sickly look in her eyes. “Imagine if everyone found out about her being a sex worker...how horrendous of a scandal it would be! She won’t just have taken our poor Taiki’s life, she’ll ruin this girl’s future too!”

“Stop…” Kawakami pleaded quietly, her bravado from earlier disappearing under their threats on her person as well as her pseudo-daughter’s. “Please.”

The uncle barked out a laugh. “A teacher working in the sex industry while an underaged girl is signed under her name? You’ve definitely done it this time. How unfortunate for you that you thought you could just leave Taiki’s matter unsettled...You know what you have to do now, right?” He sneered. “Pay up! And don’t ever call us again with this garbage about stopping the payments!” With a turn of his heel, he walked out of the room with his wife and slammed the door shut, leaving them alone in a bitter silence.

Akira clenched his hands. Threatening his teacher was bad enough, but threatening Airi? They couldn’t hold off on this any longer. He was going to take their Hearts.

Trembling slightly, Kawakami laughed to herself, the sort that came from a person who lost all hope. “I guess I can’t quit my part-time job just yet…”

Airi stepped up beside her. “You can’t give up just like that.” She voiced tensely.

“I know!” Kawakami snapped. “But what am I supposed to do..?” She covered her eyes with an arm and took a deep breath, trying to think. “What about the Phantom Thieves..?” She murmured. “Would they even help someone like me? No, that’s impossible…”

They glanced at each other. Now was their chance. Akira stepped forward. “Sensei. We need their names.”

Letting her arm fall, she looked at them tiredly. “Who?...The Takases? Their names are Takase Toshio and Takase Hiromi…” She smiled bitterly. “I could never forget. I send them money every week…” She tensed and turned her head sharply to look at them. “…Wait, why are you asking for their names? You don’t intend on doing something, do you? Please don’t.” She pleaded. “A Shujin teacher asking the Phantom Thieves for help would be…”

She stared at them for a moment before slumping. “I’m sorry...I was so excited to tell you what I had decided...that I was standing up for myself for once...and then it ended up like this…” She closed her eyes. “Just don’t do anything, OK?” She whispered morosely. “If you think about it, I’m right back where I started…” A tear slipped down. “...I guess I’ll never be able to change.”

Airi held her arms, cutting her off. “Nee-chan, let us...let me save you this time.” She voiced firmly. “You saved me because of Taiki, sure, but you still saved me. Let us help you.”

Kawakami only laughed, dishearten. “Class is about to start…” She said, unable to take what she said to heart. “I need to go.” Lips quivering, she shook off her grip before walking out of the room.

A tear drop hit the floor before the door was shut, and Airi only sighed heavily, holding a hand to her forehead. How could everything go so wrong so quickly? A hand landed on her shoulder and she looked up.

Akira gazed at her worriedly. “You OK?” He asked quietly. “I had no idea there were rumors about your relationship with Sensei.” Then again, he ignored all the gossip these days. They didn’t bother him much anymore.
She slowly shook her head. “No, it’s my fault. I was the one who blurted it out on Saturday and I know some people overheard. I’m not surprised that it’s spread all over the school.” She frowned. “Even though the Takases found out…”

He clenched his jaw. “…Today, after school.”

She blinked. “What?”

“The Takases.” Akira said firmly. “We’re going into Mementos.”

Her eyes widened and Airi brightened. He was letting her go in with them. “Right, this was what we wanted to do anyway! Today it is then.”

The bell rang then, signalling that next period was about to begin and she quickly stretched up on the tips of her toes to kiss him. He reciprocated, his hand sliding from her shoulder and down to her waist, holding her closer to his taller frame. Breaking it off, she leaned her forehead against his, even as his glasses stopped her from getting closer. “I love you.” She whispered. “Thank you for helping Nee-chan. Thank you for helping us.”

He smiled, giving her one more peck. “Love you too. Sensei’s becoming a big sister to me as well, you know. She tried to lecture me about my health the other day, just like how you do.”

Airi laughed. “That’s because if we didn’t, you’d just eat ramen and curry all day.” She placed her feet firmly against the floor. “Let’s go, class is going to start. Then, we’ll take their Hearts.”

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**Ai:** New request for Mementos.
**R:** There is? I didn’t see anything on the forum.
**Ai:** It’s not on the forum.
**Ak:** Meet up at the hideout.
**Ma:** I understand.
**Y:** Of course.
**An:** Right!
**R:** Gotcha!

---

“So, who are we targeting?” Ann asked while sucking on a lollipop. “You didn’t tell us through the phone.”

They were all gathered at the hideout at the Shibuya station passageway, pedestrians walking by without a glance in their direction. It was a sunny and hot day, and they all had a cold drink in their hands from the nearby vending machine.

“Takase Toshio and Hiromi.” Airi stated with a frown. “They mistreated their nephew and adopted son, Taiki, and he worked three jobs while in school trying to make a living. He died in a car accident and they blame Kawakami-sensei, who was his teacher at the time, for encouraging his studying and distracting him from his jobs.”

Makoto narrowed her eyes. “That’s despicable, and you say they were his guardians?” She shook her head disapprovingly. “How do adults get away with this?”

Akira nodded in agreement, finishing his drink. “They’re blackmailing Sensei to pay for their
silence or else they’ll sue the Board of Education.” He continued coldly, crushing the empty can in his hands. “We’re going to do something about it.”

Ann covered her mouth in horror. “Sensei’s been going through something like that? How horrible…” Finishing her candy, she looked at them determinedly. “Let’s help out!”

Ryuji scowled from his crouched position. “I ain’t a favorite of hers, but she doesn’t treat me badly like the other teachers. No one deserves to be blackmailed like that!”

Yusuke inclined his head, leaning against the rail as he brushed his hair out of his vision. “I must agree. She was only doing her duty and is being punished for it. It seems we are all in favor.”

Morgana stood up on all fours. “Mom, are you sure you should be coming too?” He rubbed his sleek fur against her arm with a worried frown. “After what happened only ten days ago…”

Airi smiled reassuringly and brushed his head with a hand. “I’ll be OK. I’ll need to go back anyway since I don’t plan to stop being a phantom thief, and this request…I’m taking it personally.” She was going to save her guardian. She was going to let Taiki’s name rest in peace, without it being tainted with guilt.

Staring at her for a moment, he nodded.

Taking out his phone, Akira tapped on the app and transported them to Mementos, their surroundings warping into its sick parody.

Once the ground solidified underneath their feet inside the dark subway entrance, Joker immediately gripped Elegant’s shoulder. “Feeling OK?”

Taking a deep breath, Elegant blinked in surprise. She didn’t feel any nausea this time. It was almost off putting because she had gotten used to feeling sick while in this part of the Metaverse. Was she really gaining immunity? Or was it because she was surrounded by her suns that glowed warmly around her, as if they chased the darkness away? “I’m feeling fine, no nausea or anything.” She reassured with a confident smile. “Must be due to my new self.” She couldn’t wait to see their faces when she finally summoned Xihe. She was completely overjoyed to know she could still keep helping the team without dragging them down.

Queen walked over to her side. “You experience a sort of nausea every time you enter Mementos? But you weren’t halted at all in Kaneshiro’s Palace…” She mused speculatively. “You were... extremely sick that time, but it seems it was mostly due to your already exhausted state. Is there something specifically in Mementos that’s causing this?”

Mona crossed his paws. “That’s exactly what I was thinking.” He added grimly. “If I recall, it was when we opened the first gate that she began feeling this way. Just as the Shadows are drawn underground, Elegant gets progressively sicker the further we go. We still don’t know why though…”

Stomping up to the noblewoman, Panther grabbed her by her shoulders, shoving Joker out of the way. “If you start feeling nauseous or you get weaker, you tell us immediately, OK?” She demanded firmly, ignoring her leader’s annoyed grunt. “I’m not going to let you endanger yourself again just because you think you’re slowing us down. No more of your martyr-like tendencies!”

Taken aback by her aggressive stance, Elegant could only blink. “U-Um...yeah. I understand,
Panther.”

Deflating a little, the dominatrix wrapped her arms around her. “Let us protect you for once. I’ll show you that I’m strong enough that you don’t need to mother me so much.”

Smiling softly, Elegant hugged her back. “I know you’re strong, but thank you.” She was so proud of her for taking things seriously.

Skull grinned, lacing his hands behind his head. “Yeah mom, let us handle some shit for once. We’re big kids now.” His grin turned excited. “Plus, I gotta show you guys my new self!”

Fox raised a brow. “‘New self’? And what is that supposed to mean?”

He only snickered. “You’ll just hafta wait for a dumb Shadow to come ‘round.”

Elegant narrowed her eyes. His new self? “Wait, don’t tell me....I’m guessing it’s not Captain Kidd anymore, huh?”

Taken aback, Skull sputtered and stared at her with wide eyes. “What?! How’d you know? Unless you…you too?! No Jeanne?!”

She smiled and winked. “You’ll just have to wait.” She repeated his statement.

The others watched them with confused frowns. What were they talking about?

Holding her hand out, Elegant summoned her new scythe. Her first one had been a pure silver with a purple grip. This one though, the one Hisoka had left her...It was completely black with silver accents. If she shifted it into the light, it shined gold, as if it beckoned safety and warmth even in darkness. The staff was shorter, but it had a chain on the bottom, meaning she could swing it around like a kusarigama. She didn’t know how to feel knowing that this weapon was given to her by her parents’ killer...but she would use it to save people. A weapon of death that was only used to help the innocents.

“Guys,” Joker called out as he took out his phone again. “We have a target to get to. Focus.”

That was pretty close to being scolded and Elegant inclined her head at her leader. “Right. Sorry for getting carried away.” She glanced to their left, just past the broken ticket machines, and saw it again. That blue light. What was it? It felt...familiar somehow, as if she had been in it before, but something in there now told her to keep away. Something dark...

Using the app, Joker transported them down to Chemdah Area 5’s rest point, making sure to keep an eye on the team’s noblewoman. They were close to where she had...had almost died. He wasn't risking her for anything.

Elegant flinched at the increased oppressive aura that seemed to pressed down on her, but other than that, she was fine. There was no nauseous feeling in the pit of her stomach, throat swelling, or even a headache. It felt so surreal but she should be grateful. She could keep going with them.

They ran down the escalators to Area 6 and drove Mona down to the next station. For some reason, they had been able to bypass all the wandering Shadows and made it to the Mementos Chamber without a single battle. “Man…” Skull grumbled in his seat. “Can’t we fight already?! I wanna show off my new side!”

Panther side-eyed him. “You keep saying that, but what do you mean exactly? You and Elegant…”
The noblewoman was practically bouncing in her seat in excitement, which was very out of character of her. “You’ll see as soon as we get to the Takases, I promise. I want to show off by completely annihilating them.” Because they deserved to be beaten into submission as she used to say as a child. They didn’t deserve any sort of mercy from her or anyone.

Queen slammed the gas pedal and propelled the vehicle into the dead silent Chamber where she then pressed down on the breaks. Rolling out of the car, they stared at the distorted couple in the middle of the room, black Metaverse flames licking around their bodies. “Those two look pretty sure of themselves.” Skull remarked with a scowl. “Real smug lookin’.”

Fox pursed his lips. “So they’re blackmailing that teacher, Kawakami, by using that incident where their child died.”

Panther gripped her whip. “But Kawakami-sensei did nothing wrong, right? She just wanted him to study so he’d do well in school. We have to help her!”

Queen clenched her fists. “That’s right. No matter how mediocre she believes she is now, she’s still Elegant’s legal guardian. It is imperative we help.”

With the exception of Joker and Mona, the others stared in surprise. “Wait, what?” Skull sputtered. “She’s your guardian?”

Elegant nodded grimly. “The person who died, Taiki? He was one of the older brothers in San’ya. Sensei signed on as my guardian to atone.” Her hand tightened around her scythe. “I want to repay her kindness by getting rid of these parasites.”

Joker twirled his dagger and glanced coldly at the couple. “Which means we have more of a reason to do this. Let’s get to it.”

They ran up to the middle aged adults. Upon their arrival, Toshio crossed his arms. “Money, money, money!” He laughed, his dual toned voice signifying him as a Shadow. “Hurry and pay us your money! It’s your “responsibility”!”

Hiromi giggled, a sickly sound that grated their ears like nails on chalkboard. “Clothes, handbags, makeup...There’s too many things I want!”

Narrowing his acid yellow eyes at their arrival, the uncle sneered. “Hm? Aren’t you Kawakami’s students...? Did you come to bring me money? That incompetent teacher is so worthless!” He cackled. “She should be grateful to be a source of income for me!”

Joker glared at them for their callous words. “She’s not worthless!”

Toshio scowled. “Shut up! Kawakami got in my way! I was going to use what happened to my son to get back at people! I was going to drag that stupid girl of hers, and get twice the amount of money!” Face twisting grotesquely, his limbs began to contort, the Metaverse slime gathering at their feet. “I’m not gonna lose...I won’t lose to elitists like you!”

With a rumble, they shed their human skin to be replaced by a Titania and an Oberon, the two fairies hovering in the air. “Take them down!” The Titania screeched, her green dress and blonde hair billowing slightly in the Metaverse winds.

Skull snarled, tightening his grip on his spiked metal bat. “How ‘bout you shut up, huh?!” Holding a hand to his mask, he called out with a vicious grin. “C’mon, Seiten Taisei!”

With a thunderous rumble, the monkey king of legend rode in on his cloud. Dressed in a red and
blue mythical Chinese outfit, a golden cape billowing behind him, and a yellow mohawk jutting from his helmet, he grinned mischievously under his motorcycle visor. With a twirl of his 8000k staff, he sent a Zionga at the fairy princess, charring her in a sea of electricity.

The others stared in shock at the new arrival. “What?!” Mona yelped from the back as he jumped up on Fox’s head for a better view. “Is that a new Persona?!”

Queen turned her wide eyes at him. “Is that something you didn’t know about?!”

Panther stared in awe. "Wow...He's so powerful!"

Hearing that, Skull rubbed under his nose with a giddy grin, Seiten Taisei covering his back for him.

Joker stared for a moment before he smirked. So this was what he was going on about at Ogikubo. A Persona was a reflection of a person’s soul, and Ryuji had really matured and found his niche with them.

The Oberon scowled, the action twisting his otherwise beautiful face. “Brats!” Flying up to Panther, he smacked her repeatedly with his baton. Grunting from the attacks, the dominatrix stood strong before retaliating with her whip, the end snapping his wings off with a sickening crunch.

Smiling serenely, Elegant stepped up beside her. “Let me.” Caressing her mask, she summoned her own new Persona. “Xihe!” The mother goddess floated behind her, a peaceful smile occupying her veiled face just like her wielder’s. Her multiple layers of embroidered robes floated around her as if she was underwater, and her long ivory hair was partially held up in a complicated knot, held with golden pins and head pieces that lavishly decorated it. The large golden disc behind her slowly rotated, six colored suns hovering peacefully at her command.

With a swish of a long sleeve, Xihe sent a Kouga at the Oberon, the light burning him and the stubs that used to be his wings. He screamed out in pain and slumped to the floor, black sludge oozing out of his wounds.

Skull gaped from next to her. “What?! Your Persona’s way cooler!”

Panther clapped her hands together. "Whoa! She's so pretty!"

Gasping in delight, Fox held up his hands, making it into a frame. “Such beauty! The noble chroma of gold, purple, red, and white!” He observed with wide eyes. “I must draw her!”

“These new Personas…” Queen grasped her chin thoughtfully. “Six suns…”

Joker stared in awe. No longer was it the familiar cold elegance of Jeanne. She had been refined into the warm grace of a goddess. Could they all have a new Persona? Did he count as well?

Snapping out of his thoughts, he ran up to the downed fairy king and slashed with his dagger, making sure he was down for the count. Back flipping away, he high fived Panther who then jumped into the air and lashed out with her whip, tearing the fairy queen to pieces.

In a splash of black liquid, the couple returned to their human forms, postures slumped in defeat. “You’re looking down on me, too?” Toshio muttered. “Deep down inside, you’re laughing at me, aren’t you..?”

Hiromi sobbed, covering her face in shame. “Name brands...Esthetic appointments...Without them, people will laugh…”
Elegant frowned angrily at their reasons. “No one’s laughing. No one is happy with this. Why do you care more about your image than the fact that you’re ruining someone’s life?” Her eyes hardened. “Do you think Taiki would want this?”

The uncle could only bow his head. “...We’re terrible human beings. Taiki and his real parents were different...My sister and her husband were both high level elites at big name corporations. Always looking at us coldly…” He clenched his jaw. “That’s why I let our son experience what it’s like to be forced to grovel!”

Skull glared with disgust. “What the fuck…”

“It felt nice to see him gradually break down from working so much…” Hiromi confessed with a bitter laugh.

Clenching her fists, Elegant took a deep breath to try to calm down. “You two are terrible human beings.” She stated coldly. “Making an innocent person suffer just because you had suffered…”

Toshio chuckled bitterly. “I guess this is why everyone’s looked down on us...Now I’m questioning if his birth parents really did look down on us…”

“I was happy as long as I was with Toshio,” Hiromi continued quietly. “But I forgot all about it. I became obsessed with money...” She burst into tears. “I’m sorry, Taiki…”

“He really was a good kid…” The uncle confessed with a sigh.

Joker frowned. “If you’re really sorry, then you have to apologize to Kawakami-sensei too.”

They nodded. “Right...we’ll do that.” Glowing white, they disappeared and dropped their Treasure as well as ¥17,600.

Joker picked it up and divided it between them. “Anything else to do while we’re here?”

Queen grasped her chin. “Could we go to a Rest Area? There’s something that I noticed earlier. It’s important to speak about.”

Blinking, the leader nodded and gestured for Mona to change into the van. They rode back up to Area 5 where they all took a seat in the waiting room. “So…” Queen crossed her legs. “When Skull had summoned his new Persona, Seiten Taisei, correct?”

Skull nodded, leaning back in his chair and spreading his legs out. “Yep. Got ‘im a few days ago.” He grinned. “He’s pretty cool! But apparently not as cool as Elegant’s.” He sent a tiny glare at the noblewoman who smiled and waved. “Takin’ my spotlight...”

The biker nodded. “From what I observed, he did considerably more damage than he used to with Captain Kidd, and it wasn’t as if the Shadow was weak to lightning. That means these new Personas you two gained are exceptionally more powerful than your old ones.”

Panther leaned forward in her seat, furrowing her brow. “But...how did they get these new Personas? We haven’t gotten them, I still have Carmen. What about you guys?”

Queen and Fox both shook their heads. Mona crossed his paws as he stood up on the seat. “I think...those were their Ultimate Personas.”

Joker raised a brow. “‘Ultimate’?”
The feline nodded. “An Ultimate Persona forms when an individual takes up a resolution in their hearts. Basically, it means that they have a goal that their entire being strives for. Their Persona changes in accordance to that wish, granting them the power to fight for it.”

“Uhh…” Skull scrunched up his face. “So, I’m stronger ‘cause I know what I wanna do?”

Queen nodded. “Yes. It could be a promise, or something you feel strongly about. Had something changed in you two?”

“A promise..?” Skull whispered to himself before a wide grin spread on his face as he remembered his oath. “Hell yeah. I get why now.”

Fox gave him an unimpressed look as he leaned against the glass wall. “You hadn’t answered the question.”

Elegant softened. A promise. She promised Rui that she would keep going, to make sure no one would end up like her, and that she would always stick by Joker’s side through thick and thin.

A red gloved hand was placed on top of her own purple one and she looked up at her leader who sat next to her. “Promise?” He whispered with a smirk.

She beamed. “Promise.”

“The next thing I wanted to bring your attention to,” Queen continued. “Was Elegant’s Persona in particular. Xihe, right?”

The noblewoman nodded. “I did a little studying last night. She’s a Chinese sun goddess who birthed ten suns.”

“That!” The biker pointed out, sitting up attentively. “The ten suns is what’s striking to me. When you summoned her, she only had six, and when Skull, Panther, and Joker attacked, the yellow, pink, and red suns glowed briefly.” She grasped her chin pensively. “Do those suns represent us? Is there more to this connection?”

The others stared in surprise, with Skull sitting up in his seat. “So like, she’s a mom to ten suns? Like how you’re our mom?”

Elegant smiled sheepishly. “I guess so. I haven’t had her long so I’m not sure yet, but I do feel a sort of connection with you guys, especially when you’re in battle. I think…” She grasped her chin thoughtfully. She could sense them next to her, so she had a deeper connection somehow. Could she help them even more with this new power? “I think I might be able to do more for us with Xihe, but it’s too soon to say.”

Panther ooh’ed. “So you really are our mom!” She grinned teasingly. “Are you able to track us so you can scold us for being out late at night?”

Elegant deadpanned. “I mean…if you’re asking, I should just scold you anyway.”

Fox smiled calmly. “I doubt there is much scolding to be done. If we are finished, shall we go? I have an exhibit scheduled tomorrow.”

Joker nodded, getting up from his seat. “Right, let’s go then. We should see if there’s a change with Kawakami-sensei.”
Kawakami rank 7 & 8

So Airi no longer feels sick in Mementos, though she's aware of its oppressive aura. Could it be the end of her mysterious illness?...Or not? -wink-

The spring semester begins tomorrow for me, and honestly, my updates haven't been on time either. It'll probably be 1-2 updates a week for a long while. Sorry to everyone who's looking forward to reading a lot more but we'll all have to be patient ;A; My health hasn't been the greatest either lately, so...welp. -shrugs- I already finished writing Futaba's Palace and I'm getting up to the beach scene, so hopefully by spring break I could begin Hawaii and then Haru's section. I can't believe this long ass fic is halfway done...

Once again, thanks for reading and keeping up with me! <3
Chapter 149

Chapter Notes

How's everyone doing? I had a tough week but I survived to bring you another chapter, though it's a bit shorter than usual.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-EVENING-

Once they left the Metaverse, they separated for the day. Yusuke had gone straight home to prepare for the exhibit tomorrow, while Airi and Akira went to the cafe.

Sojiro greeted them languidly as usual from behind the counter, and there was an elderly couple Airi kind of knew sat at one of the booths, a cup of coffee in front of them on the table. She had bumped into the elderly woman a few weeks ago at the supermarket and recommended her to go to Dr. Takemi for her arthritis.

Morgana sneakily jumped out of the bag and out of the door without any of the adults noticing, saying he was going to wander around, maybe keep Yusuke company.

“We haven’t studied in a while.” Airi reminded her boyfriend as they took a seat at a booth. “Plus, we should be together in case Nee-chan calls us. I hope they’ll apologize to her soon…”

Akira nodded. That did make sense. Using the restaurant burglars as a frame of reference, a change of Heart usually occurred within two hours, so something could happen.

They took out their books and began from where they left off in class today, catching up on the material. Airi tapped her mechanical pencil as she made out a schedule on the side. There was no doubt she would be doing another study session at school for whoever was interested, and now that Makoto was on their side and their friend, she’d help out too. She could do it two days beforehand like last time, or she could extend it by starting a day earlier...

Akira finished the first couple of problems by himself, finding it surprisingly easy. He used to struggle with schoolwork, but ever since he had come here and began studying with her, everything became easier. Maybe because she never discouraged or insulted him when he got things wrong like his father had, or just outright scorned him like his mother.

Tokyo was so much better for him than Mishima, and he wished he could stay here forever. If only...

Both their phones rang out in the quiet cafe and they took it out, noticing it was a message from Kawakami.

Ka: Hey! Something amazing just happened!
Ka: I think I’m still in shock...
Ka: Kurusu-kun, can you request me tonight?
Ka: Are you with him right now, Airi? I want you to hear this too!
Ak: Got it.
Ai: OK!

Putting his phone away, Akira got up and walked up to the yellow public telephone on the counter, dialing the already familiar phone number. Airi began to pack up their things to bring upstairs. She didn’t think Sojiro knew about this and she didn’t want him to think they were doing weird things.

“Oh, aren’t you the deary who lives down the street?” The grandma gently called out to her. “I should thank you. Dr. Takemi has been a big help with my health lately!”

Airi smiled happily as she shouldered the two bags. “I’m glad you went to her! She’s a very competent doctor, isn’t she.”

The grandma laughed genially. “She’s such a dear. She tries to hide her kindness with that gruff demeanor, but I can definitely see she cares very much for her patients. Well, Anata, shall we go?”

Her husband nodded and took out a few bills. “It is getting late. Thanks for the coffee, Sakura-san.”

Sojiro only waved him away. “Anytime. I should be closing up anyway….” He watched as the two left the cafe before turning to the cellist. “You’re stayin’ late, right? There’s some curry left over in the pot. Help yourselves.” He took off his apron and hung folded it beneath the counter. “I’m going home. Akira, make sure to lock up once your guests are gone.”

Placing the phone back on the receiver, Akira nodded sheepishly. Guess the boss knew about his occasional maid.

The barista left the cafe and the two thieves moved upstairs into the attic, Akira moving the table out for them to study some more in the meanwhile. The TV came with it and Airi turned it on. “Intermittent service Interruptions have been fixed. The ISP announced that the problems were caused by an external attack. The perpetrators did not issue a statement, but they are suspected to be an anonymous hacker group.”

Airi frowned, sitting down on the couch. “A hacker group..? Where did I hear about that before…”

Akira sat down across from her and opened his books again. “I guess they’re talking about Medjed. Mishima told me they used to be something like us, but now they hack everyone.”

She furrowed her brow at that. “Like us? As in people who do things around the law? Hm…” She rested her chin on her palm. “Do you think we’ll end up like that? Taking Hearts for our own reasons?” She questioned quietly. She didn’t want to to be like that. Her purpose was to help innocents, never harming them like what Medjed was doing.

Akira shook his head. “No. We have our rule, remember? As long as we all think it’s right, then it is.” He reassured. “We won’t go wrong.”

She smiled softly at his conviction. “Yeah…”

The bell rang from downstairs, signalling someone had entered the cafe, and heels clacked noisily on the wooden floors as they ran up the stairs, showing Kawakami in her maid uniform. “You guys!” She greeted exuberantly, breathing heavily as if she had ran here. “Takase-kun’s guardians came to my house and apologized to me! They told me I won’t have to send any more money! And that they’ll return everything I paid them.”

Brightening, Airi got up and hugged her. It worked. It really worked. She saved her guardian. She
hadn't failed this time. “That’s great! I’m so happy for you, Nee-chan!”

Laughing, Kawakami hugged her back. “I’m so glad that they won’t threaten you too...It was weird though,” She let her arms fall. “It’s like they’re completely different people...” Her brow furrowed. “Like what happened with Kamoshida.”

Taking a step back, Airi refused to meet her gaze, and Akira slid his eyes away as he sweated nervously.

Kawakami stared at them as they continued to stay silent. “…Hey. You two wouldn’t be, um...Never mind. Anyway,” She grinned. “It’s such a relief. They apologized about Takase-kun, and admitted that what they did was terrible.”

She bit her lip. “They even told me that I am a good teacher. It felt really nice to know I wasn’t actually incompetent...So,” She took a deep breath. “I decided to really quit my part-time maid job today. I’ve been talking to my boss about it ever since Saturday. It took a while to work out who would cover my shifts.” She placed a hand on her hip. “I didn’t want to inconvenience anyone. Now I can finally make a fresh start as a teacher. I can take care of my students and earn their trust. That’s the ideal teacher I aspire to become.” She grinned. “I bet I’ll be an old woman by the time I achieve my dreams.”

Airi snorted and gave her an amused smile. “You’re not giving yourself enough credit, Sensei. You’re already a good teacher. I learn a lot better here than I did back in my hometown.”

She beamed at the praise. “That’s probably only due to Airi, but I’ll take it. I’m still within the demographic age range of what’s considered “young.”” Squaring her shoulders, the smile fell from her face, replaced by a firm stare. “...I was always able to rely on you, Master. You helped me come to a lot of realizations, because you were such a good listener. You even…” Reaching out, she grasped Airi’s hand. “You even helped my family. I can let Takase-kun rest in peace now. Thanks again.” Her eyes widened. “Oh, crap!”

They looked at her quizzically.

Gathering her skirts, Kawakami curtseyed, giving him a pouty smile with sparkly eyes. “Thank you for using our service!” She said cutey-like. “Today marks the day I graduate from being your maid~.”

Laughing slightly, Akira bowed back. “Thank you for your service.”

She giggled, letting her dress fall back to its original shape. “Thank YOU for your hard work as a master!”

Smiling, Airi took a seat on the couch again. “Maybe your first goal as a hard working teacher should be making a study group?” She asked hopefully. “Take the heat off me?”

Kawakami snorted. “As if, Ms. Class President. I’m not supposed to be helping students for the exams, but I can let you use the room again.”

Airi slumped. “OK, thanks anyway.”

Laughing at her reaction, the teacher-turned-maid-turned-teacher slid her gaze to her other student. “At any rate, what are you going to do once I stop coming here? Can you handle the cleaning on your own?” She frowned. “I’m pretty worried about the state this place is in, and I know you never ask Airi to clean for you, or else this place would be spotless. You don’t put much thought into your diet either...”
Akira sweatdropped at her mother henning. “You don’t need to worry so much, I’ll be fine.” He slung an arm around Airi’s shoulders and pulled her closer. “I have Ms. Class President here to watch for me, so you can pay more attention to everyone else.”

Blushing at the bold move, the cellist covered her heated cheeks with her hands. “Uh, Nee-chan...We’re to-”

“Together, I know.” Kawakami interrupted, amused at her shyness. “You think I didn’t see it ages ago? I had my suspicions about you two getting together ever since May. You two are a little too sweet when you’re together.”

“Sweet?” Airi squeaked. “Since May?”

Akira shrugged, unabashed. “Everyone’s been saying we were a couple since we met.” He grinned, giving her a small peck on the side of her head. “I ain’t even mad.” How could he be when it led to this?

Rolling her eyes but smiling exasperatedly, Kawakami placed her hands on her hips. “Keep your hands to yourself, Kurusu-kun. That’s still my little sister you’re embarrassing in front of me.”

Smiling sheepishly, he took back his arm. “Right. Sorry, Sensei.”

Staring at them for a moment, Kawakami softened. “Don’t be. I’m happy for you two, especially since you saved…” She paused. “Never mind. Well, this is the end of my last shift as a maid.” She curtseyed again. “Thank you for everything. I’ll protect you as your homeroom teacher. Oh, and I’ll keep my initial promise too to let you keep slacking off in class, but make sure you keep your grades up!”

He inclined his head. “It’s been my pleasure.”

Straightening up, she smiled again. “I’ll see you two at school tomorrow. You’ll be seeing a new me!” Waving goodbye, she walked downstairs and out of the cafe.

They grinned at each other, their chests light at seeing just how happy their teacher was now compared to how she was earlier this morning. Yet more proof that they were doing good in this world.

Their phones rang out.

An: Kaneshiro got rid of those photos, right?
Ma: That’s what he said.
R: You think we can trust him?
Ma: I doubt he’d lie if he really had a change of heart.
Ma: Though we can be more thorough about this. Airi, can you ask Nishiki?
Ai: On it.

Opening another chat, she texted her ex-foster brother. It had been almost two weeks since she had heard from him so hopefully he was OK.

Ai: Nishiki, can I ask you something?

After a few minutes, she finally got a reply.

Ni: Yo.
Ai: Did Kaneshiro delete those photos of us inside the bar?
Ni: I deleted them. He was too busy having a breakdown.
Ni: I gotta go, I’m on a job right now.
Ai: Be careful and don’t hurt too many people.
Ni: Comes with the job.

She sighed. What was he doing that he couldn't tell her anything, not even a smidgen of information? She had known he was higher up in the chain than Kaneshiro...but how high? What exactly did he do on these jobs? He had already admitted to her that he had killed before...

Ai: Nishiki told me he deleted them and any copies.
Ma: Then that answers that.
R: Looks like we’re all clear then!
R: That guy sure is useful.
Y: But can we really trust that?
An: You mean Kaneshiro having a change of heart?
Y: No, I’m relatively certain he did. That is not the issue.
Y: Despite Kaneshiro’s change, his organization remains intact.
Y: Can we really trust Nishiki who worked alongside him?
Ai: ...With this, yes. I’m not saying to trust him completely, he is still yakuza, but in this case, yes.
Ai: I was told that the scams were Kaneshiro’s assignment to prove himself. He was supposed to begin his own family branch.
R: Whoa, so he was gonna be a captain or whatever? That’s kinda scary...
Y: Loss of the leader does not necessarily spell out the demise of the group.
An: So you’re saying we might have to fight them again?
Ma: I doubt it. Some groups that lack a strong guiding hand will simply crumble, such as Kaneshiro’s branch.
Ma: Nishiki must be of a higher rank to have terminated the whole operation.
Ma: I’m not keen on asking for his help though. He may have lead us into another trap if Airi was not part of our group.
Ak: We’ll be fine.
Ma: All we can do is wait.
Y: Hopefully Kaneshiro’s confession motivates the police to crack down on the mafia.
Y: I would love nothing more than to see them defeated once and for all.
R: That part’ll be up to Makoto’s sis.
Ai: Just rest for now. We won’t have to worry about this soon.

Airi breathed a sigh, and leaned against his shoulder. “I’m so glad everything’s working out…”

Akira rested his cheek against her head. “Same...I was a little scared Sensei wouldn’t accept us though.”

She bit back a smile. Her leader and boyfriend was scared? He was usually an unmovable stone, unfazed by anything, so to hear him admit a weakness was surprising. “Scared? Why would you be?”

He exhaled and rested a hand on her waist. “Because if she didn’t like us together, she could’ve done something about it.” And that was one of, if not his biggest, fear. Because Airi was his light. If she left, he would be stuck in the darkness again.
His friends all cast their beacons as if they were the stars in his night sky, but she was the sun that illuminated his life. Call him sappy since they’d only been together for a week, but he really loved her.

Softening at the hint of insecurity in his voice, Airi snuggled closer into his side, wrapping one arm around his waist. “I’m not going anywhere. I promised, right? To stay by your side?” Tilting her head up, she planted a light kiss on his jaw. “And you promised to stay by my side, too.”

Smiling warmly, he nodded and leaned down, brushing his lips against hers. Their mouths moved together, as if they couldn’t get enough of each other now that they were so close. His heart leaped into his throat as he parted his lips and wordlessly asked for permission. How far could he go? How far did he want to go?

His request was granted and his tongue met hers, hesitant at first, but the longer they stayed together, the more they became acquainted. It was hot, and wet, to caress her mouth so intimately, but...he really liked it.

She angled her head just a little to the right so the rim of his glasses wouldn’t nudge uncomfortably into her cheeks. His other hand landed on her hip, dangerously close to her rear, and gave her a slight squeeze. She moaned quietly into their intense kiss, face red from both the intimacy and the lack of oxygen.

Gripping the front of his shirt, she forced herself to pull away, a string of saliva bridging their tongues before it snapped and landed on their chins. “We’ve only been together for a short time…” She quietly protested. She didn’t want to stop, but she knew they were going a little too fast.

Licking his lips and tasting the remnants of her honey green tea lip balm, he rested his forehead against hers, pupils blown out behind his foggy glasses. “Time is only a human concept.” He whispered mischievously, leaning down to kiss her neck. “We could technically go as fast as we want…” He didn't know what he was doing, but he did know one thing.

He loved it.

She reddened at his answer and pushed him away, him grunting as his back landed against the armrest. “C’mon, I’m supposed to be the pervert in this relationship and I’m telling us to stop for now.” She scolded. “Plus, I know you haven’t been studying lately because of what’s happened, and I’m not letting my boyfriend start lagging behind in his grades again.”

He quietly groaned but acquiesced. “Fine…”

Except they ended up fooling around even further than either of them thought they would. Good thing Morgana was still out.

They didn’t need him to catch them half naked.

Someone on FFNET asked if there was going to be art of Airi in her thief outfit, so I finally got around to drawing it. It's my best artwork yet, and I'm really proud of how close it is to the actual P5 artstyle! I'll be updating this into chapter 3 as well. Sooner or later, I'll probably draw Jeanne, as well as a head profile for Airi both in and out of her PT outfit.
Chapter End Notes

Kawakami rank 9

So the end of that leads into chapter 1 of "My Heart Is A Furnace" winkwink
Chapter 150

Chapter Notes

oh man we've made it to chapter 150 lololol why is this fic so long what was i thinking

See the end of the chapter for more notes

---7/5, TUESDAY, EARLY MORNING, SUBWAYS.

Yusuke sighed as they waited for their train on the Ginza line. The station was akin to a hot swamp as the humidity rose with barely any air flow. “It’s quite hot today…” He remarked, even though he was completely bare of any sweat.

Airi groaned next to him, pulling at the collar of her polo to try to cool herself off. “Is summer over yet?”

Akira snorted. “It’s just barely begun.” He placed a hand on her shoulder. “You’ll live.”

“But I won’t…” Morgana wheezed from inside the bag, the humidity of the station and the lack of air and space inside leaving him in a hot mess of fur.

“Kaneshiro’s deadline is this weekend, isn’t it?” The artist murmured, eyeing the crowds of other students and working adults waiting on the platform. “His change of heart draws near…” He smiled. “The Phantom Thieves will be even more renowned than before when this goes public.”

Akira smiled and nodded. “I can’t wait. It’s going to get really busy.”

He chuckled. “I suppose. It’s not a bad feeling to have your efforts recognized.”

“We’ll be swamped with Mementos requests then.” Airi added. “Let’s keep working hard.”

When they arrived at school today, they found Kawakami buzzing around like a busy bee, invigorated with an energy she hadn’t felt in a long time. She smiled at her students, she gave them advice, she stopped them in the hallways to ask how they were, and took their current lessons seriously.

Everyone was surprised, but not as much as their homeroom since they had known her longer. She had said she would go to the cafe later for another chat, so until then, they had things to do.

Makoto had said she was hanging out with Eiko, Akira left for Shibuya to meet up with Yusuke for the exhibition, and Airi had gone to visit Shiho with both Ryuji and Ann. Today was the day she was being checked out. Ann had been there the entire time while Shiho and her family signed all the documents stating their agreements, payments, and recommendations.

Ryuji fidgeted his leg awkwardly near the back, not wanting to interrupt the clearly private moment, and Airi placed a hand on his back, silently telling him she was here. They were both technically strangers. They had never met the rest of Shiho’s family, and in Ryuji’s case, he never
even met her mother. Ann was practically part of the Suzui family since they filled the void of her real parents, and she and Shiho were as close as sisters.

Once Chiyo at the reception desk cleared them, the model grasped her best friend’s hand and slowly guided her to the doors. Shiho was shaking with both excitement and anxiety, this being the first time she would be out in the real world in almost three months. It showed with her pale face, sweated brow, and the slight shake of her legs as they were still too stiff to do more than walking.

Airi and Ryuji stepped up behind them, ready to step in if anything happened, and Suzui-san guided them outside. Once the doors slid open, the ex-patient stopped and took a deep breath, smelling the city ozone and carbon monoxide from the nearby cars, a stark difference from the sterile air inside the hospital. “…I’m outside.” She whispered, a tear escaping the corner of her eye. “I’m…outside now.”

Ann nodded, fighting the urge to cry in happiness for her. “Yeah, we’re outside and no one’s going to do anything to you, or else they’ll have to fight me.”

Shiho laughed slightly, a hint of a true smile breaking through. “…Thank you, Ann.” She turned around and gave them a small smile as well. “Thank you to you too, Airi-senpai, Sakamoto-kun.”

Airi smiled gently. “Of course, Shiho-chan. We’re here for you too.”

Ryuji grinned and gave her a thumbs up. “Damn right! Just give us a call if you ever need anythin’, and we’ll do our best to help out!”

Biting her lip, Shiho nodded. “I don’t know how to repay you guys…”

Ann shook her head and slung an arm around her shoulders, making sure to be careful with how much weight she dispensed. “Just focus on yourself and your health. That’s…” She clenched her jaw for a second. “That’s all we can ask for. C’mon, let’s get you home.”

Shiho nodded and waved bye before entering the car. Ann was about to head in after her but stopped for a second to turn to her fellow thieves. “…Thanks for coming. This means a lot to Shiho, and even though I want to be her strength, I…” She sighed. “I know she wouldn’t have recovered this much without your help. She wouldn’t be alive right now if not for you, Airi, and she wouldn’t have gotten the resolve to leave her hospital room without you, Ryuji.” Stepping forward, she enveloped the both of them in a hug. “Thanks, guys.” She sniffed quietly.

Reddening at how open she was, Ryuji patted her back. “Yeah, ‘course. She went through way worse stuff than I did, so…” He muttered solemnly, face soft of a grin or frown. “I’m glad she’s getting better.”

Airi hugged her back as well, wrapping one arm around her waist. “Like I told Shiho-chan, of course I would help. She’s my friend too, and…” She bit her lip. “It’s still partially my fault that she had gotten so injured. I’m glad to have helped her in what little I could.”

Sniffling again, the model took a step back and wiped her eyes of any stray moisture. “Yeah, still…I appreciate it. I’m going to go with Shiho back to her house, so I’ll see you guys tomorrow.”

They waved farewell as she got into the car and with a start, they drove off into the streets, disappearing in the sea of vehicles on the main road. Stretching his arms in the air, Ryuji sighed. “Well…We ain’t got anythin’ else to do, right?”

Airi shook her head. “Not unless you want to come with me to Dr. Takemi’s?”
He gave her a confused look. “Wait, why? You feelin’ OK?” He looked her up and down, trying to find a trace of illness or weakness. “You aren’t gonna faint on me, right?” He pointed his thumb at the building behind them. "Hospital’s right there."

She huffed. “It’s for you. I noticed back in Kamoshida’s castle that your knee gave out on you, and you were occasionally wincing when we were at the gym too. You’re not completely healed, huh?”

He looked away. “It’s fine…” He muttered. “It just twinges sometimes, but it’ll go away.”

She frowned worriedly. “Still...Maybe we should check. I don't want to think it's something more serious.”

He heaved a sigh. “Yes, mom…”

She burst into laughter and patted his shoulder. “C’mon, son, let’s go to the nice doctor.”

“...Well.” Takemi murmured as she moved the portable X-ray screen around the knee, the monitor showing an in-depth view of the healed bone. “The bone is healing well, but here,” She tapped the spot where his knee and thigh connected. “The quadricep isn’t healing correctly. You have been tearing it in a way that if left alone could harm it permanently.” She wrote her observations down on her clipboard. “Have you been stressing it?”

Ryuji rubbed the back of his head sheepishly, stretching his legs out on the cot inside the examination room. “Uh...I’ve been goin’ to the gym more often since Ann’s been goin’.”

Airi smiled slyly from her seat next to the bed. “Oh, do tell.” She teased. “What else have you two been doing together, hm?”

“Sh-Shuddup…” He pouted, embarrassment coloring his face. “I just don’t want her to hurt herself trying to lift a barbell or somethin’…”

She only hummed with amusement. “Sure, whatever you say…” She knew that he meant he was really trying to protect the model in the only way he knew how. It was sweet to see what had been in the works for years finally unfolding right before her eyes.

Pushing off with her feet, Takemi rolled her chair back to her desk and scribbled some things on his patient file before taking out a packet of white powder. “Here, this is M-ndin, which should help reinforce the skeletal frame in your leg as well as regulate your muscle fibers. Take this once a week, preferably at night. It has…” Her eyes hooded with amusement. “Side effects.”

Ryuji gulped nervously but hesitantly took the prescription. “...S-Side effects?”

A smile began to spread on her face. “Yes, such as dizziness, fainting spells, hysteria, crippling stomach aches, spontaneous diarrhea, liver failure...and death.”

The blood slowly drained from his face as she continued to list the symptoms, outright sputtering at the last side effect. “N-No way would I take this then! I’m not gonna risk dyin’ just to help my leg!”
Airi covered her mouth as she broke down, laughing so hard that barely any sound escaped her. The doctor was in a good mood if she was joking like this.

“I’m only joking.” Takemi smiled slyly at his reaction. “There shouldn’t be any side effects. I only recommend taking it at night because it’s most effective when you’re asleep. Otherwise, do as you please. Pay at the counter.”

Slumping in relief, Ryuji dragged himself off the cot and out of the room. “Damn, you’re scary…”

Airi was about to get up as well when the doctor called out for her. “Wait, Kimisawa-chan.” Rolling her chair back to a filing cabinet that was next to her desk, Takemi took out another patient file, the tab reading “KIMISAWA, A.” Wheeling back to her desk, she opened up the folder and took out a sheet. “This concerns your last visit here when my little guinea pig brought you unconscious and dangerously overdosed on caffeine.” Her cool dark eyes slid over to her. “I hope you haven’t been consuming any coffee since?”

Airi shook her head. “No, I haven’t. I’ve been abstaining since Akira has confiscated all my coffee packets, and Sojiro-Ojisan refuses to give me any caffeinated drink.” She bit her lip. “Um, I’ve been feeling fine. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with me anymore, so…”

“Unfortunately, I can’t trust your word.” Takemi twirled her pen in her hand. “Self-diagnosing is unreliable at best and harmful at worst. Just humor me for a while. First, have you experienced any…nausea?”

Airi shook her head. “No, not at all. Only some weakness, and that had disappeared after four days.”

“Hm…” She noted it down. “Weakness would be expected after overdosing on caffeine. It could’ve done irreparable damage to your heart and brain. It’s good that guinea pig brought you in when he did…”

Biting her lip, Airi bowed her head. “Right, I’m sorry. I worried a lot of people.”

“I’m pretty sure I witnessed him having a breakdown, even when surrounded by all your other friends.” Takemi remarked quietly, closing the file on the desk. “…I’m sure it was a relief for him to see you recover.”

Airi bit back a smile, cheeks warming at hearing how worried Akira was. Even though she felt bad for causing him so much stress, she could only love him even more for caring so much about her. He always made her feel so special, she would almost be embarrassed for blushing like a lovesick teenager. Even though that was what she was.

“Well, you’re free to go.” The doctor stated languidly. “I’m sure your friend is waiting outside for you. Make sure you let Kurusu know he has an appointment tomorrow.” She smiled, a hint of excitement shining through. “I’m almost finished.”

Airi lit up. “That’s great! I’m confident you can do it and cure Miwa-chan!”

Takemi only chuckled at her confidence and shooed her out of the room. Ryuji was waiting for her in the waiting room, and straightened up when he noticed her leaving the office. They took the elevator out of the building and walked over to Leblanc, her waving hi to the mother, daughter, and dog that was always walking around the small and cramped neighborhood.

The bell on the door of the cafe rang at their arrival and Sojiro looked up at them with a raised brow from behind the counter, the rest of the cafe bereft of any customers. “Oh, hey. Akira’s still
out, but you’re welcome to take a seat and wait for him. I hear summer vacation’s almost here for you students, huh?”

Throwing himself into one of the booths, Ryuji groaned and slumped over the table. “Yeah, but we got finals before that...I’m gonna bomb it.”

Airi smiled serenely, the action sending a shiver down his spine. “No, you won’t. Now that Makoto is our friend, you have twice the amount of resources to excel in the exams. If you fail…” Her smile turned even more peaceful, if that was possible. “I’ll be sure to let you know how disappointed I am, as well as Sakamoto-san herself.”

He gulped, fearfully scooting back away from her. “Y-Yes, mom…”

Sojiro let out a loud snort. “’Mom’? I could see that…” He shook his head with amusement. “You’re definitely Akami’s daughter.”

Airi only smiled sheepishly, a small blush occupying her face at being compared to her mother. “Hehe...It’s only natural. She did birth me.” She unzipped her bag and took out her books. “OK, Ryuji. We’re studying. You need the most help out of all of us.”

He let out a small whimper before reluctantly copying her, taking out his own books that were more ragged and inked than hers. They spent the next hour with him attempting to rip his own hair out in frustration, but gradually calmed as he started to finally understand what she was talking about.

“...And then you should get the answer.” She pointed to the calculus question in his textbook with the tip of her pencil. “Try it now.”

Sticking his tongue out of the corner of his mouth, Ryuji scribbled down the numbers into the equation, his handwriting sloppy and all over the place, but managed to finally get the right answer. “I did it!” He whooped, throwing his pencil into the air. “I’m a genius!”

Airi stifled her laugh and nodded. “Mhm, definitely a genius.” She pointed to the next, more intricate question. “Now try this one out.”

He immediately groaned and hung his head, the pencil thudding off his head once it fell back down. “These never end…”

She smiled sympathetically. “You’re doing really well though. I guess you only ever needed someone to just explain it straight up instead of out of the textbook.”

He rolled his neck, exhaling when he felt it pop. “Yeah...the textbook’s as dry as bones, and I always get distracted by video games...Oh!” He perked up. “Speakin’ of entertainment, when we gonna finally do that movie night?” He looked at her excitedly.

The sight reminded her of a puppy and she had to try her hardest not to burst out laughing. “Umm...how about after the exams? So we can have more time to celebrate. It’ll be summer vacation then, and it would be nice to make it a sleepover…” She mumbled, writing down the logistics of that kind of event. She’d have to stock up on food. Bills weren’t a problem anymore since she used Mementos as a secondary source of income. It was amazing that she could be making money and saving people’s lives at the same time. If only she could put this on her future resume.

“Well…” Ryuji fidgeted his leg excitedly. “Tell me when we’re gonna do it, and I’ll bring all the classics I got!” He grinned, completely abandoning his studying. “I noticed last time I was over at
your place that you don’t have a lot of movies, so we gotta do something ‘bout that!”

Airi huffed with amusement. “Yeah, well, I don’t have time to watch movies so there wasn’t any point to buying them. Which ones would you bring?”

He hummed. “Prolly “My Neighbor Totoro,” ‘cause we still gotta show Morgana why cat buses are so popular. Maybe “Spirited Away,” that’s a classic. “Howl’s Moving Castle”?” He grinned. “I dunno, I’m just totally up for a Ghibli marathon!”

“Now that you mention them…” Airi brightened. “I’m up for one, too! It’s been a while since I’ve watched any of them, and I don’t think Yusuke had ever watched them.” The last time she watched any movie was in San’ya. It was one of the few luxuries they could afford.

Nishiki and Taiki had dug up an old TV and VCR from a junkyard and brought it back to their building. All the kids clamored around it since they hadn’t had such amenities in a long while. She made it a point to have a weekly movie night so they could all forget about their bleak situations, just for a little. Taiki had also been able to find the classics in a bargain bin since VCRs were out of style by then. Maybe she could ask Nishiki what happened to the kids. She hadn’t gone back in a long time, ever since she entered high school, and she knew they were too smart and full of hope to give up.

The bell rang on the cafe door as it opened, and they both looked up to see Yusuke and Akira walk in, the former having an irritated frown on his face. Morgana jumped out of the bag and up onto her lap. Idly giving him a pat, Airi looked at them worriedly. “Are you guys OK? Did something happen?”

Yusuke only frowned harder. “That is…one way to put it. It has only fueled my passion to create the perfect piece!” He raised a hand to the air dramatically. “I cannot give up..!”

They looked at him quizzically even as Akira smiled indulgently, taking a seat on one of the bar stools. “Uh…” Ryuji began slowly, not really understanding. “...Sure, dude. We’ve got your back.”

Sojiro raised a brow at their antics. “If you’re gonna crowd around my cafe, at least order something. Akira, make some coffee for your friends.”

Akira nodded and stood up to go around the counter, taking each container of beans from the shelves. Airi watched with a fond smile as he got to work, sifting ground powder into each individual filter with deft hands, making sure none of it spilled on his green apron. He really looked like he was in his natural environment as if he belonged here. The cafe fit him well.

The quiet and calm atmosphere was the first impression a person would see, but each container of beans held a depth and flavor that endeared the customer to the gentle hands that worked with them. Some were bitter, some had a bite to it, and some were creamy and sweet, but no one can deny he was a mysterious individual with many layers to his personality. He had every flavor to cater to each person’s tastes, and that was why they were so attracted to him.

Carefully lifting the saucers, Akira brought the just finished coffees to their booth, using his pinky as a crutch so the dark liquid wouldn’t spill out once he placed it on the table. “Enjoy.” He bowed with a hand on his stomach.

Airi covered her mouth with a hand as she smiled. Such a gentleman.

Straightening up, he walked over to the fridge and took out a can of soda, popping the top off to drain the contents into a glass before walking back to place it in front of Ryuji. “Cola OK with
you?"

The ex-runner grinned. “Hey, you remembered I don’t like coffee! Thanks man!” Lifting the glass
to his mouth, he drained half of it in large gulps before putting it down and letting out a big sigh.
“That was great...Awright, I’m done with studyin’.” He slammed his books closed and threw them
into his bag. “I can’t do this anymore.”

Airi gave him an unimpressed look but sighed. “Fine. We did a lot anyway.” She put her books
away as well and then picked up her still steaming cup, stopping when she realized she probably
shouldn’t be touching caffeine.

Akira sat down next to her with his own cup, sipping away at his Blue Mountain. “Yours is decaf.”
He informed her quietly. “I’m still not letting you drink caffeine for at least another month.”

She pouted, but was inwardly pleased. He was considerate, but that wasn’t a surprise since he had
taken care of her with her withdrawal and exhaustion “OK, daddy.”

Akira paused, the rim of the cup just a hair’s breadth away from his lips. His eyes were wide open
with shock, and a red hue was beginning to blossom on his cheeks, extending from his neck and all
the way to his ears. Why did she call him that? Why was his heart beating so fast at being called
daddy?

Yusuke raised a brow at his reaction, sipping on his own cup of Kona. “What a peculiar shade of
red...Akira, you are full of inspiration for me today.”

Ryuji snorted, downing the rest of his soda. “Man, you’re pretty weird. Is Kosei full of weirdos?”

Airi gave him a warning look. “Ryuji, don’t be so insensitive.” She scolded. “He’s not weird just
because he sees everything artistically.”

He pouted. “Fine...”

Yusuke shook his head. “It’s all right, Aneki. There is a lack of intelligence in anything Ryuji
says.” He ignored the ex-runner’s indignant shout. “I do have one classmate that stands out...She is
a rising shogi player.” He made a thoughtful hum. “Perhaps you would be interested, Akira. I hear
she has yet to lose a match.”

Morgana perked up. “If she doesn’t lose, then that would imply her strategies in the game are top-
notch. You could probably learn from that and apply it to battles.”

Akira raised a brow. “That’s kind of impressive...Where would I find her?”

“Her name is Togo Hifumi. I believe she is most commonly found in the church in Kanda.” He
took a long sip of his coffee. “I do not see her outside of classes, so I assume she spends most of her
time there.”

Airi flinched. She wouldn’t want to be within thirty meters of any church. Ever. “Uh...good luck
then.” She gave him a tight smile. “I won’t be going to meet this person.”

Her boyfriend gave her a confused frown but then realization dawned on him and he placed a
comforting hand on top of hers, under the table and out of Ryuji’s view. “Right. I’m not going to
ask you to go with me. Besides,” He shrugged. “She might not have anything to offer anyway.” But
if she did, they could learn how to fight more efficiently in battles. They were getting stronger, but
maybe if they were smarter about it, they could take advantage of each situation and get more
money out of it.
Finishing his drink, Yusuke placed the empty cup on the saucer and stood up. “If you’ll pardon me, I must get to painting once more. This time may have been a failure,” He clenched his hands. “But that will not stop me. I will see you at home, Aneki. Akira, Ryuji, Morgana, good day.” Inclining his head, he headed out of the cafe, the bell on the door ringing at his departure.

Checking the time on his phone, Ryuji grumbled and stood up as well, stretching his arms in the air. “I should get goin’, too. Ma’s cookin’ tonight.” Letting out a small satisfied groan as he cracked his back, he shouldered his bag and waved at them. “See ya tomorrow!” He left the cafe, leaving only Akira, Airi, Morgana, and Sojiro within the establishment.

The barista looked up from the newspaper he opened. “Go upstairs, will you? If you’re gonna have the cat out, I don’t want any customers to come in and see him here.”

Morgana pouted on her lap. “It’s not fair.” He muttered sullenly. “I didn’t choose to be in this form.”

Airi smiled sympathetically and gently picked him up in her arms. “I know, but I’m sure as long as we keep doing our jobs, you’ll get to be human again.”

Picking up their bags, Akira took their drinks up with them upstairs, Airi following after. “But…” She sighed. “I would miss how cute you are, and how soft you are, and your toe beans.”

Inadvertently purring at the compliments, Morgana rubbed his ears on her arms. “Of course I’m the cutest, but I’m sure I’ll be just as cute as a human!”

Akira stopped and snorted, trying to imagine the feline as a human. Would he be a little boy, or maybe a pre-teen? He was too oblivious about certain things to be their age or older, so he had to be younger.

Ears flicking at the sound, Morgana zoned in on him and narrowed his eyes. “What’s so funny?”

Covering his mouth, he waved him away. “N-Nothing.”

Raising a brow, Airi sat down on the couch, idly massaging his paws. “Morgana, has Akira ever cut your nails? Or given you a bath?”

The feline shook his head. “I take care of that myself. Though…” His ears drooped. “It’s hard to use nail clippers with paws.” He raised a paw and stretched his pads, showing the growing claws that poked from between.

Biting her lip, Airi dug into her bag and took out a brand new cat nail clipper and grooming kit, freshly bought from the pet store today. “Would…” A small blush occupied her cheeks. “Would you mind if I do it for you?” She had always wanted a cat and though it sounded demeaning to him, she really did adore her “son” and she wanted to spoil him.

Gawking at the kit, Morgana sweatdropped and gave up. “OK…”

She beamed and kissed him on top of his head, holding in a squeal. “I promise I’ll be gentle.”

Akira watched with a small smile as she clipped the feline’s nails, and he took a seat on his workbench. Since they had nothing to do but wait for Kawakami, he might as well get some work done. Taking out the necessary tools, he began making some lockpicks. They could be amazingly stealthy in the Metaverse, so he had never found the use for smoke bombs or the other tools Morgana had taught him.
Grasping a tin clasp, he bent it out with the pliers into a straight piece of metal. Then he wrapped the silk yarn around one edge as the “teeth,” tying the ends to make the small ridges. It was too bad they were so fragile. Maybe he could use better materials to make a permanent lockpick…

The bell in the cafe rang, a familiar voice greeting Sojiro with a “excuse me,” before footsteps approached the stairs.

The steps creaked as Kawakami appeared behind the railing and she landed on the attic floor, a little out of breath. “Hey! Sorry I’m late.” She grinned sheepishly. “A student asked me for some advice as I was leaving. It’s definitely a first for me since Takase-kun…” She fidgeted with her hands. “I wonder if they see me in a new light now..? I need to work hard so I can make up for all the times I pushed them on Airi and let them down as their teacher.”

Airi looked up from a content Morgana, paws hanging limply over her arms, and smiled. “I didn’t mind, but I’m glad to hear it. I’m sure Taiki would be happy to know it.” The other orphan had always had a big heart from what she had seen in the short months they knew each other. He could finally rest in peace now.

Kawakami beamed at the praise, eyes becoming a little misty at the thought. “I hope so…” She blinked when she noticed the feline in her arms. “...When did you get a cat?”

Airi sweatdropped. “Uh...This is Morgana. He’s Akira’s..? Well, ours.”

She turned to look at her leader who nodded in confirmation. “We have joint custody as his parents.” He said seriously.

Morgana snapped out of his stupor and cringed. “You are not my father.” He pouted.

Biting her lip, Airi tried to stifle her laughter. It would only be natural, right?

Staring at the feline for another moment, the teacher slowly took a seat next to her pseudo daughter and slowly held out her hand, palm out.

Morgana stared up at her and then at her palm before heaving a reluctant sigh and gave her a small lick, a clear sign he was fine with her.

Taken aback by the quick acceptance, she hesitantly petted his head and smiled slightly. “He’s really cute...I’ll allow it. It might explain the meowing I have occasionally heard during my lessons.”

The thieves froze. She knew?

Noticing their looks, Kawakami gave them an unimpressed frown. “Did you think I didn't know? I found cat hair on Kurusu-kun’s homework, and just today I swear I heard purring during 3rd period!”

Morgana sweatdropped and shrank away. “That was when I was napping…”

Scooting his chair closer, Akira clapped his hands in a plead. “Please don’t report me, Sensei. I, uh…” Shit, what could he say to justify having a cat with him at school? “Have...anxiety and he helps.”

They stared blankly at him and he sweated. “I wasn’t going to…” Kawakami began slowly as if he was stupid. “As long as it’s not hurting anyone, I’ll keep it a secret...just like you two being phantom thieves.”
Their eyes snapped to her in shock. “What?” Airi gasped. “N-No, we’re not-”

“Don’t bother denying it.” The teacher crossed her arms and frowned. “I thought it was strange how quickly you two clicked, and then Sakamoto-kun and Takamaki-chan joined you when Kamoshida suspended himself who targeted all of you, and lately, Nijima-san…You’re all phantom thieves, right? Takase-kun’s guardians changing their minds so quickly worked out way too good for me, and you’re the only two who knew about my situation.”

The thieves shared a look, wondering what they should say. “…We’re still high schoolers.” Akira began slowly, calculating ways to turn this in their favor. “Why would you keep it a secret?”

Slowly breathing out, Kawakami leaned back in her seat. “There are a lot of stories about the Phantom Thieves but in the end they help people like me, right?” She smiled softly. “I don’t know if I have a place to say this, but…I’m proud of you two. I just thought Kurusu-kun was a problem child with a criminal record…but now I know better.” She grinned. “I’ll support you guys 100%!”

Airi stared at her in wonder. “Nee-chan…”

Kawakami looked at Akira. “You’re not just a student to me…” Then looked at Airi. “And you’re not just my way of atonement…You two are special to me, for helping me realize my path as a teacher…” She furrowed her brow determinedly. “A new path where I’ll never abandon any of my students.”

Akira smiled warmly, a little touched at her conviction. She was the first adult to tell him that. She really was on his- their side. “We’ll make sure of it.”

Airi nodded in agreement. “Definitely, and…thank you for keeping our secret.”

Kawakami grinned happily. “Of course! I wouldn’t be here to say this if it weren’t for you guys, so I should be thanking you! Now…” Getting up from her seat, she placed her hands on her hips. “My first action as your teacher is to lecture you, Kurusu-kun!” She frowned disapprovingly at the male teenager who blanched. “Your diet is atrocious! If Airi didn’t make your lunches, you would be eating ramen with soda every day! Not to mention the sheer amount of curry and coffee you consume. Once in a while is fine, but every day is simply not healthy!”

Akira sweatdropped as she continued to scold him. Maybe she was taking it too seriously…

“And this room is disgusting!” She complained, gesturing to the dust and grime that still permeated the attic. “I tolerated it because you were my client, but now I just can’t let this keep going!” Stomping over to the pile of junk stored behind the staircase railing, she pulled out an old mop, the one he used on his first day here, and shoved it in his hands. “You’re going to clean this mess up!”

Cowering from her demands, Akira sweated and quickly nodded. “Yes, Sensei.” He replied obediently and went down the stairs to get water and detergent.

Airi just stared with her mouth open before laughing. “Nee-chan, you can be pretty hardcore.”

The teacher turned her hard gaze on her and she froze. “And you! When were you going to tell me someone else was living with you?”

Her eyes widened. “What-? How did you-”

“I saw men’s shoes in the entryway last time, and they were a different size from Kurusu-kun’s.” Kawakami crossed her arms. “Who is this boy, and it’s clearly a boy, and why is he living with
Airi sputtered at her accusations. Her? Cheating on Akira with Yusuke? Sure, her pseudo brother was very handsome, but in her personal definitely not biased opinion, Akira was the most handsome man she had ever seen. Also, Yusuke was her brother in every way but blood. That was gross to think of. “His name is Kitagawa Yusuke. I don’t know if you were keeping up with the news, but he’s a former student of Madarame Ichiryusai, the artist who…” She averted her eyes. “Mistreated his apprentices and stole their art.”

Taken aback, Kawakami blinked. “Oh, wasn’t he the second person to get the calling card? Then…” She quickly pieced it together in her mind. “Is this Kitagawa-kun also a phantom thief?”

Observing her for a moment, Airi shrugged and threw any hesitation out the window. She already knew their big secret, and perhaps she could help out with the paperwork for Yusuke’s move. “Yeah, he’s our fifth member. Makoto is actually our newest teammate, so…”

Humming thoughtfully, Kawakami crossed her arms. “Then who is Kitagawa-kun to you? You’re not cheating on Kurusu-kun, right? I mean, this boy is living with you…”

“I really hope you aren’t cheating on me with Yusuke.”

They turned their heads to see Akira coming up the stairs with a white cloth over his hair and his mouth, a mop and bucket in his hands. “Don’t break my heart already.” He joked, placing the bucket down on the worn floorboards with a clang.

Airi rolled her eyes. “Why would I be dating my younger brother? That’s like dating Morgana here.” She gestured to the feline on her lap.

Morgana made a face. “No thanks, mom. You and Akira belong together.”

Akira smirked. “Of course. It’s almost destiny.” He winked. “We promised, right?”

She blushed and grinned. “Yeah…”

Watching their interactions with a fond smile, Kawakami straightened up and dusted off her jean skirt. “I guess I don’t have to worry. No matter what happens, I know you will have each other.” She extended a hand toward her pseudo-daughter. “Now, while Kurusu-kun cleans, you’re going to introduce me to this ‘younger brother.’”

Airi nodded and patted Morgana to get off before standing up from her seat. The teacher walked down the stairs first and she was about to follow but stopped when a hand landed on her shoulder.

Turning around, she saw Akira pull down his face mask enough to lean in for a kiss. They closed their eyes in bliss for a moment before they separated, smiling softly to one another. “See you tomorrow?” He whispered, still a hint of shyness in his expression.

She smiled and nodded. “Of course. Why are you being so shy?” Her smile turned teasing. “Even after what we did yesterday…”

A red began to spread under his skin all the way to the tips of his ears, and he looked away. “J-Just because…” He stammered quietly. “I...I want you to have an out if you need it. I don’t want to force you into anything you don’t want to do.”

Shaking her head, she stepped closer and wrapped her arms around him. “I thought you would know me well enough by now.” She whispered, his strong heartbeat next to her ear. “You would
never hurt me.”

Looking down at her, he softened and circled an arm around her waist, the other still holding up the mop. “Right…”

Stepping back, she gave him another smile before walking down the stairs, already hearing him begin to clean. She waved to Sojiro who raised a brow at the teacher waiting just outside, and finally joined her guardian on the way to her home.

“So…” Kawakami began as they walked past the closed theater. “What can you tell me about this Kitagawa-kun anyway?”

Airi hummed. “Well, he’s first and foremost an artist. That’s very important. He’s polite and cultured, and a very good younger sibling.”

Kawakami huffed. “You’re amassing quite the family. How is he living with you then if Madarame is in jail…?”

Airi hesitated just as they got to her front door. Entering the house, they took off their shoes and walked to the living room. “Well…It’s not legal right now.” She confessed, the both of them taking a seat on the couch. “When Madarame was arrested, no one came forth to discuss any guardianship with Yusuke, and he didn’t want to stay in the house where he was…mistreated,” She worded carefully. She didn’t know the extent of the mistreatment under Madarame, but everyone seemed all right, Chiyo notwithstanding, and Ayasakawa-san who took his life. “So I offered my place, and he’s lived with me since the beginning of June.”

Kawakami hummed thoughtfully. “But if his guardian is in prison, shouldn’t they have found another person for him?”

Airi shrugged. “You and I both know how incompetent child services are, and it’s likely that he had been forgotten during the whole scandal.” She sighed. “I actually put in a request to see Madarame-san in prison. I want to ask him to put my house as Yusuke’s permanent address...At least then he wouldn’t need to move into the Kosei dorms.” And she would miss him. The house would be so lonely if he had to leave, and she could see he was happy here.

They heard the front door open and they tilted their heads to look down the hallway. “I’m home, Aneki.” They heard a deep male voice, shuffling noises from him removing his shoes in the entryway.

“Welcome home, Yusuke!” Airi called back. “Can you come here for a moment?”

Dull footsteps approached them and the artist appeared in view, blinking in surprise at the guest. “Ah…Kawakami-sensei, correct?”

Kawakami nodded. “And you’re Kitagawa-kun. It’s nice to finally meet the boy who’s been living with Airi.” She raised a brow. “And the last phantom thief.”

His eyes widened. “What?! That’s nonsense!” He quickly refuted, furrowing his brow. “There are no phantom thieves here. Aneki and I are simply regular students.”

“It’s OK, Yusuke.” Airi reassured. “She found out earlier. Akira knows, too.”

He frowned. “Then...Are you sure it’s safe for her to know? She could jeopardize our entire existence. She is also an adult, would she comprehend our suffering?”
Kawakami frowned at his words. “I can keep a secret, and I already swore to support you guys no matter what, especially for what you had done for me. I don’t know how you do it, but the fact that you save people like me...” She squared her shoulders. "I’m grateful.”

He observed her for a moment before slowly inclining his head. “Then...If both Akira and Aneki approve of this, I will also concede.” He gave her a minuscule smile. “Welcome to the Phantom Thieves.”

**Chapter End Notes**

Yusuke rank 3
Kawakami rank 10

So as you can see, since I'm already making the main group more tight knit and more like a family, I decided to also involve confidants much the same way. I know they were only there for Akira, but it only makes sense that they should know the rest of the group as well. They'll be playing a bigger role than they did ingame, throughout the rest of the story and especially during the final boss and dungeon. Of course, Akira is still the person they bonded with and therefore would stick with him most, but they will know the rest of the team too.
Chapter 151

Chapter Notes

Whoa we hit 966 kudos!! I wonder if we can hit 1000? ’3’ Thank you very much for your support!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

---7/6, WEDNESDAY, AFTER SCHOOL, SHUJIN ACADEMY

After cleaning up his room again and only making minimal progress, Akira had went out to help out Iwai at his shop. He wasn’t surprised to know the older man had been yakuza, but to find out he had a son named Kaoru that was studying for entrance exams? He couldn’t judge a book by its cover.

He ended up telling Ann, Ryuji, and Makoto the next morning that Kawakami was now in on their secret, having figured it out on her own. They were reluctant to include a non-phantom thief, an adult, in their secret, but considering that she would be able to allow them more leeway in school, they were able to accept it.

Just as she promised, the teacher was able to pull some strings in the administration, and will slowly curb any inappropriate rumors about them. She would also allow them some leeway in missing classes if the need came for it, but she stressed that it was a last resort since other teachers would notice who was missing from classes.

Already Airi noticed there was less gossip about herself, and the overall impression of the phantom thieves were improving. Maybe they could keep at this, gather more allies, and change the world.

Classes ended for the day and she remembered she had a message from yesterday. “Akira.” She called out to her neighbor who looked up at her from packing his bag. “Dr. Takemi wanted you to come in today for an appointment. She said she’s almost done with her medicine for Miwa-chan.”

He perked up. “And that means I won’t have to take those awful drugs anymore.” He stood up and shouldered his bag. “Should we go then?”

She smiled apologetically. “I would, but there’s a council meeting today and it’s the last one before the break. I’ll see you later though, if you aren’t too busy.”

Slightly disappointed, he nodded and left the class, heading toward Yongenjaya by himself.

Packing up her stuff, Airi got up as well and headed out of the classroom. About to go up the stairs, a shout stopped her. “Ah, wait, Kimisawa-senpai!”

She turned around and saw Ikesugi waving her over across from the teacher’s lounge, face pale and slightly sweating. Shit, she completely forgot about his problem. “Ikesugi-kun.” She greeted, frowning worriedly as she walked over to him. “Are you OK? You don’t look so good…”

His eyes darted to the side. “Er...I found a scarf in my locker.”
She blinked. “A...scarf? In the summertime?”

He nodded uncomfortably. “Yeah. I threw it away though. I keep feeling like someone’s staring at me, too. Maybe it’s a ghost haunting me…”

She grasped her chin, trying to think. There was that person that day he told her about this who wanted to kill her with their eyes, before disappearing behind the corner and into the Practice Building. Was it them? But who were they? “…I’m not sure what to do, except maybe place a camera in your locker. I’m actually going to a council meeting right now so let me ask. Would that be OK?”

He let out a sigh of relief. “Please. I really don’t know what to do about this. I’m getting kinda scared…”

Frowning sympathetically, she placed a hand on his shoulder. “It’ll be all right. Maybe you can ask the Phantom Thieves if nothing else works.”

He let out a weak laugh. “You like them? I actually got a prank Calling Card a few days ago.”

Prank? She pursed her lips. Their work wasn’t to be used so flippantly like that. They were supposed to help people, not to be used to scare them. “Well, I ended up helping some of the girls on the volleyball team, so...even if people don’t trust the Phantom Thieves, I know they at least saved them.”

Taken aback, he rubbed the back of his head. “That’s true...Well, I hope whoever’s doing this will stop soon. It’s getting really creepy and-”

“Ah, Airi-sen- Airi!”

Once again, she turned around to see Mishima running up to her. She was about to smile but paused when she noticed the somewhat dark look in his eyes. She had never seen him like this before, even before he joined the volleyball team. It...kind of scared her. “Y-Yes, Yuuki-kun?”

He scooted in front of her, pushing Ikesugi back with a jab of his shoulder. The other male teenager held up his hands in a surrender and slowly walked away, leaving them alone. “Did you see this?” He held out his phone.

Taking it, her eyes widened. On the screen was a blog site, the words “Phantom Thieves Want To Steal My Boyfriend” as the first entry. The next and most recent one was…”Kimisawa Airi Deserves To Die.”

Furrowing her brow, she tapped the blog and read through it. “‘Kimisawa Airi should die! She doesn’t deserve to live, she already has so many guys after her! She’s a cold hearted bitch who brainwashes people! She’s the worst, touching my boyfriend like that! I’ll make her bleed, her and the Phantom Thieves...It’ll be a blood storm!’ Wow…” She drawled, brows raised up. “That’s, uh...She’s feeling quite strong about this.”

Mishima scowled. “I know right! Based on how much she knows about you, she’s probably a student in the school! I’m going to find her name and send it off to Kurusu.” He clenched his hands. “I won’t let her get away.” He promised darkly.

Airi bit her lip, not liking her instinct telling her to back away from him. Why was he being so...violent? This wasn’t like him. “…Thank you for telling me this, Yuuki-kun.” She gave him a small smile. “If you don’t mind, I’m about to be late for a council meeting.”
He nodded. “Right. I’ll get straight to researching who they are. Um…” He tightened his jaw. “Just let Kurusu and the others handle this one. I don’t want you getting hurt.”

She bit back a frown. Did he think she was weak? This girl who wanted her dead wouldn’t be able to stand up to her power, not when she had Xihe and her six suns. “It’s fine, Yuuki-kun. You don’t have to worry about me, I’m pretty strong too.”

He looked down at that. “I’m not strong enough then…” He whispered to himself. “I have to get stronger, I’m not a zero… I can control them…”

Not hearing what he said, Airi held out his phone to him. “Um…” She began hesitantly. “I should go now before I’m late. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Home wrecking tramp!”

Their heads snapped up at the derogatory slur, seeing a female Shujin student dash away from behind the hallway corner and through the doors into the Practice Building. She pushed past some passing students, knocking them to the ground, and disappeared in the throng of other students.

Letting out an indignant cry, Mishima dashed off after her. “Hey!”

Furrowing her brow in worry, Airi rushed up to the girls on the floor, pushing the perpetrator out of her mind for now. “Otani-chan! Fujiwara-chan! Are you two OK?!?” She held out her hands, and after a moment, they accepted, letting her help them get up from the floor.

“Ugh...Who was that crazy bitch?” Otani winced, brushing off her skirt. “Did you see who that was?”

Their fellow classmate shook her head. “No...But she’s not in our class. Maybe from one of the other classes. Senpai, are you going to report her?”

Airi sighed. “I can’t if I don’t know who it is. I’ll try to find out who they are, maybe Mishima-kun will catch up to her.” School was getting dangerous again. It’s almost ironic that she wasn’t afraid this time.

“...All right, that’s enough for today.” Takemi announced as she wrote the results on her clipboard.

Akira slowly sat up on the cot with a wince, her latest concoction now only giving him mild muscle aches. “Is that enough for Miwa-chan?”

She smiled slightly. “Almost. I probably only need one more appointment before I can finalize the medicine. Anyway,” She stood up from her computer chair and straightened her lab coat. “Are you going home already? If you have some time, why don’t you stay and enjoy an apple?” She gestured to the clear plastic bag full of fuji apples. “It’s a gift from one of my elderly patients. She gave me a lot…”

The door to the examination room opened, showing a middle aged man in a clean cut brown suit, a sneer on his aging face, and a black briefcase in hand. “…Hello, Dr. Takemi…” He greeted mockingly.
Her eyes widened. “...Chief Oyamada.”

Akira narrowed his eyes. So this was the man who rushed the medicine and almost killed a little girl. His mind flashed to his first ever appointment, and he realized this was the same man then who pushed his way inside.

“There was a medical conference nearby, so I thought I’d check up on you.” Oyamada informed, voice scratchy and flat. His eyes slid over to the phantom thieves leader and he frowned. “Who’s this? He doesn’t look like a patient.”

Takemi pursed her lips. “He’s a part-time staffer. I’m having him handle some miscellaneous tasks for me. Do you have business with me?”

He scoffed. “The reason for my being here is that I hear you stole one of my patients.” He scowled. “A girl with bronchitis. She came here with her father…”

Takemi only narrowed her eyes. “...Bronchitis, you say?” She murmured, knowing he was completely wrong about the girl’s illness. “Well, I had no intention of taking her from you. I certainly didn’t encourage her to visit my clinic.”

Akira’s eyes darted between them, feeling like this might be an ongoing problem about to boil over.

“Now there’s talk that the care at a university hospital is inferior to that of a general practitioner!” Oyamada shouted angrily. “‘Original medicine.’ Ha! What you’re doing here is simply absurd!”

Sighing, she looked away. “...You’re right.”

Akira frowned. No, he wasn’t. She had sold them drugs that saved their lives inside the Metaverse, and she had helped heal Airi with her amazing concoctions. She was an amazing doctor.

“I would’ve turned a blind eye if you had just rotted away out here in this little town…” Oyamada gestured to the small office. “But this is your final warning...Shut this place down and resign your medical license.”

Having enough of his shit, Akira stood up and rested his hands inside his pockets. “She’s a great doctor.” He refuted firmly. “You don’t have any right to slander her.”

Oyamada glared at him. “...What did you say?” He hissed.

Hiding her small smile with her clipboard, Takemi closed her eyes. “Heh…” She whispered to the teenager. “Don’t worry about it.”

Oyamada hmphed. “You seem to be quite fond of her. Perhaps I should reveal this woman’s true identity. She’s a monster who tortured a patient with her unregulated medicine! Terrible isn’t it?” He lamented mockingly. “She was such a brave girl, always smiling…”

She snapped her gaze to him. “.."Was"?”

He sneered. “She passed away.” He stated, the news chilling them to the bone. “Perhaps you’ll suffer the same fate, kid.” He chuckled. “She is the Plague, after all.”

Breathing shakily, Takemi rushed up to her former superior. “Don’t lie to me...!” She shouted, eyes wide with panic. “She should still have some time! She was slowly recovering...Her condition couldn’t have deteriorated that quickly!”
“But it did.” Oyamada refuted. “You must’ve misjudged. Now, back to the reason why I’m here.” He glared at her. “Don’t ever take another patient away from me again...You don’t want to make me angry.” And with that, he walked out of the room, the sound of the front door slamming close a moment later.

A silence pervaded the examination room, before Takemi dropped to her knees in a stupor. “Miwachan’s...dead...?” She whispered. “No, no, no...But she’s all I’ve been working toward all this time...” She slowly shook her head, as if she wanted to deny it. “Curing her was my only...” She sighed shakily. “There’s no way...”

Akira frowned at her state of despair. “Don’t lose hope. Maybe he was lying.”

She only shook her head, his words barely registering in her ears. “What have I been doing all this time...? What was even the point...?” She closed her eyes. “I can’t...”

He knelt down next to her. “Is there anything I can do to help?” He asked quietly.

She slowly exhaled. “No...I’ll be fine.” Wiping her eyes without smudging her eyeshadow, she quickly composed herself and stood up. “Thank you for your help, my little guinea pig.”

Getting up as well, he nodded.

“Ugh, I wish I hadn’t shown you that side of me...” She grumbled halfheartedly.

He shook his head. “I’m glad you did. You’re a good person, doctor.”

She huffed, though there was a hint of a smile on her face. “...Well, I suppose that’s fine as long as it’s you. Go on home for today...” She looked away, face falling again. “...We will continue this another time.”

He pursed his lips but nodded. “If you’re sure...” Leaving the downtrodden doctor alone, he shouldered his bag and left the clinic, walking out of the office building.

That man, Oyamada...he seemed just as distorted as the Takases. Could he take his Heart? He didn’t want the doctor to quit. Not only was she their primary supplier for medicine, but she was also the doctor they as a team trusted. She was well liked in the neighborhood.

He checked his phone, trying to see if anyone had called for him, but for once, he had gotten no texts except from Airi saying the meeting was going longer than expected.

He sighed. What should he do...?

Something jumped up onto his shoulder and he barely flinched, already recognizing the familiar weight of the feline. “Hey, are you done with the doctor?” Morgana asked curiously, back from his walk around the neighborhood. “Maybe if we have time, we should check out that Shogi player in Kanda. The sooner we learn some more strategies, the smoother our operations will go.”

He blinked. Should he..? Might as well.

Taking the train to Shibuya and transferring, he finally made it to Kanda. Exiting the station, he looked around the unfamiliar surroundings. This part of Tokyo seemed a lot quieter than he was used to. There was a certain air here that made him feel conscious about every noise he made. The buildings were older but well taken care of, and little shops lined the quiet streets. It was almost dark now, the sun setting right against the horizon, casting dark orange rays on the ground.
Walking around for a few minutes, he finally saw a Christian church. It was a very western design, the building white and rectangular with a rounded tiled roof. Above the door was a depiction of Jesus on the cross, and he slowly walked inside, pushing the dark double doors.

It was extremely quiet, and his footsteps echoed on the marble. There were rows and rows of benches leading up to the altar where there was a simple clothed table and a few lit candles. Behind it were large portraits depicting several scenes from within the bible, and to the right was a confessional booth. Stained glass windows lined both sides, showing the dark evening outside.

There were only a few people sitting quietly, but at the very front was a teenage girl in the distinctive Kosei uniform. She had long dark brown hair in the classic hime style and a red string kanzashi clipped near her left temple. In front of her on the bench was a shogi board, wood clacking as she placed pieces in strategic locations.

Morgana shuffled out of his bag and closer onto his shoulder. “That girl’s playing Shogi. Maybe she’s Togo Hifumi…”

Stepping toward the front of the church, Akira slowly took a seat on the same bench and inclined his head as a greeting. “Togo-san?”

Surprised, her head shot up from the board to look at him. “Um...yes..?” She voiced quietly. “I’m Togo Hifumi…”

He tilted his head toward the board. “You play in a church?”

Hifumi looked away. “Strange, hm..?” She murmured. “I did received approval to do so though. Experimenting with new tactics is best to do alone in a place like this.” She paused. “…Well, I suppose that doesn’t sound terribly plausible to someone who doesn’t play…” She shook her head. “Don’t mind me; please go ahead and pray.”

He shook his head. “I’m not really here for that…” He didn’t think he could ever pray in a Christian church, especially after learning what Airi went through. He knew this wasn’t the place, this building wasn’t big enough to house an orphanage and she had said it was closed down after Rui’s death, but he knew anything close to it would be uncomfortable. Besides, he was more inclined toward Shinto Gods. The ones who simply existed and never interfered. “Can you teach me Shogi?”

Taken aback, she stared at him with wide eyes. “Huh..?” She whispered. “Um, you don’t necessarily have to learn from me, you know...There are other options, such as playing online.”

He bowed his head respectfully. “Please.”

Staring at him for a moment, Hifumi shook her head and looked away. “Sorry, I just can’t. Well then…” She moved another piece on the board. “So…” She began hesitantly. “You like Shogi?”

“I want to play like you.” He requested.

“Like me..?” She rested her chin on the back of her hand. “You’re a bit strange...but thank you. Um…” She pursed her lips, thinking it over for a moment. “OK, just a quick game then. Twenty seconds per move...if that’s all right with you.”

He nodded. He didn’t know how to play, but...maybe he could wing it.

Any sort of shyness disappeared from her expression, replaced with a serious frown. “I’ll start.” She stated firmly.
After arranging the board for a fresh start, she moved one rook. He stared for a moment before taking a random piece and placed it two spots to the right of the middle. After a few more moves, the board was now a barrage of different pieces, and he struggled to keep up with which was his as they all looked the same to him.

“...So this is your skill level, huh?” Hifumi remarked coolly. “The dragon which governs the blue sky has fallen into my hands. How do you intend to survive this?”

What? He stared at her blankly. Dragon that governed the blue sky? He thought this was just generals and soldiers. “I…”

Anything he was about to say was cut off when she placed a piece down with a resounding clack. “Check.” She announced definitively. “It’s checkmate no matter how you look at it. Please concede.”

He shook his head. “I can still keep going.” Somehow.

She frowned disapprovingly. “To concede is an act of admitting that you have lost, with grace. If you aspire to become a shogi player, I recommend that you take your study of the game to heart.”

Mulling over her words, he bowed his head. “I lose then.”

Hifumi bowed back. “Thank you for playing…” Her confident posture seemed to disappear now that the game was over, reverting back to her previous shy self. “Well then, that will be all for today…” Biting her lip, she looked back up at him. “If it’s all right with you, may I request another match sometime?”

He blinked in surprise. She wanted to play against him again? Even after seeing how bad he was at it?

“I feel…” She began slowly. “A gambler’s spirit emanating from you. Which is strange, since your style of play is that of a complete novice…”

He rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. “Sorry, I’m a beginner.”

Her eyes widened. “Huh..?!” She gasped. “Oh, I-I’m sorry…” She pursed her lips. “All right, I will instruct you under one condition: You become my playing partner so that I can research new moves. Is that agreeable?”

He nodded. “Sounds good to me.”

She smiled slightly. “Thank you very much...Well then, it’s a deal. I’ll teach you how to play, and you’ll assist me with my new moves.”

He nodded again. “Thank you. Should we exchange numbers to meet up here?”

She nodded and took out her phone. After giving each other their numbers and chat IDs, she put hers away and reset the board. “For our first lesson, I will teach you Koma Sabaki. It’s a technique where you can switch a soldier for another within the midst of battle…”

Chapter End Notes
Iwai rank 3
Takemi rank 7
Hifumi rank 1

I know I'm kind of squishing a lot of the confidant events in one, sorry ;w; Also wassup Mishima with that darkness
Chapter Notes

aaaaaaaaahhhhhhh 986 kudos SO CLOSE TO 1000 <3 <3 <3 I honestly haven’t been writing at all, I’ve been mostly drawing to reduce stress from university ;w; Please don’t mind me as I post them at the bottom of this chapter!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

---7/7, THURSDAY, EARLY MORNING, YONGENJAYA BACKSTREETS.

Airi locked the door behind them before they set out toward the cafe, grimacing as the heat immediately hit her. It was a hot and sunny day, just like every day had been for the past week, and it was so humid.

Her polo immediately began to stick to her back and she sighed. Today was Tanabata, a day that was extremely popular with couples. She had bought two bamboo shoots yesterday after a shift at work, one for herself and one for Yusuke, but she hadn’t asked Akira if he was up for doing anything today. Maybe they could go on their first date?

Turning the corner into the alley, she perked up when she saw Akira already waiting for them, quietly talking to Morgana as usual. “Good morning!”

“Good morning.” Yusuke greeted right after her.

The two cafe residents looked up and smiled. “Good morning!” Morgana chimed, waving a paw at them.

“Good morning.” Akira smiled, straightening up from the brick wall. He made no mention of anything tanabata related and Airi felt slightly disappointed. Nevertheless, she linked hands with him and they made their way to the station.

Swiping their wallets at the turnstiles, they took the train to Shibuya. On the usually crowded journey that was packed with other sweaty people, she couldn’t help but notice all the girls who smiled to their phones, or even the older women who gossiped about what their husbands planned for today.

She quietly sighed and leaned closer to Akira in their little corner on the train. Maybe she was being selfish. They were still new in their relationship, even though they had been a bit...experimental a few days ago, they were too busy, or rather he was too busy. She couldn’t help but be sad that he didn’t remember, or maybe he just didn’t want to do anything special today.

Oh well.

“This is Shibuya. I repeat, this is Shibuya. The time is now 7:14AM, the next stop is…”

Getting off, they walked over to their transfer amidst the throng of pedestrians. “Good morning.” Makoto greeted as she walked up to them. “It’s hot today again…”
Airi fanned herself in the humid station. “Please stop reminding me how hot it is…” She moaned helplessly.

Yusuke knelt down and pinched her thigh highs with two slim fingers. “If you didn’t insist on wearing these, I’m sure you would be much cooler.”

Akira pouted. “But I like them.” He really liked them. Maybe he was into zettai ryouiki.

Airi rolled her eyes, grimacing when she felt her hair begin to stick to her neck. “I don’t want to show my legs and I’m required to wear a skirt…” She eyed their male uniforms. “Aren’t you guys sweating? You’re wearing more than me.”

She reached out to touch Yusuke’s exposed wrist, latching on with her other hand as well when she felt how cool his skin was. “Oh wow, you are cold…” She sighed contently.

Perking up, Morgana jumped out of the bag and darted onto Yusuke’s shoulders, purring at the cooler temperatures. “Since Yusuke is ice based, there’s no doubt it transfers into real life.”

The artist only accepted it with a glance, not bothered that he was being used as a portable AC.

Makoto smiled sympathetically. “You’ll just have to bear it for another week and then you can wear regular clothes. Speaking of time passing…” Her smile fell. “Kaneshiro’s deadline is drawing near. We did all we could. I hope we can avoid problems now…”

Akira waved her away. “We’re fine. If they were going to retaliate they would’ve done so already.”

She chuckled. “As expected from someone who’s been through this three times already. If you say so, then…” She nodded. “Yes, I’m sure it’ll go well.”

Kawakami smiled at the class of 2-D, standing at the front of the room. “Today’s Tanabata, the star festival! I wonder if any of you will be spending the day with your boyfriends or girlfriends! I most likely won’t be putting up any bamboo decorations or writing my wish.” She laughed sheepishly.

Akira froze in his seat. Today was Tanabata? The day of couples?

His head snapped to his right where Airi was looking down at her notes. He wanted to be a good boyfriend and with a stab of guilt, he realized he had yet to take her out on a date. Shit, he was terrible. “Airi.” He whispered.

Blinking, Airi looked up at him quizzically.

He swallowed nervously. “Do you want to-”

“Kurusu-kun!”

Inwardly cursing, he looked up at the teacher who called out to him expectantly. “What’s the traditional food of Tanabata?”

“Uh…” He struggled to come up with the answer with how scrambled his mind was. “S-Soumen.”

Kawakami clapped her hands. “That’s right! Originally in China, they ate a baked good that we
call sakubei in Japanese to appease demons. Over time, that pronunciation went from sakubei, to sakumen, to soumen- a wholly different food.”

“Whoa, we’ve been eating this to calm demons?”

“Kurusu-kun knows a lot of weird stuff.”

“Going with the theme of calming demons,” Kawakami continued. “Sounen on Tanabata is sometimes called “demon guts.” You should restore your strength with some seasonal food and get ready for your exams next week!”

Morgana ooh’ed quietly inside his desk. “It’s almost finals time. It starts on the 13th, right?” He gave his host a knowing look. “Will you take mom out on a date today? If you wait, she’s going to be busy with the study group.”

Akira pursed his lips. He was right. He had to do something today.

Airi packed up her bag as soon as the last bell rang for the day. Makoto had agreed yesterday after the council meeting to help out with the study group, which they would begin tomorrow right after classes end. She didn’t want to do it today since people would be busy with dates.

She sighed. If only she could say the same. The disappointment wasn’t as heavy now as it was earlier during the morning train ride, but it still sat in her stomach, a constant reminder that there would be no romantic plans for her today.

Getting up from her desk, she didn’t notice Akira awkwardly trying to reach out for her, and walked up to the front of the room. “Can I have your attention?” She called out loudly, gaining all her classmates’ focus. “Since finals start next week on the 13th, Nijima-senpai and I will be hosting the study group!” She smiled. “We worked out a schedule. We’ll be studying in this room tomorrow, Saturday, Monday, and Tuesday for two hours. If any of you have specific problems, we can try to work things out.”

They let out a collective sigh of relief. “Thank you, Senpaiiii!” Matsumoto cried tears of joy. “You know my grades aren’t so great!”

Namikawa giggled from behind her. “But you’ve been improving…”

Tsukishima groaned. “More studying…”

Ando rolled her eyes. “Shut up. You need the most improvement out of all of us.”

Airi only smiled indulgently at their chatter. With no bias at all, she could say her class was the best. They actually liked her instead of just viewing her as some kind of perfect person like the rest of the school. “Enjoy your tanabata!”

With that, most of the class left the room, only a few people staying behind. Ann left as well to meet up with Ryuji outside in the hallways, which Airi smiled slyly about. Were they going to get together soon?

About to head back to her desk, she was intercepted by her most enthusiastic classmate. “Ne, Senpai!” Matsumoto breathed out excitedly. “Are you spending today with anyone special?” Her eyes slid over to a certain transfer student who stood awkwardly near his desk. “Are you writing a
Airi blinked, and blinked again. “Uh...I don’t know. I wasn’t told of any plans.”

Matsumoto frowned. “What? But...But I thought you and Kurusu-”

“Airi?”

Turning around, Airi forced herself to keep smiling. “Y-Yes, Yuuki-kun?”

Mishima stood behind her with a determined frown, but the dark look she had noticed yesterday still persisted. In fact, he...seemed to be worse. “I want to talk to you for a second.”

“Oh...” She hesitated, glancing over at Akira. The phantom thieves leader frowned and observed the scene with tense eyes. Focusing back, she nodded. “Sure.”

Mishima lit up and smiled, leading her over to the corner of the room. Pouting at the interruption, Matsumoto grumbled and left the class, leaving Akira the only one left.

He slowly packed his books, but his eyes were trained on his girlfriend and their team manager. He had been acting strange ever since those old bullies made fun of him. The last time they hung out, Mishima kept insisting to go after that famous actor, even though there wasn’t any concrete evidence that he was distorted. He wanted to be credited for helping the Phantom Thieves change the world, and while Akira agreed that they wouldn’t have gotten this far without him, there was some sort of dark undertone to it.

He narrowed his eyes. ‘Don’t tell me...’ Was he distorted?

Airi bit her lip as Mishima continued to say nothing, keeping his head down. “Um, is everything all right, Yuuki-kun? Were you able to find that girl yesterday?” That girl had to be called in for a reprimanding if she thought it would be OK to threaten other students. However...The person in front of her needed to take priority. Why was he acting so strange?

Clenching his hands, Mishima took a deep breath and looked up directly in her eyes. “S-Since you don’t have any plans today,” He fumbled with his words, though there was some sort of desperation in his expression. “D-Do you want to go to the first tanabata festival? With me?”

Taken aback, she stared at him in shock. Was he...asking her on a date? “Uh...” Airi stuttered. “Wh-Where did this come from?”

Mishima rubbed the back of his head. “I just thought it would be a good opportunity. I-I’ve liked you for a while now, so...” He bowed. “Please go out with me!”

Snapping his head in their direction, Akira gaped indignantly at the loud confession.

Morgana snuck his head out from inside the bag. “What?!” He yelped quietly.

Airi could only stare. He liked her? For a while now? How long had he held onto these feelings and she never noticed? She bit her lip, guilt already welling up. “I...I’m sorry, Yuuki-kun, but I can’t return those feelings for you.” She was already in love and it wasn’t with him. “You’re a really good friend to me and our biggest supporter, but I don’t see you in that way.” She voiced sorrowfully. “I’m sorry...”

The heartbreak in his eyes tripled her guilt, and his hands were clenched to the point his knuckles were white and stark underneath his skin. “...Fine.” Mishima whispered, lowering his head so she
couldn’t see his expression. “It’s because I’m a zero, isn’t it? Because I’m nothing…” His mouth twisted into a bitter frown. “But I’m the producer of the Phantom Thieves. You should be obeying my orders…”

Furrowing her brow, Airi slowly took a step back, not wanting to be near him right now. He was actually scaring her.

His hand shot out, latching onto her wrist and she winced at the bruising grip. “Th-That hurts!”

Eyes turning cold at the sound of her distress, Akira quickly walked over to the front of the room and tore the other boy off, placing himself between him and Airi. “Hands off.” He voiced menacingly, almost growling. He didn’t care if the Phanboy was their friend, he had no right to lay a hand on her.

Face twisting into a scowl, Mishima tried to pull himself out of his grip but the thieves leader proved himself stronger, cementing his hold on him. “This is your fault...She paid attention to me until you came along!” He shouted angrily, a hint of self loathing in his frown. “I’ve liked her longer!”

Akira narrowed his gaze, the afternoon sun adding a red hue to his gray irises. “Really?” He asked coldly. “You like her so much that you bruised her?”

Mishima's eyes widened. “What?” His gaze darted to the class president who shuffled behind the taller teenager and held her wrist gingerly, male fingerprints marring her skin at her wrist. “I…” He began hesitantly, his earlier anger washed away by guilt. Lips quivering, he yanked his arm back and ran out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

Akira cursed at his escape but turned back to his girlfriend. “Are you OK, Airi?” He asked worriedly, reaching out to gently grasp her arm.

She bit her lip, letting him examine the rapidly forming bruise. “I’m OK, it’s nothing a little Recov-R won’t fix. But...” Her gaze turned to the windows that showed the school hallway. “I’m worried. Why has he been so...violent lately?”

He frowned and guided her over to their desks where their bags laid abandoned. Since no one else was here, Morgana jumped out of the bag and grabbed the half-empty tube of Recov-R gel out of the bag with his mouth. “Here.” He offered, voice muffled by the medicine between his teeth.

Akira took it with a thanks and uncapped it. Squeezing out a generous amount, he slathered it on her bruise, his hands as gentle as a feather.

Airi smiled softly at how careful he was. It didn’t matter if he made no plans for them today, she already knew he loved her by his little gestures. To see him turn from an unflinching protector to caring boyfriend proved a lot.

Once the bruise faded away, Akira planted a kiss on the healed spot, the action making her smile wider. “Thank you, Dr. Kurusu.” She winked.

He smirked. “Of course.” Pulling her closer, he leaned against his desk and gathered her in his arms, the oranging sky shining behind him through the large classroom windows to cast their shadows across the empty desks. “You sure you’re OK?” He whispered, resting his cheek against the top of her head. “He didn’t do anything else to you, right?”

She loosely wrapped her arms around his waist. “No, he didn’t.” She bit her lip. “But I’m still worried. Have you noticed him change?”
Akira sighed. “Yeah…”

Morgana jumped up next to them on the desk. “I might be wrong,” He began cautiously. “But to me, he seems to be distorted.”

Taken aback, Airi furrowed her brow. “What? Distorted? When did this happen?”

Akira pursed his lips. “He met some of his middle school bullies who said some things, and he kind of…shut down.” He should’ve said something earlier.

She sighed. “I see… I didn’t know he had feelings for me though…”

He rolled his eyes. “I noticed the first week when I transferred here. You seriously never knew?”

Airi blinked in surprise. “Y-You did? He liked me even then?”

He deadpanned and sighed. “Please stay oblivious about other people’s feelings about you forever.” He kissed her forehead. “You’re only supposed to love me.” He pouted. “So don’t fall for anyone else.”

She burst into giggles and tried to muffle it in his polo. “OK, Mr. Possessive.” She snickered. “I promise to only love you, so you better only love me.”

He grinned. “Deal. Oh, speaking of love,” He reached behind him to grasp her hands and held them in front of him. “Would you do me the honor of going on a date with me?” He whispered. “I completely forgot today was Tanabata or else I would’ve asked earlier.” He smiled apologetically. “Sorry I’m a bad boyfriend.”

Airi stared at him in surprise. So he had forgotten and it wasn’t intentional. She had been worried for nothing. Smiling shyly, she nodded. “Sure, I’d love to.”

He perked up and was about to lean in for a kiss when she placed a finger on his lips. “Uh-uh!” She frowned, pushing him back a bit. “You should go make sure Yuuki-kun is OK first. With how he was acting, I don’t think he’s being rational.”

Deflating, Akira sighed and straightened up. “All right…” Taking out his phone, he texted the Phanboy.

Ak: **Where are you? We need to talk.**

He frowned when he didn’t get a reply and was about to put his phone away when it buzzed.

M: **The Diner.**

Putting it back in his pocket, he shouldered his bag with Morgana inside. “He’s at the Diner. Why don’t you go home for now?” He frowned worriedly. “I don’t want you anywhere near him.”

Airi bit her lip but conceded. “Yeah…” She grasped her healed wrist. “I don’t think I could forget this…” She looked down morosely. She didn’t think she would ever come to be scared of her classmate like this. She trusted him as both a friend and their supporter, but he had actually hurt her…

Climbing up the stairs to the warmly lit Diner, he bumped into Yukimi who let out a sound of
surprise. “Oh, Kurusu-kun!” She blinked. “Are you here for your classmate?” She pointed over to the table in the corner that was closest to the model motorcycle. “He came in a rush. I think he’s having a breakdown.”

Akira pursed his lips. “Thanks for letting me know. Could you keep our corner private?”

She nodded. “Sure, sure. Another one of your shady business meetings…”

Rolling his eyes, he walked past her and over to the table, taking a seat across from the Phanboy with an apathetic frown.

Mishima jumped at his appearance but quickly settled back into his brooding state. “…Hey.” He greeted sullenly. “Um…” He fidgeted with his hands. “H-How is Kimisawa-senpai?”

Akira raised a brow. Kimisawa-senpai? Didn’t he call her by her first name just an hour ago? “She’s fine,” He answered coldly. “But you hurt her.”

Mishima flinched. “Right…I should apologize.” He laughed weakly. “It’s probably because of the pressure of being your producer. I have to work harder.”

Akira narrowed his eyes. “…In what way?”

The Phanboy sat up in his seat. “Well, right now there are a ton of idiots out there doubting you, and trying to influence others to do the same.” He clenched his fists. “So…We’re gonna purge them.”

Akira scoffed. “You really need to chill.”

Mishima frowned. “No, hear me out! I looked up some of those idiots who were criticizing you and sent them warning messages. You know, something like, ‘if you don’t change your wicked ways, you’ll be our next target.’” He smiled dementedly. “I’ll have you know, it’s been working wonders. They totally stopped dissing the P-Thieves!” He grinned as if it was something to be proud of. “There are still some people who say they don’t believe, but deep down they’re just afraid of you guys and me by extension.” He laughed. “Isn’t this great?!”

Akira could only stare at him. “What the fuck…” He was definitely distorted if he thought it was fine to threaten people with their name. What happened to helping people? To save others who were like him? Now it just seemed like he was doing this to ride their coattails.

“Plus,” Mishima continued, ignoring his expletive. “Now that all those haters are gone, people are putting a bunch more info on the forum.” He sneered. “Post after post after post, it’s all ‘please’ and ‘help me’…” He chuckled. “This is so much fun.”

Akira furrowed his brow. “This isn’t like you.”

The Phanboy waved him away. “What are you talking about? All I did is find my own way to change people’s hearts.” His eyes hardened. “I’m above the simple stuff like producing and advertising now. I can change the world. I have the strength to do that now…”

Footsteps approached them even though they were supposed to have been left alone, and they looked up to see Akiyama walking by with his head down, a frustrated frown on his face. “Huh?”

Mishima grimaced. “Akiyama-kun…” He greeted warily.

“Yo, Mishima…” Akiyama greeted halfheartedly. “I haven’t seen you since graduation.”
Mishima tightened his jaw before laughing weakly. “We actually saw each other here two weeks ago…”

The bully looked away. “…Oh, yeah. Guess you’re right.” He stayed in his spot before he directed his gaze to the Phanboy, looking as if he wanted to say something.

Mishima blinked. “…Akiyama-kun?”

“What?”

“Are you OK?” He asked hesitantly.

Akiyama scoffed, though the action was weak at best. “Whaddya mean? Does it look like I ain’t OK?”

Mishima shook his head. “I dunno, you just seem…quiet.”

Akiyama clenched his hands and looked away. “…Shut your mouth, zero. I don’t got time to be listening to you.” He muttered before walking away.

Akira furrowed his brow at the conflicted behavior he presented, but Mishima only lowered his gaze down to his lap. “Dammit…He acts like I’m a total nothing, but he still takes time to try and mess with me…” He scowled. “I’ve changed though. I’m way better than a loser like him. I even heard he’s been hanging out with some shady people…” He scoffed. “They’re all scum. I wish we could change their hearts, for the good of our society…”

He lit up. “Wait, that’s it..! We can change his heart instead of that actor’s! All right, it’s decided! Your next target is gonna be Akiyama-kun!” He swiped his phone and began scrolling through his phonebook. “Let’s see, where’s his info…” He paused, eyes dimming as a thought came to him. “Oh…Are you guys gonna come after me someday too..?”

Akira only closed his eyes. “Do you really have to ask that?” He asked quietly. “You physically assaulted Airi because she rejected you, and now you’re telling me you want your old classmate’s heart changed just because he used to bully you. Aren’t you already a target?”

Mishima stared wide eyed at him before laughing weakly. “Haha…Good joke, Kurusu. I…” He looked down at himself, conflicted. “…No, this is good. I can just apologize to her and she’d forgive me. She’s nice and understanding and beautiful. She’s perfect.” He clenched his hands on his lap. “I’m stronger now…She’s paying attention to me again…” Picking up his bag, he abruptly stood up in his seat. “I’m heading home. I’ll send you Akiyama-kun’s info soon…” He looked down guiltily. “Then everything will…go my way.” Without waiting for another word, he quickly walked down the aisle and out of the Diner.

Akira leaned back in his seat, frowning deeply at what he just heard. How did he turn like this? And he thought Airi would just let him hurt her again?

His gaze hardened. Hell no. He wasn’t going to let anyone on this plane of existence or the next to hurt her again. They were going to solve this. Now.

Taking his phone out of his pocket, he texted the others to meet up. First though, he was going to go change. He had plans later and this wasn't going to interfere with them.
The sky was dark now, the sun just barely peeking on the horizon. The station passageway was no less busy though, with plenty of people in yukatas walking by as they made their way to the small festivals that were happening around the city.

Airi stayed silent as she listened to Akira’s explanation and leaned against the railing, having changed into her peachy summer dress when she went home. Mishima thought she would just forgive him? Maybe, but...she couldn’t forget.

Makoto frowned, leaning against the railing. “He hurt Airi because she rejected him? His actions are unforgivable.”

“Indeed.” Yusuke scowled, standing close to his pseudo-sister. “Did he leave a mark?”

Airi held up her already healed wrist. “Recov-R did the job, thankfully.”

Ann crossed her arms. “He just wants revenge on a guy who makes fun of him...And didn’t he give us that weird request too? About that actor?” She furrowed her brow. “Is Mishima-kun trying to take advantage of us...?”

Akira nodded, crossing his arms over his black shirt and white shirt jacket. “It seems like it. Plus, he’s been using our name to threaten our haters.”

Yusuke crossed his arms. “Perhaps we should enact a change of heart in Mishima, not this Akiyama fellow.”

“Whoa, wait up!” Ryuji held up his hands in a stop motion. “He ain’t that bad! He’s like our biggest supporter, so he wants to do the right thing...” He hesitated. “Right?”

“But the right thing to him was hurting Airi.” Ann bit her lip. “And now he wants to hurt this Akiyama guy...It isn’t justifiable.”

Airi took out her phone and opened the MetaNav, pursing her lips when she typed in his name. “Yuuki-kun...registers.” She whispered morosely. “Did he really want to hurt me...?”

Did she not do enough for him? She knew she should’ve made sure he was completely fine after Kamoshida’s arrest, but he seemed all right, and so much happened with the Phantom Thieves, giving Yusuke a home, and then Hisoka. With a guilty heart, she realized she had pushed him back on her list of priorities...

Morgana sat on the railing between them. “We could find his Shadow and ask. He’s already worried that we’re going to change his heart, so he knows he’s distorted.” He rubbed his head against her arm in an affectionate manner. “I don’t think he really wanted to hurt you, but we should defeat his Shadow and change his heart.”

Ryuji deflated. “Damn...Mishima of all people? He’s a cool guy, bit of a wimp though.”

Idly sweeping his bangs out of his vision, Yusuke nodded. “It may seem preposterous...but we cannot allow him to harm Aneki again and disrupt our work.”

Makoto straightened up from the railing. “Either way, we can decide whether or not we change his heart later. For now, we must meet his Shadow.”
Akira sighed and took out his phone. He didn’t think things would end up like this, but they had no other way. “Let’s go then.”

Warping into Mementos, they followed the MetaNav down the Areas and finally made it to the aforementioned Chamber. Getting out of the Mona bus, they walked up to the Shadow of their biggest supporter. Like all denizens of Mementos, he was stood in the middle of the Chamber, black flames of distortion licking his figure.

Hearing their footsteps, he quickly turned around with a panicked expression. “Wh-Who are you?! Could you be...the Phantom Thieves?”

Elegant stared in horror. She didn’t think she would ever have to see him like this; a distorted person inside Mementos. If she had put more effort into reaching out to him and helping him, maybe this wouldn’t have needed to happen.

Mishima looked at all of them, taking in their gear and outfits, before bursting out laughing. “So you wanna change my heart, even after everything I’ve done for you guys?! ME, of all people..?!” He smiled dementedly, the yellow glowing eyes only adding to his sinister expression. “If you just shut up and listened to what I told you, the Phantom Thieves would get even more famous...And if you did that, I’d get some of the spotlight too. I wouldn’t be just some stupid zero anymore. I’d have power, I’d have fame, I’d have the girl...!” He clenched his hands. “There’s finally some hope back in my life...So why? Why are you insistent on stopping me..?”

Clenching her fists, Elegant stepped up with a conflicted frown. “Yuuki-kun, why did you change like this? You of all people...”

Tightening his jaw, he looked away from her as if her very gaze burned him. “I don’t want to talk to you.” He snapped. ”You act like you know me so well, but you don’t know anything about me!” He screamed, voice hoarse. “You never gave me the time of day! I was fine with that because you were like that with everyone. Kind and helpful but distant...” He scowled darkly. “Then he shows up one day and you’re always together! It makes me sick to think he could just waltz in and get what I’ve wanted for over a year. It’s not fair...”

Taken aback by the sheer anger and distraught expression on his face, Elegant took a step back, a hand covering her mouth. How did she miss this..? Had she really been so blind?

The group looked at each other, uncertain of how to proceed when their target was someone they knew and was friends with.

Mishima jerked his chin toward the exit and sneered. ”...Yo, losers. Get out of here. I wanna talk to your leader...alone.”

“What?!” Panther yelped. “As if! Don’t think you can just-”

Joker held out a hand, stopping her mid sentence. Turning to them, he gave them a nod.

With pursed lips, they obeyed his command and walked closer to the swirling entrance, letting the Shadow and leading thief have their privacy.
Shadow Mishima looked down. “This is all your fault…” He whispered. “Before you came along, I knew my role in life. I was supposed to be the guy everyone messed with, the guy who never would’ve had a chance with the popular girl...I had accepted that I was a zero, embraced it even…”

He clenched his jaw. “I even let Kamoshida hit me because I knew it was my place...But once I figured out you were one of the Phantom Thieves, everything changed...You just HAD to get close to me..!” He cried, his hands coming up to press against his eyelids. “You just HAD to save me, giving me hope, making me think I deserve better. I mean, seeing a real-life hero do all this amazing stuff made me wish I could be something more...Making me think that I deserve more.”

He gripped his hair, pulling harshly. “I want to change society too...I want the world to notice me! If I can just make the Phantom Thieves famous, maybe I’ll end up famous too..!”

Joker observed his distorted classmate. “Would that really satisfy you?” He asked quietly.

“I’m not sure…” Mishima scrunched up his face in guilt and frustration. “But I don’t have any other choice! I don’t have any special powers like you guys...Hell, nobody even pays attention to me except for Airi, and she’s too focused on you to really care about me! I’m nothing! I just want…” He looked down at his feet, letting his arms fall limp at his sides. “I just want attention...That’s why I need you guys. You’re the only way I’ll be able to make a name for myself!”

Breathing out harshly, he held a hand to his head. “I know it’s wrong…” He choked out. “I know I hurt her...But if I can’t push my way in, when will I finally be in the spotlight..!? When will I finally get what I want!?” After a tense moment, he looked up defiantly. “A-Anyway, just bring it on already! You’re here to fight, aren’t you?!”

Joker only frowned sorrowfully at the warped Phanboy. He didn’t want to. Mishima was their friend, and he was aware he was doing the wrong thing. He wanted him to change himself. He knew he could, he just needed a little push.

The Shadow hesitated at his silence. “Wh-What..? You aren’t going to change my heart..?”

Joker shook his head. “Do it yourself.”

“C’mon, let’s go.” Skull called out for him, the rest of the team waiting at the entrance of the room. “I’m sure he learned something if he’s been spendin’ all this time with us amazin’ heroes, yeah?” He voiced while staring straight at their Phanboy with a look of disappointment.

Joker looked back at the Shadow one last time before pivoting on his heel, walking toward his teammates. Mishima stared wide eyed at his retreating back before balking. “N-No..! I need the Phantom Thieves! I need..!” He began to deflate. “I need to...I…” Lips quivering, he bowed his head.

Elegant stared sadly before they left the room and out of Mementos. ‘I’m sorry.’

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So it's super late and totally irrelevant now for you guys but I finally drew Jeanne as to how I really wanted to envision her!! I've been using stock images I found on google and then a dress up game as a sort of reference, but this is exactly how she looks! I'll be updating chapter 3 with this image as well! I know it's way past it now but I might as well show you guys
Also hi here's Airi that I drew in the P5 dialogue style (9/8/18 update: This is the original version, updated version is on chapter 1.)
Chapter End Notes

Mishima rank 6.5

Zettai Ryouiki - Thighs conforming slightly due to the thigh high bands.

I promise next chapter will be much happier lol
Chapter 153

Chapter Notes

WE HIT OVER 1000 KUDOS HOLY SHITTTTT WE HIT 1012 EVEN!!! AND ALSO 38.9K HITS. PEOPLE HAVE LOOKED AT THIS THING 38,901 TIMES. THIS FIC IS FAMOUS NOW (nah jk)

But damn, over 1000 people clicked on this fic and liked it enough to give it a kudo ;w; thank you very much for your love and support!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Warping back into Shibuya station, they let out a collective sigh, unnoticed by the passerby that strode past them in the passageway. “I didn’t think Mishima thought like that…” Ryuji murmured as he ruffled his hair.

Ann looked down guiltily. “He was in the wrong, yeah, but...I guess it’s also our fault. We just took his support without asking if he was OK.”

Airi winced, folding into herself like a house of cards. “…It’s my fault.” She whispered. “I didn’t know he liked me like that, and I never really made an effort to make sure he was OK once Kamoshida was arrested.” She sighed. “He’s right. He’s been under my charge at school even during first year but I’ve been so blind…” She hugged herself. “I hope he’ll be able to change himself…”

Finding her safe haven in Akira had ended up hurting her classmate. If she hadn’t been so preoccupied with herself last year in dealing with court paperwork for her house, she might’ve reached out to him and maybe prevented Kamoshida from ever hurting anybody in school. Shiho wouldn’t be suffering either.

Everything was her fault.

Frowning at her wilting disposition, Akira placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. “You can’t be responsible for everyone’s wellbeing no matter how much you try. Don’t blame yourself.”

Yusuke pursed his lips. “All that is left is to wait. I suggest we all disperse for now until he reaches out to us once more.”

Makoto nodded in agreement, a look of guilt passing by her face. She knew she had failed the student body as well. “We can only observe if he will change. I will see you all tomorrow then. Airi,” She turned to the cellist. “I’ll finalize the study guide tonight and send it over.”

Airi nodded in understanding. “Got it.”

With that, the group dispersed for the day. Morgana jumped down from the railing and climbed up onto Yusuke, letting the artist carry him to Yongenjaya.

Airi was about to walk after them when a hand reached out for hers. She looked back at Akira who smiled hopefully. “We had a date, remember?”
She blinked, surprised. “Yeah...Yeah!” She repeated with more enthusiasm, a smile spreading on her features. She shouldn’t dwell on the past so much. There was nothing she could do to change what happened, but she could do her best in the present for the future. Right now, the best thing she could do for herself and everyone around her was to just live her life to the fullest, on her first date with her boyfriend. “Do you have any place in mind?”

“Uh…” Akira rubbed the back of his neck. “I...I was thinking we could do some sightseeing at Odaiba. I heard it was a nice place for couples, so…” He looked away shyly. “But we can go somewhere else if not-”

“No, no!” Airi interrupted excitedly. “I’m up for anything!” She softened. “I...just want to spend time with you. You’ve been so busy lately and I know it’s because of business, but I haven’t had you to myself in a while.” And now with Mishima's situation coming to light, she needed some normality.

He relaxed and leaned his forehead against hers. “I’m always yours.” He whispered. “So don’t think I’ll push you to the side or whatever. My business isn’t more important than you.”

She teared up and nodded happily. “OK.”

Straightening up, he held out his hand to her and smiled. “Let’s go then?”

They took the Ginza line and transferred onto the shuttle bus right outside Shimbashi station that would take them to the man-made island.

Airi stared out the bus windows in wonder, the quiet chatter of the other passengers fading in the background. She had never traveled so far out from central Tokyo before, and the view was absolutely breathtaking.

To get to Odaiba, the bus traveled over the famous Rainbow Bridge, seven different colors lighting up the suspension cords and into the clear evening sky. The ocean underneath dazzled in the light, and the bright visionary buildings as well as the colorful ferris wheel on the island made it seem like they were traveling into the future.

She was mesmerized by just how beautiful this world could be. To think she had never experienced anything like this before...What else had she been missing? What else could she see and hear and smell and feel?

Akira appreciated the sights as well, though his main focus was the joy on her face. He didn’t think he would ever see childlike wonder from the usually mature and down-to-earth cellist. He was glad he read that Tokyo dating guide that recommended this place.

After ten minutes, the bus stopped in front of Odaiba station and they got off amongst the other passengers. Airi kept turning around in circles, her heels clacking against the pavement, and trying to take in the views all at once. “It’s so beautiful here…” She breathed excitedly. “Where should we go? What should we do?” She grinned. “There’s so much to take in!”

Akira smiled fondly at her enthusiasm. “Well, according to the guide here,” He pointed to the island map on the station wall that detailed all the attractions. “There’s this European inspired shopping mall called “Venus Fort.” We could also just walk around.” He shrugged. “I’m up for anything you want to do.”
She raised a brow. “Oh? Not going to complain about your girl dragging you shopping like any regular guy?”

He snorted. “Those regular guys don’t love their girlfriends then.”

Blushing at his casual statement, Airi smiled shyly and hugged his arm. “Then...let’s go then!”

They walked over to the mall he mentioned where a giant gundam statue stood in the courtyard, and they admired the architecture once they entered the building. The ceiling was a fake sunny blue sky with fluffy clouds, and the storefronts and beige stone arches were all made to resemble 18th century South European architecture, making them feel as if they really were in Europe if not for the Japanese shoppers.

Airi tugged him forward deeper inside the mall, their shoes clacking on the white marble floor, and they looked around at all the stores they passed. There were little fashion boutiques that sold a variety of different clothing, foreign brands, small cafes, and even accessory kiosks that were situated in the middle of the path. Everything was softly lit with warm lighting, imitating torchlight.

Airi tilted her head at a swimsuit shop, mannequins in the windows showing off bikinis and swim trunks. It was summer after all, and vacation started next week. She had never had the chance to go to the beach before and never had a swimsuit. Plus, it had "30% off" sale stickers all over the window...

Biting back a smile, she turned back to her boyfriend and gestured to the shop. “Would you mind?”

Akira stared and a red hue began to color his cheeks. “Uh...should I be going in?”

She shrugged. “They have male swimwear too.” She smiled teasingly. “Besides, don’t you want to see me in some?”

At that, he perked up and nodded enthusiastically. In fact, it was him who took the first steps into the shop, tugging her in after him.

The bright studio lighting shone above them, the walls painted a light blue and yellow near the bottom to simulate a beach. It was divided into two sections, men and women, with the women’s section overflowing more than half the store. Since it was so late, there weren’t any customers present. There were only two employees, both of them women, who were manning the cashiers.

Akira eyed a bikini that was really only bits of string with interest, and Airi rolled her eyes. Still a guy.

Leaving him to ogle the mannequins, she walked around, reaching out to look at the swimsuits on the racks. Picking up a plain black bikini by the hanger, she furrowed her brow when she tried to make sense of the sizing. What did they mean when it said size 28?

“Excuse me, ma’am!”

She jumped at the unexpected voice and turned around to see one of the employees smiling at her. “Is there anything I can help you with?”

“Oh...” Airi stuttered. “This is my first time shopping for a swimsuit, so I’m a little lost...”

The employee brightened. “Oh, perfect! Allow me to help you out! Let’s see...” She eyed the cellist’s figure. “You’re certainly top heavy, so these might not be the size for you unless you want
“Now then,” The employee gestured further into the shop and closer to the back. “We have the mature women’s section over there which should be perfect for your figure! What kind of style do you like? Sweet? Simple? Sexy? Elegant?”

Airi tried to follow her quick and snappy questions, trailing after her like a lost puppy. “Uhhh...Elegant, of course.” She had to. It was her name. “Something tasteful?”

The employee nodded and took out a few different swimsuits from the rack before holding them out to the cellist. “I think these would be perfect!” She smiled. “Why don’t you go try them on in our dressing room?” She gestured to the right of the cashier desk where there was a small room, a curtain pushed back to show it was a small dressing room with a mirror and small cushion.

“All right,” Airi jumped yet again and turned around to see Akira staring curiously. The employee eeped and hid the swimsuits behind her from his view. “Please sir, don’t ruin the surprise for yourself!” She scolded playfully and walked over to the dressing room, leaving the hangers on the hook and out of his view before walking back out.

He blinked cluelessly. “Huh..?”

Airi smiled shyly. “I think she’s saying I should show them off to you…” She eyed the blue swim trunks he held in his hands. “Are you getting that one?”

He shrugged. “Yeah, I’m not really picky.”

She huffed. “Well, there’s a bench over there,” She gestured in front of the dressing room where a ottoman was set up. “So…” She smiled teasingly. “Why don’t you enjoy the show?”

He perked up and he subtly swallowed, cheeks reddening with anticipation. “OK…” He took a seat, his chosen swim trunks beside him, and watched her attentively.

Blushing at his focused gaze, Airi walked into the dressing room and tugged the curtain closed behind her. Quickly undressing and leaving her garments on the small stool, she stood completely bare as she eyed the first swimsuit. It was a plain black two piece bikini with metal rings on the hips and cleavage.

She slid them on, the spandex-like material hugging her body like second skin, and admired herself in the mirror. It was nice, but...a little too simple. Nevertheless, she took her phone out to snap a photo to send to Ann. She quickly got a reply back.

An: Airi, you look amazing. Are you going shopping without me?!
Ai: I didn’t plan to or I would’ve asked you to come with!
An: I guess I can forgive you...Oh, now this makes me want to go swimsuit shopping too!
An: Are you getting that one? I think it’s too plain.
Ai: Same, so I’m going to try another one.
An: Keep sending me pictures!

Putting her phone down, she took a deep breath and slid the curtain back, the bright lights of the storefront shining into the dimmer changing room.

Akira looked up from his phone and his breath hitched, his eyes trailing all over her figure and taking in how the black bikini accentuated her curves. “Damn…” He breathed. “I like it.”

Airi smiled, shy about showing off her body in public like this, but he was her only audience so it was fine. “I don’t think I’m getting this one…” She admitted, fingering one of the metal rings on her hip.

He nodded distractedly, eyes still trained on her. “OK…”

Snickering at his hypnotized state, she slid the curtain closed again and changed into the next swimsuit. This was a black latex-like one piece in a turtleneck leotard style. The interesting aspect was that there was a zipper extending from the collarbones to below the breasts, giving off a large window of her cleavage.

She sent it off to Ann who immediately vetoed it, saying one pieces didn’t suit her. Airi shrugged but agreed.

She still slid back the curtains though, and her boyfriend’s reaction was definitely worth it. Akira's jaw dropped and his eyes darted to her chest to her face and back again. “Uh…” He tried to say something but only succeeded in opening and closing his mouth over and over again. It reminded him of gundam pilot suits but sexier.

“I’m not getting this one either.” Airi decided. “Ann said one pieces don’t work for me.”

He blinked. “Ann? Wait, are you sending her pictures of you?…” He held up his phone expectantly. “Can I get them?”

Airi raised a brow. “…Maybe.” She teased before sliding the curtain closed again, snickering at his disappointed groan.

She tried on a few more; a sailor suit one, a classic Japanese school one, and even a blue butterfly two piece that she was tempted to get, but it still didn’t really work for her. Akira sat through and appreciated each and every one of them, and she could see from the slight blood from his nose that he was enjoying this. She was having fun too, but this was taking too long and she knew it was getting late. Her phone said it was almost 8PM.

Exhaling, she tried on the last one and paused when she saw herself in the mirror. Biting her lip, she turned to her left and right, admiring how this one seemed to enhance her features but still kept it classy and elegant. Plus, it was only ¥3080, discounted from ¥4000.

Pursing her lips, she nodded. She was buying this one.

Taking a picture for Ann, she resisted the urge to show it off and undressed out of it. This one would be the surprise.

Putting on her own clothes, she exited the dressing room with her chosen swimwear and hid it with her arms. Bypassing Akira who tilted his head quizzically, she went up to the cashier and quickly paid for it before he could see it.
The employee gave her a wink with her receipt and bag. “Thank you for shopping with us!”

Airi smiled back and waited for Akira to pay for his own swimwear before they both left the store. “Which one did you buy?” He asked curiously, trying to peek inside her bag. To his disappointment, there was a black plastic wrapping that covered it from his view.

“You’ll just have to wait for another time.” Airi winked before gesturing to the rest of the mall. “C’mon, let’s get a bite to eat. It’s late and I’m hungry!”

After a quick meal in the food court where Akira avoided Big Bang Burger and their challenge, they walked around more, just content to be with each other without any mention of school or phantom thieves business.

Airi sucked in a breath when she saw the beautiful statue in the square of the mall. It was a French styled tower fountain, two female statues holding the bowl up and two more statues held their arms out from the side as if they were admiring the strong women. Soft music played from the overhead speakers, and it was such a fairytale setting that she was at a loss for words.

An idea came to her and she bit her lip. Lacing her hand with his, she tugged her boyfriend with her up to the rim of the fountain before taking out her phone. “Let’s take a picture.” She suggested happily. “…I want to preserve this memory, of me and you together.” She smiled shyly. “I want to always remember how happy I am with you…”

Akira softened. He couldn’t even put into words how much he loved her. “Let’s do it then.”

She beamed and turned on the camera function, switching it to the front camera. Holding it up in the air, they smiled as she pressed the shutter button.

“Let’s take a few more.” He suggested, an idea coming to him.

She looked at him curiously but nodded and posed again. Just as she pressed the button, he leaned in to kiss her and her eyes widened, the shutter sound happening a split second later. He moved back with a devious smirk and she pouted, lips tingling from the unexpected contact. “You cheated!”

Akira raised an amused brow. “It’s not cheating if I win.”

Grumbling at his sneaky ways, Airi checked the photo she just took. It captured her shocked face perfectly, eyes wide and brows raised, while he had his closed, leaning down to her. It was...really cute, almost like out of a shoujo manga.

She pursed her lips but sighed. “Fine...Can we at least take a proper one?”

He blinked but perked up. “Yeah! Let me use mine.” He took out his own phone and swiped the lock screen, showing that his background was still that photo he took of her and Morgana in Leblanc a month ago. Turning on his camera, he used his other hand to tilt her chin up to plant the most loving kiss she had ever received from him.

She smiled against his lips, and even after hearing the shutter go off, remained close, her heels helping her match closer to his height so he didn’t have to strain his neck. After a moment, his hand fell from her chin to her waist, pulling her closer to deepen their kiss. His large specs pressed into her cheeks, now just a barely registered sensation instead of glaringly uncomfortable, and her lashes fluttered against the glass. She could smell the faint whiff of coffee around him, mixing with the scent that was just him.
Her heart felt like it was going to burst. This was such a perfect date. How could she ever ask for more? Though she did have one thing in mind...

Finally beginning to run out of oxygen, Akira moved back with a small gasp, cheeks red and a small but elated smile on his red lips.

Airi beamed, cheeks hurting from how much she had smiled today. “You’re the best. I love you.”

He smirked and coiffed his hair with a hand. “I know.” He said arrogantly.

Rolling her eyes, she playfully pushed him away. “It’s getting late and there’s still one more thing I want to do.”

He perked up. “Taking a photo in front of the Rainbow Bridge?”

She blinked in surprise. “Huh? Oh...I didn’t even think of that. Did you want to?”

He shrugged. “Yeah...I saw how happy your face was when we were crossing the bridge, and I thought you looked really…” He looked away shyly. “Beautiful, with all the lights around you. It kind of reminded me of Xihe and her suns, so I thought it’d be perfect.”

Airi blushed and fiddled with the edge of her dress. Hearing that the beautiful bridge they crossed reminded him of her truest self made her feel flattered, though a little embarrassed. “Well...We have time, so why not!”

Linking hands with each other, they left the mall with their bags of purchases and walked outside. The sky was completely dark now, with only the bright lights of buildings and skyscrapers to penetrate the humid night. Compared to the bustling crowds from two hours ago, there was only the occasional person wandering out, the rest having retired home or to one of the luxury hotels on the island.

Walking close to the edge, they traveled back to the world famous bridge, listening to the waves hitting the concrete promenade. A particular violent current splashed high into the air and showered them in a fine ocean mist. Airi scrunched up her face in disgust at the salty brine. “Mmm...smells good.”

Akira snickered, not at all bothered by the familiar scent of the ocean. He had grown up near the ocean, after all.

Walking for a few minutes, just admiring the beauty of Central Tokyo across the waters and the trimmed flora that decorated the courtyard, they finally made it back to the station and with it, the bridge. The lights that the bridge was known for were even brighter now that it was so late at night, reaching 9PM, and the seven colors that lit up the stone arches made it seem like they were mystical crystals.

Taking his phone out again, Akira was about to turn on the selfie function when a passerby called out. “Oh, would you like me to help you take a photo?”

The phantom thieves leader blinked but nodded. “Please.”

They took his phone and held it horizontally. The couple put their bags down and smiled at the lens. “OK, 1...2...3 and smile!” After a moment, the passerby handed it back.

Airi checked the photo on the screen and grinned. They had gotten the whole bridge in the background, and the colors lit up both their silhouettes, making them seem as if they were
powering up a move. Even reality was magical in its own way. “Thank you very much!”

“You’re welcome!” They waved before going back on their walk, leaving the couple alone.

“Well,” Akira began, putting his phone away. “What was it that you wanted to do?”

Airi smiled mysteriously. “We have to go home for that.”

He tilted his head curiously but nodded, and they took the next shuttle bus back to Shimbashi station before transferring to a train.

After a long journey in the underground system and crowded against various couples in the trains, they finally made it back to Yongenjaya. Exiting the station, they turned into an alleyway to walk into the back streets. It was livelier than normal since Tanabata marked the beginning of the festival season, and all the restaurants and bars that littered the cramped alleys were full to the brim, raucous laughter and chatter echoing throughout the usually quiet streets.

Passing by Cafe Leblanc, they walked to her residence where she opened the door for them. The lights were already on, meaning Yusuke was home, and she saw on the bamboo shoots she set up inside the tatami room that he had already written his wish.

Taking off her shoes, she walked up to it and took one of the spare tags of paper on the kotatsu and offered it with a hopeful smile to Akira who followed her in. “So...Since this is our first Tanabata,” She bit her lip shyly. “I was thinking we could write a wish. Together.” She faintly remembered doing the same with her parents, and she had read online that doing this with another person signified a very close bond.

Akira stared in surprise. He had completely forgotten about wishes. His family had never partaken in the tradition, only food-wise, and he couldn’t even remember the last time he had written a wish. That she offered to make one together...

He slowly smiled, evolving into a full blown grin. “Yeah, let’s do it. What should we write?”

She hummed thoughtfully. “...The Phantom Thieves being together forever? Morgana turning back into a human?”

He sweatdropped. “I thought it was supposed to be about us.” He emphasized, gesturing to her and back to him. “Morgana can write his own wish.” His eye caught the other papers already tacked on and furrowing his brow, leaned in closer to read them. “I wish to redefine art and herald a new movement...” ‘I wish to be human and be with the lady of my dreams. Also lots of fatty tuna.’” He snorted. Guess they already wrote their wishes.

Picking up the marker, he held out his hand expectantly.

Blinking, Airi handed over the blank tag she picked up and watched curiously as he scribbled something on it. After a few seconds, he capped the marker and turned the tag over for her to read. “‘We wish to be together forever. Airi and Akira.’” She covered her heated cheeks with her hands, her vision already clouding over with tears. “You...” She began shakily, heart beating a mile a second. “Do you...even know what you’re asking?”

Akira smiled, faint traces of hope in his eyes. “Do you?”

Sniffling, she closed her eyes, a tear falling down her cheek. He was serious. He was really serious. He wanted to spend forever with her. He really would never leave her. “...OK.” She breathed. “Forever then.”
Yusuke greeted them a while later once the clock hit midnight, and he and Morgana followed them out into the small yard that was between the gate and the house. There wasn’t enough space or dirt for a garden, but they did have a few potted plants they tended to, most of which being herb plants.

Airi had found a spare bucket from the kitchen as well as a lighter, bringing them outside with her. Putting the bamboo shoots in it with the wishes attached, they watched them slowly burn, signifying that their wishes were delivered to the star crossed gods in the heavens.

They weren’t the only ones doing this; many of their neighbors stood outside of their apartment complexes to burn their own bamboo, but they were the only teenagers.

Airi grasped her boyfriend’s hand with her own, feeling his fingers respond minutely. She could hardly believe what he had really wrote on that wish tag. ‘Together forever.’ What was he doing, tying himself to her like that. It felt like everything was going too fast, they were doing too many things, there weren’t enough hours in the day to accomplish everything they wanted to do and say.

And yet...He had given her one unshakable statement, something he assured with so much confidence that she couldn’t help but believe him.

She leaned against his arm, just reveling in his scent and comforting air. His thumb caressed the back of her hand like a smooth brush, back and forth, and leaned his head against hers. He reassured her without saying a word, just letting his actions speak for him. She smiled softly, the embers casting warm light over her form. “I love you…” She whispered.

“And I love you.” He murmured.

“Together forever.”
Odaiba is a manmade island that's technically part of Tokyo and is connected to the main land via the Rainbow Bridge. It's also home to the giant gundam statue and is a popular tourist destination as well as a somewhat higher end shopping district.

You burn bamboo shoots during tanabata in the hopes that the wishes will ascend to the heavens and to the star crossed lovers the holiday is known for. The story is that Orihime and Hikoboshi fell in love but the Orihime's father found out that with them being so in love, they weren't performing their duties, and so he separated them to opposite sides of the milky way. On 7/7, Orihime and Hikoboshi met up on the sides of the "river", milky way, but there was no way to cross it. Hearing her sad crying, magpies flew in and formed a bridge for the two lovers to meet. However, they must be separated for the rest of the year.
Chapter Notes

Every time I update, the kudos jump up so much!! Thank you for your support guys <3
1028 with 39.5k hits ahhh

See the end of the chapter for more notes

--- 7/8, FRIDAY, MORNING, SHUJIN ACADEMY

Hiruta-sensei sighed dramatically in front of the class. “It may be the turning point between seasons, but this heat...This must be global warming.” He swept his bangs from his half lidded eyes. “We are all destined to fade away the ice at the South Pole. Speaking of ice, kakigori is one of the symbols of summer. Usually sold at festivals, they come in many varieties such as melon and strawberry.” He smirked. “Kimisawa-chan. Let me ask you a question.”

Airi blinked and sat up. She was a little sleepy since yesterday had been full of activity. She was still filled with joy about their wish together, and her heart fluttered every time she thought about it.

They had already burned the bamboo shoots and wishes once it hit midnight, and Morgana was so excited for it that he didn’t mind being treated like a cat, purring all the while as he rubbed against their legs.

“What is a common trait of almost all kakigori syrups on the market?” Hiruta-sensei asked.

She tilted her head. “They’re all the same flavor, it’s your brain tricking you into thinking they’re different.”

He clapped satisfactorily. “Correct. Almost all kinds of syrups have the same flavor. The ingredients used are corn syrup, fragrance, food coloring…” He smiled languidly. “It’s essentially sugar water. As Kimisawa-chan stated, if you close your eyes, plug your nose, and tasted kakigori with just your tongue, you likely wouldn’t be able to tell which flavor it is.” He sighed. “That cold, sweet strawberry flavor is just a deception of summer produced by color and smell…”

“Whoa, really? So we’ve been eating the same flavors?”

“I’m gonna try this!”

“But before you can enjoy the sweet illusions of summer,” Hiruta-sensei continued with a smirk. “You have very real exams waiting for you. They start next week on the 13th.” He winked. “Well, good luck.”

Akira glanced across the room to the only vacant seat. Mishima hadn’t come to school today. He had yet to hear anything from him via the Phan-site either. Was he OK? Hopefully he wasn’t doing anything unsavory…

There were no notices put up and yet students from every grade showed up in class 2-D for the
study group. Makoto had sent Airi a guideline of what they were going over and aside from a few upperclassman lesson’s she hadn’t learned yet, Airi was confident that with the two of them, everyone would be able to see some sort of improvement on their finals. The other phantom thieves were sat near the back because they knew they were going to have personal study time later.

“So let’s start with chapter 8…” Makoto suggested, pointing to the schedule she printed while they stood in a corner. “Then we’ll work our way into English, Calculus, and Biology.”

Airi nodded in agreement. “That works with me. Let’s start then?”

The council president nodded and they both turned toward the very full room, quiet and nervous chatter murmuring from their worried classmates. “May I have your attention?” Makoto spoke loudly, the noise immediately dying down to a silence. “Kimisawa-chan and I will be your tutors for the remaining days leading up to the exams. If you are showing up, I expect you all to respect one another’s determination to study. Any questions can be asked by raising your hand. With the guide we have created, I’m sure each and every one of you will improve even marginally.”

Airi smiled beside her. “And you’re not obligated to stay if you have other things to do, or if you find that our guidance isn’t working. We aren’t teachers, so if we sound too bossy, scold us. Now then,” She clapped her hands together. “Let’s begin. We’ll start with chapter 8 in Japanese literature…”

The session dragged on for two hours, both of them doing their best to be clear and concise with the information they were imparting. Most listened well and took notes, though some like Tsukishima only grew more frustrated the more they taught. After a quick lecture in each subject, they would give sample questions that Makoto remembered answering last year on her finals, and gauged how well the overall score was.

It wasn’t too bad, everyone would pass, but that didn’t mean they would all score well. There were fewer third years than first and second years, but the ones who were here helped the underclassmen, aside from Eiko.

Airi had been surprised to see her show up, but the older girl still ignored her while showering Makoto with attention. At least Ikesugi had shown up, though judging by his pale face, it wasn’t really because of studying.

She hadn’t been able to get her camera idea approved, and they would have to wait for another move from the stalker before she would be able to do anything. If only she knew who it was…

Before Airi knew it, two hours were up and they were all packing up their books to go home to study some more. Some students like Matsumoto and Namikawa came up to ask additional questions, but they had hurried home soon enough.

The now mostly empty classroom was lit with a warm orange light from the setting sun outside, reminding them how late it was, and the thieves sighed. “Ugh…” Ryuji popped his neck with a groan, leaning back in his chair and propping his feet up on a desk. “I hate studying…”

Morgana huffed from within the bag. “At least you’re doing it. I’m surprised, Ryuji, I didn’t think your simple brain could handle all this information…”

The ex-runner glowered. “Of course it can! I just like playing video games more. Studying’s so dry!”

Ann stretched her arms up in the air before bumping shoulders with him. “Just bear with it. We
have another semester and then one more year to go.” She narrowed her eyes. “You better not drop out, OK?!”

He pouted. “Yeah, yeah…”

Akira glanced away toward the glaringly bright window panes. He might not make it back in time to join them for the spring semester. His probation stated he would stay in Tokyo until March where he would then be restricted to Mishima for another month. If he did make it back and his parents didn’t interfere, he’d be starting the year late again. Though...

He glanced back to his team- family as they argued about their studies and softened. It would be worth it. He had promised someone forever, after all.

“Anyway,” Airi began as she shouldered her school bag. “We should probably go study somewhere else. School will be closing soon and we have very little time to cram.”

Makoto nodded in agreement. “I usually study at the library, but…” She side-eyed a certain noisy ex-runner. “Perhaps a more lively place would suffice.”

Morgana yawned, showing his tiny pink tongue. “We could study at the cafe. At least then I can move around freely and not be stuck in the bag…”

They all looked to their leader who shrugged and stood up, his chair skidding against the floorboards. “Let’s go then.”

--LEBLANC

While in the middle of their second study session together as a group, Yusuke had joined them, saying his art had to wait until finals were over. They were now all sat in the cafe’s attic, the table pulled out and chairs taken out to accommodate them all.

Akira spun his pencil in his hand as he idly skimmed the material. The sun had set about an hour ago, making it 7PM, and they had three more days of this.

“...and yet I still attained the same solution.” Yusuke continued with a scowl as he crossed his legs on the bench. “Wouldn’t that still be applicable?”

Makoto sighed deeply on the couch. “No.” She stressed. “You need to use the same equation to achieve the answer. That’s why it says ‘use this equation,’” She pointed down to his study sheet where it stated exactly what she said. “Why aren’t you using it?”

Yusuke sighed. “Mathematics may be useful, but it is restrictive. What does it matter what equation I use? So long as I am correct, any path to the answer is a correct path.”

Ann sweatdropped, mechanical pencil stopping on her own calculations. “Is this your way of saying art is superior?”

He idly swept his bangs out of his vision. “Of course. Though geometric shapes play a role, art by itself is far more freeing. There are no restrictions, only parameters. Math is important, yes, but do not forget that it is art that revolutionizes culture and humanity therein.”

Airi smiled indulgently. “You make some good points there. Adults always tell us we should do this or that, but it’s the rule breakers who make history. Makes me wonder if all our studying is worth it…” She still didn’t know what she wanted to do after graduating high school, only that it would look good on her resume. Perhaps...She had promised to make people happy with her music.
Could she find something with that?

Makoto pursed her lips. “I suppose that’s true...but that doesn’t mean you can neglect your studying right at this moment. For now, all of our goals is to graduate high school. You can decide everything else after.”

Ryuji groaned and planted his face into his book. “Please...no more…” He voiced, muffled by the pages. “My brain is fried…”

Morgana snickered. “You have a brain?” He joked lightheartedly.

Ryuji glowered. “At least my brain is human sized.”

At that, the feline fell silent, a dark frown replacing his earlier mirth-like expression.

Airi furrowed her brow. What was wrong?

Akira rolled his neck and sighed. “It’s getting late...Do you guys want any curry? I can go downstairs and grab us some food.” A chorus of yes’s overtook his ears and he got up to go down the stairs. There was only a young couple sat in one of the booths, the ones that frequented the cafe regularly, and he moved behind the counter to grab several plates from the cabinet.

Sojiro looked up from his daily newspaper and sighed. “You and your friends eat up all my stock…”

Akira smiled apologetically. “Sorry. We can pay…”

The barista shook his head. “Don’t bother. Just go and study so you can get some good grades.”

He nodded and scooped several helpings of boiling curry onto the plates. Taking two at a time, he quickly distributed the food amongst his friends and they all took their well deserved break.

Airi sighed contently as she took another bite, not minding as her tongue tingled from the very mild spices. “I swear, there’s no better curry than Ojisan’s.”

Ryuji grinned as he scarfed down his plate. “Tooood good! I dunno how he does it! You think he’s got some sort of secret recipe?”

She blinked and pondered that. The barista had mentioned two weeks ago that it was “her” recipe. Who was this her? Was it Isshiki Wakaba? She was the only woman on the research team that she knew of. Maybe it was someone else?

Morgana purred as he sat next to Akira with a wagging tail, letting his leader scoop another spoonful for him. “The chief’s curry is so good! The spices are perfectly blended!”

Makoto furrowed her brow. “Are you allowed to eat human food?”

He puffed up, cheeks still full of rice and potato. “I’m a human too! Even if I look like this!” He voiced defensively. “Just you guys wait! Once I turn back into a human, I’ll eat all kinds of food without needing to be treated like a cat!”

Sweatdropping, Ann reached over the table and patted his head. “It’s OK, Morgana. She’s just worried because your physical form right now is a cat, and they can’t eat curry.”

He purred from the gentle touch. “I-I suppose…”
Finishing his curry, Akira furrowed his brow when he felt his phone buzz in his pocket.

M: Can we meet right now?
M: I have something to say…
Ak: Where?
M: Inokashira Park. I’m over at the lake.

Pursing his lips, he stood up and shouldered his bag. “You guys keep studying. I’m going to go meet up with Mishima.” He announced, scooting out from the bench. “I think he might tell me his decision.”

Airi bit her lip. “Good luck…”

Yusuke raised a brow. “Indeed. If he goes forward with his decision with that Akiyama fellow, we may need a new manager.”

Ryuji frowned morosely. “I hope not… I like the guy. He suffered a lot under Kamoshida, but he’s still workin’ hard…” He sighed. “Still can’t believe he’s distorted…”

Ann bumped shoulders with him. “Not all of us who went through his crap can be strong. You heard him yesterday, he thought of us as heroes.” She looked down at her lap. “I wonder what it would’ve been like if he was a phantom thief too…”

Makoto tilted her head. “You think he would’ve awakened his power if he entered the Metaverse?”

Morgana shook her head. “No. Only a particularly strong individual can awaken their Personas. Not everyone has the strength to withstand the pain of taking off their mask, and not everyone can tame their Shadows.”

Akira sighed, tapping the front of his feet against the floorboards. “He doesn’t need to be a phantom thief to be heroic. The forum is filled with people asking for help, and he’s the only one who can reassure them their message gets to us. I think that’s hero enough.”

Airi smiled softly. “Yeah… Go help our manager. Even a hero needs to be saved once in a while.”

He smiled and nodded, his hand lightly brushing her back as he moved toward the staircase and headed out of the cafe. They listened as the bell rang, signalling he left, before they went back to their books scattered all over the table.

“Yo... The deadline’s tomorrow.” Ryuji murmured. “We really gonna be OK?”

Yusuke sighed. “Kaneshiro has no avenue to threaten us anymore. The only thing we must worry about is his arrest.”

Ann bit her lip. “You think he’ll be released? Makoto?”

The council president pursed her lips and crossed her arms. “If he doesn’t confess, yes.”

Airi smiled and patted her shoulder reassuringly. “I’m sure it’ll be fine. We did everything correctly.”

Makoto smiled slightly and nodded. “Yes. Sis actually sent me a message saying she won’t be home tonight. There’s a chance that the police have found their breakthrough.” She grasped her chin thoughtfully. “I find it strange that he would confess on the day of our supposed time limit. Morgana, do you have any insight on that?”
Morgana yawned and darted over to their bench. “The date acts as a trigger. The change of heart usually takes place the same day their Treasure is stolen, but the date is a marker that’s imprinted in their minds for when their Shadows fully merge back into their subconscious.” He groomed a paw, still freshly cut from Airi’s spa treatment. “That’s why Kamoshida didn’t confess until May 2nd, and why Madarame didn’t confess until June 5th. Instead of them targeting us on those days, we targeted them.”

Ann nodded slowly. “So...You’re saying that because they’re the days they would be targeting us, they go through some sort of enlightenment and confess it all?”

Airi furrowed her brow. “But I remember that guy, Makigami, crying his eyes out the day you guys went in to take his Heart.”

Morgana nodded. “The distorted people in Mementos only carry a few distortions. Trying to compare their crimes to the ones of Palace Rulers is like trying to compare one piece of fatty tuna to the entire fish.”

Makoto crossed her arms. “So the more distortions they carry in their heart, the longer they take to process it once we have stolen their Treasure. The date they set for us is then used as a date for when realization sets in. I see…”

Yusuke looked away. “How poetic. The higher you climb, the longer you fall…” He murmured bittersweetly.

Trying to transfer at Shibuya station, Akira stopped and stared out the large dark windows of the passageway where he could see multiple police lights on Central Street. A siren whined in the distance, implying other patrolmen were coming to the scene.

“What’s with all the police cars?” Someone murmured.

“I think they’re searching the premises…”

“Does it have something to do with all the posters we saw?”

“Oh, about the Phantom Thieves, right? Are they being arrested?”

Akira snorted softly before going on his way. He didn’t need anyone to think that he was a phantom thief, especially if a certain student detective was on the scene like last time.

Transferring to the Keio-Inokashira Line, he rode the train all the way to Inokashira station where he exited and walked to the large park. The sky was dark, but the street lamps illuminated his path that led deeper into the forestry and over to the lake.

Mishima was already there, slumped over on the wooden railing that was supposed to stop him from tumbling into the water. “H-Hey, um…” He began timidly. “I’ve been thinking a little bit about Akiyama-kun…”

Akira frowned as he stopped in front of his classmate. “I don’t wanna change his heart.”

Mishima looked up in surprise. “Huh? W-Well, actually...I was just going to say the same thing.”

Akira blinked. Did he change?
“I mean, going after him wouldn’t even help you guys get famous. It’d practically be pointless.”

No. Akira frowned, agitated. “Stop worrying about fame.”

Mishima gasped. “Wait, how’d you know about that?! Oh…” He paused and deflated. “I get it. Of course a thief who steals hearts would see what’s going on in the depths of my psyche…”

He pursed his lips. “You know, I first started the Phan-Site so I could spread your message of justice to the world...That there were people out there who was doing the right thing, to save others...I wanted someone to recognize me for doing something amazing, and I wanted...” He clenched his jaw. “I wanted Airi to pay attention to me. Helping the phantom thieves as their manager seemed like a good way...”

He lowered his head. “But before I knew it, the only reason I wanted to help you guys was so I could get famous myself. Though…” He fell quiet. “Maybe that had always been the real reason...” He sighed. “I don’t know...I thought I was doing it out of respect for you guys...You saved me. Yet deep down, I think I really just wanted to show the world I’m more than some stupid zero.” He scoffed. “Look where that got me though…”

His shoulders slumped. “I’m just a selfish loser clinging desperately to your popularity...I don’t deserve to work alongside the valiant Phantom Thieves.” Scrunching up his face, he turned around. “Well Igottagoby!” And without waiting for a word from the transfer student, he began to run away in the opposite direction but his shoe immediately got caught on a root and he tripped, falling against the ground. “Oof! Ow...”

Running forward, Akira took him by his arm and helped him up. “Careful.” He scolded, dusting off the dirt and dust.

Nodding sullenly, Mishima sat down on the wooden railing. “Man, I totally ate dirt...” He muttered. “I’m such an idiot...” He laughed pathetically. “I can’t even run away right...” He sighed deeply.

Akira pursed his lips before taking a seat next to him. “You’re not an idiot- Well...” He rolled his eyes. “You have been one lately, but you’re not a total idiot. You’re a good guy, Mishima.”

“I guess...” Mishima whispered halfheartedly. “Working alongside the Phantom Thieves has made me feel like I myself can change the world...But it’s only ever been you guys. You, Kimisawa-senpai, Sakamoto, Takamaki-san...and now Niijima-senpai.” His lips twisted bitterly. “I’m still just as powerless as always. That’s the truth.” He sighed. “I wonder if there’s really any way that a pathetic guy like me can help you...”

Akira bumped shoulders with him, ignoring his yelp of pain. “Do what you’ve been doing this whole time: managing the Phan-site.” He suggested calmly. “Every person who asks for help on there are counting on you to get their messages to us. You are changing the world, their worlds, even if it seems insignificant.” He smiled. “You’re one of us, even if you don’t go crawling into people’s minds.”

Mishima looked at him with wide eyes before tearing up. “Yeah...you’re right! Even if I don’t have superpowers like you, my power lies in running the Phan-site...!” Wiping his eyes, he shot up from his seat, determination replacing his earlier depression. “The site needs to be a safe haven for people in serious trouble. After all that happened to me with Kamoshida, I know how hard it can be to speak out against injustice...”

He looked down at himself. “So...as long as there are voices crying out to the Phantom Thieves,
I’m gonna help them be heard. Just like you said, I can change their worlds for the better. This never should’ve been about me, it’s about them. It’s about all of us who are going through terrible things.” He held up a clenched fist. “And we can’t let them suffer any longer!”

Akira smirked and nodded. “Hell yeah. This world is ours.”

Slowly breathing out, Mishima looked up at the dark sky, his eyes focusing on the glimmering moon. “I…feel a lot better now. Thanks…Akira.”

He raised a brow. “No problem, Yuuki. You’re one of us, remember?”

Mishima nodded happily. “Let’s forget about going after Akiyama-kun. I’m still worried about some of the rumors I’ve heard about him, but I’ll do some more research first. He’s not as bad a guy as he pretends to be. Apparently he’s super sweet to his girlfriend and they’ve been talking about getting married even back in middle school.” He winced. “…I’m honestly kinda jealous, but I know after what I did, I…” He hung his head. “I definitely don’t deserve Kimisawa-senpai like that.”

Akira sighed and looked out toward the lake, spotting the sleeping swans in the bushes. “At least you’re aware. Are you gonna apologize?”

The Phanboy nodded morosely. “Yeah…I shouldn’t have put a hand on her. She’s…kind of the second reason why I wanted to push the fame.”

Akira tilted his head. “Care to explain?” He heard some of it in the Metaverse, but not the backstory.

Mishima sighed and sat back down. “I’ve known her since last year. She came from Yoyogi Junior High along with Sakamoto and Takamaki-san, so we didn’t know each other at all. When I first saw her, I thought ‘Whoa...her hair is really pretty. Like a rose...’” He smiled timidly. “We were in the same class all of first year and now second year, but she never really talked to me and I was too shy...She never talked to anyone really. Sometimes she would chat with Takamaki-san, but her usual schedule was to come to school, help others with their homework, then leave for work. I, um…” He rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. “I ended up memorizing her schedule.”

Akira glowered at his classmate with both irritation and jealousy. He had some sort of inkling that the Phanboy was enamored, but to know this much about her? He wish he had transferred here earlier if only so he had the same chance.

“It was only when Kamoshida’s treatment of us began to show that she talked to me again.” He bit his lip. “I was happy that you guys reached out to help me even when I was so ungrateful about it. Things were just so dark then and when he was taken away by police, it felt like I had hope again, and it was all thanks to you…and her.” He sighed. “But she only has eyes for you…”

Akira blinked. “Even when we just met?”

“Well, yeah…” Mishima answered sullenly. “She asked me if I was OK and stuff after all that, but who did she hang out with? Who walked with her to and from school? Who’s a phantom thief with her? You. I was just the guy who she occasionally doted on like a kid. She never liked me as more than a friend…” He slumped in his seat. “She’s totally in love with you…”

Akira looked away, his eyes softening. And he was in love with her. Maybe he should go back to Mina and ask about rings…

"I’m going to go home and redo the entire Site. It should never have gotten to the state it is now."
Mishima stated, picking up his discarded bag from the ground. “I'll see you tomorrow...!”

Ah I've been so remiss about this but I recently got more fanart from you lovely readers!! <3

Thank you so much to JustMonika4ever for this amazing piece of Elegant with her sniper rifle!! I really do enjoy the sleekness of it and how she looks so confident with it in her hands!

![Fanart Image]

Chapter End Notes

Mishima rank 7

Regarding the deadline explanation, there's no solid explanation given by the wiki, so
I used more of a psychological POV to explain it. In short, once the treasure is taken and the Shadow returns back to the subconscious, the disassociation wears off as they slowly become one person again, and the deadline date acts as a trigger for when the Shadow completely merges back with the host.
Chapter 155

Chapter Notes

1042 kudos and 40k hits!! Thank youuu ;w;

Have you guys seen the new outfits for P3D/P5D? Just...Atlus why. Why must you sexualize our girls like this. No one asked for this. (except i may or may not have started drawing Airi's outfit for Last Surprise because I'm a sellout, also Airi is a sexual person already so i feel no shame coughcough may start on her "high-cut" after because fuck it)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

---7/9, EARLY MORNING, AOYAMA-ITCHOME

All throughout their morning commute, they could only hear people gossip about Kaneshiro’s confession and the mass arrests that happened in Shibuya last night. Airi wondered if they were the people who swore under him and not the family’s.

Akira had come back late last night after everyone had already left, and he confirmed that Mishima had changed. She was relieved since she didn’t want to think of her classmate and friend as someone they couldn’t trust. Hopefully he came to school today and they would be able to talk it out. She wanted to apologize to him.

“Its sooooooo hot…” A student in front of them groaned, fanning themselves as they walked into the small street that led to their school.

“Did you catch the news report this morning about the mafia boss getting busted?” His friend gossiped. “Apparently, someone scattered calling cards all across Shibuya just before his arrest. Remember the Kamoshida scandal? They say the same thing happened, that someone left a calling card. Madarame too, if I’m not mistaken.”

“Do you think it’s the Phantom Thieves? If so, I’m impressed. I can’t believe they actually steal hearts!”

Morgana snickered from the rim of the bag. “It seems like our reputation is finally turning around, even after that detective’s slander!”

Airi took out her phone and checked the Phan-site, raising a brow. “Wow, we’re up to 36% with people thinking we’re just.”

Akira smirked. “Nice.” Now they just had to keep it up. He wondered if they would ever reach 100%...

Leisurely walking to school amidst other students, they were about to head up the steps to the entrance when a whizzing noise caught his ear and he instinctively reached out, pulling Airi into his arms and ignoring her yelp.

“Hey..!” Airi began, not wanting their schoolmates to see just how close they were. What was he
A second later, a red clay pot fell exactly where she was just standing, smashing loudly on the concrete and shattering into a million crimson pieces. Everyone stopped in the streets and gasped, taking a step back. “Whoa, that was close!”

“Where did that come from? The third floor?”

“Did someone throw that..?”

Staring wide eyed at the remains of what could’ve been her death, Airi exhaled shakily. “Oh…” That was too close. Could it be..? Was that stalker girl really going this far to get her away from Ikesugi? She thought she’d be harmless, but this was going too far.

The arms tightened around her protectively. “You OK?” Akira asked roughly, dragging her a few feet away as school staff came out to investigate the loud noise. He checked her over with a keen eye, his overprotective mode activated after such a close call.

Airi tried to assure him she was fine but he only ignored her, checking her legs to see if any shards had pierced her. Standing back up, he wrapped his arms around her once more and held her close to him, needing proof that she was alive and unharmed.

With the immediate danger over, his gaze darted to the school building, cold rage building within him. Where did it come from and who will pay for this?

Other students crowded around the site of the accident, some of them taking out their phones to take pictures of the evidence.

“What’s happened?!”

The couple looked up the steps as Makoto and Kawakami rushed out of the building and to the many shattered remains. The council president bee-lined it to the couple and looked them over worriedly. “Are you two OK? Can you tell me what happened?”

Akira tightened his grip. “Someone’s trying to hurt Airi.” He growled lowly, his eyes flashing red.

Makoto gasped. “Here? At school?”

Morgana shuffled his head out of the bag, blue eyes narrowed into slits as he gazed up at the school building. “If that pot fell on accident, it would’ve landed close to the windows and not change its trajectory. Someone threw that.”

Airi bit her lip. “Is it the same person who’s stalking Ikesugi-kun?”

Makoto blinked. “You mean the one who has been leaving things in his locker?”

She nodded. “Yuuki-kun actually told me there’s a person’s blog that’s dedicated to hating the Phantom Thieves, and then there was a blog post about wanting to kill me.”

Akira looked down at her in disbelief. “And you didn’t mention this sooner?” He hissed.

Airi shrugged. “I don’t know...After that whole situation with Hisoka, I’m kind of unfazed by this little girl’s threats. But after this…” She glanced at the sharp pieces that laid on the pavement, surrounded by school staff that were cleaning it up. “If he’s willing, I’m going to ask him for her name and take care of this in Mementos. Ikesugi-kun is scared out of his mind and I’m getting tired...”
of death threats to my person.”

Makoto gave her a look. “...I should be worried that you’re getting used to death threats, but…” She sighed. “So long as Akira is with you, and I know he always will be since you’re together, I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

Eyes widening, Airi sputtered and tried to get out of her boyfriend’s embrace. “N-No! Where’d you get that idea? We’re not...We’re not together…”

Akira deadpanned and sighed. “Yes we are. If you keep denying it like that, I’m going to develop self-esteem issues again. She saw us kiss when Kawakami-sensei was hospitalized.”

She quieted and blushed sheepishly. “O-Oh...Sorry you had to see that.”

Makoto chuckled. “It’s all right. I support you two, if only so someone will protect you from your recklessness.” She glanced at the large clock on the side of the building. “Class will begin soon. Let’s try to put this incident behind us for now and we’ll discuss it later once we have more information.”

The class chattered quietly to each other about what had happened just two hours ago. Everyone in school already knew that a certain rose haired class president had been the closest person to the scene of the crime, and the rumors were spreading like wildfire. Things like "someone wants to kill her" and "maybe it's karma." None of them really made sense but no one paused to notice just how blase the cellist was about this.

Airi leaned forward on her desk and sighed inaudibly. Was it strange for her to be so nonchalant about death threats now? After Hisoka, something in her had shifted. She wasn't afraid for herself anymore. However, that didn't mean she didn't feel fear for the people around her.

“I hope everyone is safe after this morning’s incident.” Usami-sensei raised a brow at the front of the class in room 2-D. “I doubt it was merely an accident. The angle at which the pot “fell” at as well as its weight implied it was thrown. I hope none of you were the instigator of this.”

She sighed, crossing her arms on top of her dark brown suit. “Crime has been rampant lately, though I heard the leader of the crime ring in Shibuya was caught. It seems like some of our students were being victimized by them, so we can breathe easy about that for now. I’m thankful to the police for arresting the perp, even though they’re just doing their job.” She paused. “By the way, “perp” is police slang. You might have heard the stars in Police Procedurals say it. It’s short for “perpetrator.” Speaking of stars…” She raised a brow. “Can you answer this question, Takamaki-chan?”

Ann sat up in her seat, focused and determined. She had changed so much just over these past few weeks, now filled with resolve and the urge to fight for what she believed in. Her body, already a figure of beauty, had been toned to perfection, every curve helping to hypnotise those who would dare to gaze upon her. Her hair shined with care, and her skin was smooth and blemish-free, showing that she was careful about her beauty products.

Picking up the piece of chalk, Usami-sensei drew an uneven star on the chalkboard, labeling each point from A to E. “What is the sum of the angles A through E?”

Ann bit her lip, math having always been her weakest point. “180!”

Impressed, the math teacher clapped her hands. “Correct. The sum of A through E is the same as the sum of internal angles of a triangle- 180 degrees.”
“Wow, really?”

“Hey, I knew that! We learned that in yesterday’s study group…”

Morgana purred happily. “Lady Ann is so smart these days!”

“By the way,” Usami-sensei continued. “There are rumors that the Phantom Thieves took down the perp this time- Kaneshiro. I remember their name with that bit with Madarame, as well as the incident in May.” She pondered. “Could this be a new urban legend?” She shook her head. “Anyway, please prepare for your tests starting Wednesday, and don’t be distracted by rumors like that.”

When the bell rang, signalling that lunch break began, most of the students milled around the hallways, still attempting to study even now. Mishima had come to school today, though instead of any confidence in himself like he had exuded over the past couple of weeks, he had regressed back to the meekness he was all too known for.

Biting her lip, Airi decided to approach his desk where he was still on his phone, regulating the Phan forums. “Um...Yuuki-kun?”

At her voice, he dropped his mobile with a clack and looked up at her with surprise and trepidation. “S-Senpai! Um…” He swallowed nervously. “I wasn’t going to say anything until after school, but…” Standing up from his seat, he bowed low to his waist. “I’m sorry...I’m really really sorry.” He confessed guiltily. “I shouldn’t have hurt you. I shouldn’t have gotten angry just because you don’t…” He flinched. “You don’t like me the same way. I’m sorry!”

Smiling tearfully at his apology, Airi reached out and brought him into a hug, letting his stray tears be absorbed by her polo. “It’s OK...I know we’ve been putting pressure on you as our manager without taking in your well-being. I’m sorry too for being a bad class president and friend. I never bothered to really ask you if you were OK.”

His eyes widened at the unexpected touch but slowly relaxed at the motherly embrace. “...I am.” He voiced earnestly. “I am OK now.” He moved back with a sheepish smile. “Thank you, Senpai.”

She raised a brow. “Airi.”

Mishima reddened. “A-Airi…”

She beamed. “There we go. You’re part of the team too.”

He smiled ecstatically and nodded. “Yeah! I’ll keep doing my best for you guys- us!” Picking up his phone, he quickly searched up the bloodstorm blog. “As my first task as your brand new manager, I found out the name of the girl who’s threatening you and Ikesugi. Her name is Mogami Yumeko from Class 2-C.” He frowned. “You should take her Heart soon before she tries anything more drastic!”

Airi nodded. That would be their next target in Mementos then. It wasn’t just her who could’ve been hurt earlier, it could’ve been Akira, or any of the students who walked near them.
Once they were finished with their second study session, the thieves with the exception of Makoto left and assembled over at Shibuya. Akira kept especially close to Airi while they were at school today, narrowed eyes constantly darting around to find this morning’s perpetrator. He had even snapped at Ryuji when he playfully pushed her.

Taken aback by his aggressiveness, Ryuji jokingly asked if he was looking out for his girl, but once they also learned of what really happened earlier this morning, they had stuck close to the cellist as well.

Airi sweatdropped as she was literally boxed in by her friends like some sort of official with special agents. It was nice that they were so concerned about her, but she wasn’t that fragile. She could handle a crazy girl. “Guys…”

“No.” Akira cut her off curtly, holding her hand while they walked to the hideout. “You just recovered and now someone at school wants you dead. I’m not taking any risks with your safety.”

Ann was almost spitting fire. “Who are they?” She hissed. “Who do they think they are, trying to hurt our mom?”

Ryuji cracked his knuckles, a scowl taking up most of his face. “Whoever they are, they better be prepared to get their face smashed in. We’ve taken down bigger targets so this’ll be real easy.”

Akira smirked darkly, eyes flashing red with a promise of shedding blood. “Exactly what I was thinking.”

Morgana leaned against his shoulder, claws glinting in the sunlight while he purred. “No one targets the Phantom Thieves without getting some good payback.”

The four grinned at each other and Airi smiled, sweatdropping at their sadistic streaks. Well...they weren’t hurting anybody in real life, so it was fine, right? She could admit she would do the same if any of them were the ones being threatened. Hell, she had. She had ripped into Hisoka’s Shadow with no remorse, only stopping when they had stopped her. Maybe she should do the same for them now, to make sure they don’t go too far.

While they walked to the passageway, the overheard several people gossiping about the arrest of a crime syndicate nearby, talking about how this might relate to the arrest that happened a few weeks ago. Teenagers sighed in relief knowing that they were free from their blackmailed tasks, and slowly began to relax again in Shibuya.

Arriving at the hideout, they found that Yusuke was already there, idly browsing his phone. He looked up at them and nodded a greeting.

“Ain’t it great that Kaneshiro finally confessed?!” Ryuji exclaimed excitedly, stopping next to him. “People’ve been makin’ a huge deal of it since the police announcement!”

Yusuke frowned. “It’s difficult to accept that the authorities are taking all of the credit for his arrest.”

Airi shrugged. “I’m fine with it so long as something is being done.”

“People are going nuts about the Phantom Thieves online though.” Ann added happily, taking out her phone and showing them the screen. “Look!”
The phone was opened to the Phan-site, showing dozens of comments coming in per second. Ryuji grinned and rolled his shoulder. “It’s all comin’ together for us!”

Yusuke raised a brow. “This is quite the turnaround. All of a sudden, people are expressing their long-standing belief in us.”

Akira huffed. “Opinions change fast…”

Ann nodded. “So this is why Makoto told us to post the calling card anywhere that might stand out.”

“And it was all thanks to me.” The ex-runner grumbled. “Oh...where is she anyway? We saw her like thirty minutes ago.”

Akira’s phone rang out and he picked up the call. “Makoto?”

“Hello? It’s me. My apologies, but I won’t be able to join you today. I’ve been called into a meeting with the principal. There’s no need to worry though. More importantly, there is a special on TV about the Phantom Thieves!”

Airi blinked, standing close enough that she overheard the conversation. “Really? What did it say?”

“They were talking all about our calling cards.”

Ann leaned in to listen and grinned. “For real?!”

“Anyway, my apologies about today. I’ll see you all tomorrow.” The phone clicked, indicating she had hung up, and Akira placed his phone back in his pocket.

“That’s freakin’ crazy!” Ryuji grinned excitedly. “We’re really turnin’ heads now!”

Yusuke pursed his lips. “I hope all this excitement doesn’t place us on the police’s radar.”

Ryuji waved him away. “It’ll be fine! No way they’d find out about that weird other world!”

Akira frowned. “Maybe not the police, but remember? There’s another Metaverse user and he’s taking advantage of the Palaces.”

“But he could’ve just been pullin’ it out of his ass.” Ryuji argued. “We shouldn’t let it bother us.”

Airi bit her lip. Yet Madarame had also mentioned someone just like that, and there was no way two Palace Rulers would say the same lie. Yusuke seemed to have the same idea as her, judging by the doubt on his face but he didn’t voice it. “I hope that’s the case…”

“Anyways,” Ryuji continued smugly. “In your face, Akechi! What should we do for our next target?”

Ann rolled her eyes. “Don’t get ahead of yourself. Still,” She smiled. “People might expect a lot from our next move considering how excited they’re getting.”

He nodded in agreement. “We can’t just pick any old schmo now.”

Yusuke smiled. “There is no need to hurry though. Counting Kamoshida, we’ve claimed three consecutive victories, right? We should just lay low and wait for all this excitement to blow over.”
Airi nodded in agreement. “Plus, we still need to celebrate for this one and officially welcome Makoto to our group.”

“Hell yeah!” Ryuji jumped in excitement. “That briefcase we got is pretty damn expensive! Let’s sell it and drop the cash on our party!”

Morgana who had kept quiet since now, sighed. “Wow...Seems like the “lay low and wait” idea has gone completely out the window.”

Ann smiled teasingly at the feline. “So we can count you out then, Morgana?”

He meowed in surprise. “Uh...what are you talking about? I was just saying we should try and keep our party on the down low.”

She laughed at his fast backing up. “That’s the spirit. I’m gonna let Makoto know!” Taking out her phone, she dialed their missing teammate’s number. “...Hi, Makoto? There’s something we forgot to tell you! So-Oh...” She paused, face falling into the expression of a scolded child. She pressed the speaker button, letting the council president speak to all of them. “I hope you remember we have finals in three days. Morgana excluded, of course. If you wish not to stand out, You had best not get bad grades, OK? That is something I simply would not be able to overlook as student council president! Airi, please guide them as you usually do. We can have fun once finals are over...Understood? You can never study enough.”

Airi sweatdropped. Guess even she needed to be reminded. “Yep, got it.”

The call ended and they all heaved a collective sigh. Akira rubbed the back of his neck. “Well...Guess we can still drop off the briefcase.”

Yusuke nodded. “She is right, of course...Aneki, we will be counting on you for your knowledge today.”

Airi sweatdropped. “I was hoping we can do a Mementos request before that though...”

Ryuji looked up with a scowl. “Is it who I think it is?”

She held up her phone, showing the information Mishima had given her. “Her name is Mogami Yumeko. She’s been stalking Ikesugi-kun for several weeks and recently, she’s been saying we’re the ones who are stealing him away from her, specifically me.”

Akira darkened. “So that’s her name.”

Yusuke raised a brow. “You’re all rather hostile about this one.”

Ann gasped. “Is she the one who threw that pot at you today?!”

The artist recoiled at the news. “What?! Are you hurt, Aneki?” He quickly looked her over, trying to find any signs of injury.

Airi shook her head. “Akira pulled me out the way before I even realized it happened.”

Ryuji scrunched up his face. “All right screw it, we’re gonna do this now. No way we’re gonna let this crazy bitch run free!” He cracked his knuckles. “Let’s go!”

Nodding, Akira took out his phone and accessed the MetaNav, transporting them to Mementos.
Checking the app again, Joker moved them to the end of Chemdah, their feet solidifying on the broken yellow tiles. Train tracks bordered them on both sides, and in front of them as well as the blocked off wall leading further down was their target, muttering “blood storms” to herself.

Mona furrowed his brow. “There it is, Mogami’s Shadow.”

Skull scowled at the deranged smile on her face. “She’s smirking. That’s kinda creepy…”

Elegant nodded solemnly. “Her blog is full of delusional and sick thoughts. Poor Ikesugi-kun…”

Panther grimaced. “She must be lost in some sort of sick romance fantasy but that’s no excuse for what she did.”

Fox scowled. “Let’s take care of this before her infatuation turns deadlier for all of us.”

Joker narrowed his eyes at their target. He would enjoy this battle. She had made it personal.

They rushed up to the Shadow who screeched at their entrance. “What are you Phantom Thieves doing?! I know why you’d go after Kamoshida, but why me?!”

“Hey,” Panther called out warily, fingering her whip in preparation. “I don’t blame you for falling in love, but there’s a point where it goes too far.”

Elegant nodded in agreement. “Like trying to kill someone. Are you some sort of Yandere?”

Yumeko scrunched up her face in outrage and pointed at her. “You! You’re the home wrecking tramp that’s trying to steal Ikesugi-kun away from me! Why didn’t you die when I threw my pottery project at you?!”

Elegant frowned. “So it was you. I’m not interested in Ikesugi-kun like that. I only talked to him because you made him feel unsafe.”

Yumeko sneered. “You’re just a sore loser, hanging out with some lame guys and a funny-looking animal! You wish you could get someone as cute as my Ikesugi-kun! I hate you with all my heart!”

Joker narrowed his eyes. “What’d you just say?” He didn’t appreciate this delusional girl throwing shade at them.

“‘Funny-looking animal’?” Mona glared, fur heckling at the insult. “Is she talking about me? This makes me mad! Get her!”

With a rumble, the black flames erupted around the Shadow, contorting her body into a demented looking teddy bear, rips and nails in its dark matted fur. “Urrghh!!” She screeched. “Don’t get in the way of my romance!” Quickly floating over, she swiped at Elegant with her sharp teddy claws.

The noblewoman grunted as the Shadow ripped into her gloves, but spun out with her scythe, her weapon catching and tearing into the fabric-like skin. “Back off!”

Joker rushed in from behind her and swiped up with his dagger, before Skull jumped up above him and swung down with his metal ridged bat.

“She’s a teddy bear, so…” Panther held a hand to her mask. “Carmen!” The beauteous dancer appeared behind her, dragging her boytoys on the ground. “Agilao!” With a spark, the Bugbear erupted into flames and she screeched in pain, slumping on the floor.
Rushing up to surround her, they struck out with their weapons one by one in a consecutive combo. Gaze as cold as ice, Joker dashed up and jammed his dagger deep inside the Shadow, dealing the last blow. He backflipped away, landing with a sadistic smirk.

With a splash of black ink, Yumeko turned back into herself and dropped ¥6880. “M-My romance…” She sobbed. “My passion...I can't believe it was all wrong...What is real love and romance?!”

Elegant glanced over at her leader with soft eyes before turning to face the defeated Shadow. “Real love...is knowing that even if the person you love doesn’t love you, you would still wish for their happiness.” She spoke softly. "That you respect them enough to accept their decisions.”

His lips twitched and Joker stepped forward. “Ikesugi isn’t just an object for you to hoard.” He voiced coldly. “He’s a person too.”

“Then…” Yumeko looked up at them with teary yellow eyes. “What should I do with all of these feelings inside me..? I feel so much for him...”

Panther gave her an exasperated smile. “Just tell him face to face, and don’t write weird stuff in your blog. It’ll take courage though.”

“And stop trying to kill Elegant.” Fox added shortly. “Your passion should be shown to the person of your affections.”

Skull held up a fist. “Just go at it with all your heart! But don’t hurt anyone or you’ll answer to us again!”

Biting her lip, Yumeko nodded. “I’m scared, but...I’ll do it! I’ll apologize to Kimisawa and I’ll tell my feelings to Ikesugi-kun!” Glowing softly, she disappeared and left a bud of a Treasure in her place.

“Treasure!” Mona cheered, jumping up to curl around the Sticky Hairball.

Elegant sighed in relief now that the coast was clear. “Can I go one week without death threats? That would be nice.”

Panther snorted and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “I hope so too, but hey,” She smiled teasingly. “What was all that about love? You sound like an expert on it.” She nudged her playfully with a finger. “Do I hear romance in the air for youuu?”

Elegant smiled mysteriously. “Who knows?” She wasn’t going to say anything until July ended. She was going to ruin their bet.

Mona waddled forward closer to the wall that blocked them off from going any deeper into the depths. “Since Kaneshiro confessed, I wonder…” He pondered before turning around. “Joker! Let’s try opening the door!”

Joker glanced at the noblewoman with worry. What would happen if they keep going deeper? She was fine now, but then if they don’t open it, they won’t find their answers. Pursing his lips, he walked forward and placed a hand on the blockade, his glove catching onto the inscriptions and mysterious symbols.

With a rumble, the pieces slid back into the sides, showing escalators leading down into the abyss. “It opened…” Fox marveled.
Skull grinned next to him. “Don’t you just feel like the whole world approves of you whenever these things open?”

Panther slumped. “For a second, but then I think how there are more of these walls waiting ahead...Let’s not do that today though. We’ll need to bring Queen in with us, and…” Her hand slid from Elegant’s shoulders to her hand. “I don’t want you to get sick again….”

Elegant smiled gently. “I’m sure I’ll be fine. I’m not sure if it might be because of Xihe, but I know that having you all with me makes it so much more bearable.” Her precious suns that lit the darkness away.

Joker shook his head. “We’ll leave it for another time. C’mon.” Taking his phone out, he relocated them back to the entrance of Mementos.

Elegant looked past the ticket machines and at the blue light in the corner of the room curiously. She had never noticed it before, but ever since she took Hisoka’s Heart, it had been there. She remembered that Joker would sometimes stop at a certain spot right outside the Palaces, and here too, and then zone out to choose his Personas. Maybe it was a spot that helped him? It wasn’t really important though. She’d just have to ask some other time.

Thank you to Asherr for this fanart of Airi! I received it in my email a few weeks ago but I like spacing out fanarts so they can get their spotlight!
Chapter End Notes

Kaneshiro's officially done! Next bajillion chapters will be about our favorite weirdo hacker!
Chapter 156

Chapter Notes

Spring break is almost here for me, which means I can write freely again =w= I hope. Or I might just laze around and do nothing ayyy

My friend sent me a screenshot of Ann's newest devil outfit and said "she looks just like Airi here" lmao

Thanks so much for 1056 kudos and 40.6k hits!! Every time I come back to check the stats, I'm just blown away that this fic is so popular? It's on the front page of every search option on AO3. Word count (ofc lmao), kudos, comments, hits, etc. Like wow...<3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They all entered Leblanc as one huge group, the narrow entryway just barely fitting them all. Sojiro looked up from behind the counter and raised a brow. “You kids come here pretty often.”

Ann laughed sheepishly as she walked further into the cafe. “We have exams, and this place is nice and quiet for some studying!”

He chuckled. “Glad you’re all taking your education so seriously. Go on up. Akira, make some coffee for your friends.”

The transfer student nodded and while his team went upstairs to set up their usual studying table, he moved behind the counter to make a few cups of coffee. Kona for Yusuke, Blue Mountain for Ann, Decaf latte for Airi, and a soda for Ryuji. While he waited for the water to boil, he noticed from the corner of his eye that the barista was observing him.

“How goes everything?” Sojiro asked quietly, already hearing the chatter from the attic fading down the stairs. “Everything seem above board with you, and your friends are all pretty nice, but that doesn’t mean you can slack off because summer’s on the horizon, got it?”

Akira nodded obediently, pouring the hot water into the cups of ground beans. “Right.” He had no intentions of slacking off. They had work to do as thieves; people to save. Maybe dates to go on.

Festival season began two days ago on Tanabata, so maybe he would go with Airi. He wanted to do every date cliche: catching goldfish, winning prizes, eating takoyaki, watching fireworks…

He smiled dreamily to himself, but flinched when a drop of hot water landed on his hand. ‘Don’t space out when making coffee.’ He could dream about it later.

Carefully picking up the steaming cups of coffee and the can of soda, he brought them upstairs to his room and placed them in front of each person’s seat at the table. “Enjoy, mademoiselle, monsieur.” He bowed with a curtsy. They laughed at his mannerly display.

“Hey!” Ryuji reached over to turn on the old CRTV. “Let’s check out what they’re sayin’ about us!”
The TV flicked on, showing the news channel which had a photo of Kaneshiro’s arrest as well as a photo of the seedy bar they had entered when they kidnapped Makoto. “Junya was arrested on June 22nd, and after several interrogations by the police, has finally confessed to his crimes. He is the leader of a crime ring in Shibuya, and has been charged with Illegal money laundering, substance abuse, solicitation of minors, and several other felonies. Many people are surprised that such a major criminal was suddenly arrested. Calling Cards were spread all over Shibuya the night before his arrest, leading many to believe that it may be the same group as the ones who targeted Madarame Ichirysai, though police are also reasserting their stance that the ‘Phantom Thieves’ weren’t involved in the arrest.”

They all grinned at the news, knowing their popularity was increasing by the minute. Their phones buzzed.

Ma: This reaction is incredible. I’m honestly shocked to see it.
Y: It is only natural people are surprised. Even the police were struggling to catch him.
An: Yeah. By the way, you said you were called in by the principal?
Ai: Is he still making you investigate us?
Ma: He tried. This all started because of the incident with Kamoshida.
Ma: Don’t worry. I didn’t mention a word about any of you.
Ma: I essentially told him I was unable to find any information.
Ak: Are you going to be OK?
Ma: I will.
Ma: I’ve graduated from my role as an exemplary honor student.
Ma: From now on, I’m going to be more honest with myself.
Ma: It’s quite a refreshing feeling.
R: What’re you gonna do now? Wanna stay with the Phantom Thieves?
Ma: That’s my intention, assuming it wouldn’t be any trouble.
Ai: Of course. We’d love to have you with us.
R: It’d actually be a big problem if you didn’t stick with us.
Y: It would be greatly convenient to have you.
Ma: Well then, I hope I can continue getting along with all of you.
Ai: Don’t sound so formal. We’re all friends.
Ma: You’re right. I’ll see you all later then.

“We can put all that behind us now.” Airi sighed as leaned back on the couch and took out her books. “Now, I should be listening to the oldest person in our group. It’s time to study.”

Ryuji groaned loud and long but took out his notebook as well, sitting backwards in his chair. “Fine…”

Yusuke and Akira sat opposite of them on one bench, and Morgana jumped up between Airi and Ann on the couch, settling in as they continued their study session.

---7/10, SUNDAY, EARLY MORNING, LEBLANC

“Hey, you’re still there, right?” Sojiro yelled up at the attic. “Come downstairs.”

Putting on his white shirt jacket, Akira sighed and slumped. There went any plans today.

Walking downstairs, he made his way behind the counter to help his guardian man the shop. Several customers came in and went, including the pompous coffee drinker who thought he was
more intelligent than anyone else, the elderly couple that came in from time to time, and to his surprise, even Takemi. She sat in one of the booths once it hit noon, staring down at her already cold black coffee with a forlorn expression.

Furrowing his brow, he went over with a fresh cup, gently placing it down next to her. “Doctor?”

Snapping out of her trance, she gave him a slight smile and exchanged her cups. “Thank you...” She went back to gazing down at the black abyss of her drink. “If you have time...I want to speak to you at my clinic.”

Akira nodded. “I'll come by tomorrow after school.”

She closed her eyes and nodded, taking a sip of the coffee he brewed and humming in appreciation. “Did you make this one? You're rather proficient at it...”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “Only because the Boss taught me.”

“Hey!” Sojiro called out for him from behind the counter, frowning as he stirred the pot of curry on the stove top. “Stop bothering the customers and clean the dishes.”

“Right.” He hurried to the sink and began his task on the mountain of dirty cutlery, not noticing the doctor leaving or even the time passing until the cafe was empty again, the clock signalling it was close to 3PM.

“Hey, check the ingredients in the fridge.” Sojiro ordered, right before his phone rang. Taking it out of his pocket, he answered the call. “Hey, what's up?” He paused. “Huh? It's not right?...Not cute?” He scrunched up his face and walked closer to the door and farther from Akira.

The phantom thieves leader blinked curiously, flicking his hands of any extra droplets after turning off the sink. Who was he talking to?

“That was the one the staff recommended to me though...Won't that printer do?...Huh? It'll do, but it's not it?” Sojiro heaved a sigh. “...OK, I'll be right over.” Ending the call, he placed his phone back in his pocket and shook his head. “This might take a while...” He turned to his ward. “I'm leaving the store to you. Lock up for me if I don't come back.”

Akira nodded. “Got it.”

Popping his neck of any crinks, Sojiro sighed again and took off his apron. “Sheesh, what a handful...” Putting on his white blazer jacket on top of his regular pink shirt and his white fedora on top of his combed back hair, he left the store, leaving Akira with the elderly couple who were still here even after three hours.

The TV was turned onto the news and Akira leaned on the counter to watch. “…And that concludes the latest news on the suspect Kaneshiro. This case is said to be a result of the Phantom Thieves’ actions, but what do you think?”

The screen switched to a pundit sitting on a couch. “We don't know their methods, but I believe they are a menace that will threaten this law-abiding country. This dangerous group tampers with people’s hearts. It’s no different from brainwashing.”

It switched back to the reporter who nodded. “I see. You're absolutely correct.”

The elderly grandma turned around to watch the news and frowned. “I wonder what’s going on. Didn’t this happen a little while ago too? Who was it again?” She pondered slowly. “You know,
that famous artist…”

Her husband hummed. “Madarame, was it?”

She smiled frailly. “They punished those awful people, didn’t they? The Phantom Thieves aren’t at fault then.”

“That may be true, but…”

She turned to the teenager. “Don’t you think so too, deary? The Phantom Thieves aren’t doing anything wrong, are they?”

Akira shook his head. “Of course not.”

“See?” She turned back to her husband. “Even he says that they’re doing good.” Her eye caught the clock on the wall and she gasped. “Oh my, look at the time. We should probably head home.”

Her husband nodded and with a groan, slowly stood up, his back barely straightening up. “You’re right. Thanks for the drink, sonny.” They slowly shambled out of the cafe, the bell ringing once they opened the door, and he sighed as he was now all alone. What to do…

The bell finally rang again at 6PM, and he reluctantly looked over and perked up. Airi was at the front door, her cello case strapped to her shoulder, looking around the empty cafe curiously. “Is it just you here?”

He deflated. “Hi, Akira, it’s nice to see my handsome and hardworking boyfriend.” He voiced sarcastically. “Gee, thanks Airi, it’s lovely to see my beautiful girlfriend too. Today is just a wonderful day.”

Airi smiled sheepishly and walked up to the counter. Placing her hands on the table, she leaned up to peck him on the lips. “Sorry, that was insensitive of me.”

He softened at her affectionate gesture and pursed his lips. “No, I’m being snappy. I like seeing you.” He eyed her cello case curiously. “Did you play your cello today?”

She nodded happily. “Yeah, I did it in the local park. A lot of kids came up and danced in front of me, so I ended up playing a lot of ghibli songs…” She beamed at the memory of earlier. “It felt really nice to be appreciated for my music.” Their parents had come up and chatted with her about how long she had played, would she offer tutoring sessions for their kids, and if she knew anything a bit more mature for their tastes. She had to refuse any tutoring sessions since she didn’t have time, but maybe one day she could. She wanted more people to be able to appreciate music.

Akira smiled at the joy that seemed to exude from her. “I’m glad for you. I want to listen to you again, maybe later when I can close the cafe.”

She grinned. “Maybe. I’ll go upstairs and put this down,” She gestured to her cello. “It’s getting heavy.” She headed up the stairs into his room.

He smiled softly before his phone rang. Taking it out of his pocket, he noticed it was a call from Ryuji. “Hello?”

“Hey, it’s me! Where you at? Whatcha doin’?”
He furrowed his brow. What was with all the questions? “I’m working at the cafe…”

“Gotcha! We’re gonna come over right now about the you-know-what. I tried callin’ Airi but she didn’t pick up.”

“She’s already here.”

“This is all workin’ out! See ya in a bit!” The call clicked and he looked at the phone in confusion. What?

“What was that?”

He looked up at Airi who was cradling a purring Morgana in her arms. “Ryuji just called and said “we” are coming over.” He shrugged. “He said you didn’t pick up your phone either.”

Blinking, she adjusted her grip on the feline before she pulled her phone out from her short shorts underneath her dress. “Oh...Oops. I forgot to take it off silent mode.” She sweatdropped at all the missed calls and texts. “Ryuji, Ann, and even Makoto?”

Akira shrugged. “I guess we’re going to talk about our next plan of action?”

Morgana rolled his eyes. “I thought we were going to lay low?”

The bell rang, and the three of them looked over at the entrance where their other teammates came in, all dressed in their casual clothes. “Sup?” Ryuji greeted with a grin, thumbing the pockets on his cargo shorts. “We’re here to hang out.”

Ann scowled at him. “That’s not why we’re here! We need to study for finals!”

Yusuke frowned and glanced toward the door. “Then I should be excluded.”

Makoto only sighed, adjusting her school bag. “Why am I here too...?”

Airi smiled sympathetically. “I can’t be the only one tutoring them. As our team strategist, we need you to help pass on the info.”

Ryuji nodded. “We’ll be in trouble if you don’t help out. Mom can’t look after all of us.”

Akira snorted and took off his apron. “May as well then.”

Makoto sighed. “Really, guys?” Despite her protests, she took a seat in the middle booth and looked around the homey cafe. “I didn’t ask last time, but what is this place? The storekeeper doesn’t seem to be around…”

“I live here.” Akira answered with a shrug.

She looked over at him in shock. “Really?”

Ryuji pursed his lips. “He’s got complicated circumstances…” He turned to his leader. “We can tell her about it, right? Actually, tell her yourself.”

Akira sighed but reiterated his story from four months ago, brushing past the incident, to his arrest, to his move here. He didn’t really like to keep talking about it.

Makoto covered her mouth. “That’s...That’s terrible...”
Airi lowered her gaze, subtly moving closer to provide him with support. “We all have terrible things done to us by adults, but...I want to say his is the worst, if only because it was completely preventable if the people involved weren’t so corrupt.”

Ryuji tightened his jaw. “There’s just something we can’t ever put up with. That’s why we all became Phantom Thieves.”

Morgana bristled from the cellist’s arms. “Hey, don’t forget me!”

Ryuji grinned down at him. “I know, I know. We’re all part of the team.” He turned back to the council president. “By the way, Makoto, ain’t there someone you can’t forgive either? Like, a heart you wanna change?”

Makoto pursed her lips but smiled mysteriously. “...That’s a secret.”

Airi blinked. “So there is someone?” Who could it be?

Ryuji grinned. “You could just tell us, you know. You don’t gotta be so cold.”

Raising a brow at his digging, she took out her books from her bag. “That aside,” She stressed. “Do you have any intention of studying today? If not, I do have other things to do…”

He quickly waved his hands in front of him. “N-No, I’m just joking! We can study…” He sighed. “I guess…”

“Then I’m going home to grab my books.” Airi announced. “I only brought my cello.”

Yusuke raised a brow. “You spent all of today playing? And you did not invite me?”

She pouted. “I thought you were busy. I saw you were working on a new piece inside the Study and I didn’t want to distract you.”

“That was merely a side project.” He unveiled with a graceful flourish of his hand. “It will be a thank you gift.”

Ann tilted her head. “To whom?”

He closed his eyes. “That is a secret.”

Shrugging, Airi made a quick trip back home to grab her schoolbag before walking back to the cafe, stopping by the supermarket to grab some snacks. Entering the little establishment and noticing the group had already settled into the booth with their books out, she shared the chips and gummies before grabbing a nearby chair.

“Hmm, what was this term?” Makoto pondered as she tapped the question in her textbook, taking out a new pencil from her buchimaru case. “It’s “phobia,” so it’s a fear of some kind…”

Ann peered over her arm. “I think it’s a fear of open spaces. You don’t hear it that often though.”

“Agora” means open space in Greek, so I think you’re right.”

Makoto looked at them in surprise. “Your English is quite proficient, especially you Airi…”

The cellist shook her head. “I only know that because I spent some time researching greek gods.”
Ann grinned, zipping up her pink flower pencil case. “Guess I’m still the best at English then. Leave vocabulary and long sentences to me. I suck at proper grammar though…”

Ryuji groaned at his own English textbook. “Even if we study English, it’s not like I’m gonna use it in the future.”

Airi shared a look with Makoto. “I wouldn’t say that…” She smiled slyly. He’d regret not learning more when they left Japan. “Besides, what if you go overseas one day to…America? Or Finland? Shouldn’t you know English to get around?”

Reddening at her insinuations, Ryuji looked away and pouted. “Shuddup!”

Akira grimaced at the next question, taking out an eraser from his black pencil case. “Explain the writer’s feelings..?”

Ryuji groaned and ruffled his hair with both his hands. “It’s impossible! I can’t memorize all this…” He sighed. “Ain’t there a good way of cheatin’?”

Yusuke glared at him, using his leather pencil case to lightly tap him on his head. “Cheating is forbidden. You have a brain; use it to its capacity instead of leaving it to flounder.”

Morgana snickered. “I’m all for Yusuke’s idea.”

Rolling her eyes, Airi leaned back and opened her package of seaweed chips. “Let’s take a break.”

Makoto sighed. “Agreed. You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink…”

Rolling his neck, the ex-runner leaned back in his seat and grabbed the remote to turn on the TV. “...And that was the follow-up report on the suspect Kaneshiro. Now, Akechi-san…” They all looked up at the familiar name. “This case is said to be the result of the Phantom Thieves’ actions, but in actuality, is this true?”

The camera switched to show Akechi, his fair face drawn and grim. “Considering how a calling card was scattered about, I believe there’s no mistaking that. The question is what the Phantom Thieves actually did. If they tampered with a suspect’s heart, it casts doubt on the authenticity of any confession.”

“So then, by tampering with hearts, the Phantom Thieves are fabricating crimes that may not exist?”

“We can’t deny the possibility. There’s no doubt that the Phantom Thieves are exposing hidden injustices in society.” Akechi grimaced. “However, if this is done by sidestepping the law, their way of thinking is very dangerous.”

“So in a way, they’re outlaws.”

“Yes. They’re no different than the criminals they target. This cannot be overlooked.”

“I see…”

The broadcast moved to another segment and they all turned to each other with frowns. “‘I see,’ my ass.” Ryuji grumbled. “Why the hell’re we bein’ treated as the bad guys?”

Ann shook her head. “Just let them say whatever they want. More people are starting to understand that what we’re doing is right, after all.”
Ryuji sat forward and leaned his elbows on the table. “When I’m walkin’ around in town, I hear a lot more people talkin’ about us too, and the forum’s been full of hype!” He grinned hopefully. “Do you think we made it big time?”

Morgana frowned. “Don’t get pompous over dealing with some street thug. Save it for after we deal with a bigger target.”

Airi leaned her chin on her palm, having finished her snack in the duration of the interview. “How far up do we go? A first world country leader?”

The ex-runner oohed. “You think so? Like a president or somethin’?”

Already back to working on his assignment, Yusuke sighed. “Don’t get ahead of yourselves. We don’t want to be eradicated by our own hubris.”

Makoto hummed. “It may be best if we start thinking about it though.”

Ryuji perked up. “I bet we’ll find one in no time. The wind’s blowin’ in our direction and everything! I feel like we won’t be beaten by anything right now.”

Akira snorted, going back to his notes. “Just beaten by the exams.”

Makoto nodded. “Break time’s over. Let’s get back to-”

“That reminds me-” Ryuji continued, cutting her off. “The celebration party. Weren’t we gonna do it after exams?” He turned to the cellist. “Airi?”

Airi blinked. “Huh? Oh! You mean the sleepover? I don’t know...Does that count as a celebration?”

Morgana purred. “We could do that after the party! We had our first celebration at a buffet, and then we had a spa day and shabu shabu. What should we do this time?”

Yusuke looked up. “A buffet?!” He frowned petulantly. “I yearn to have gone...”

Ann hummed happily, crossing her legs underneath the table. “Where would be good..?”

Akira glanced at the end of the table at his significant other and reddened slightly. “A festival would be nice.”

They looked at him in surprise before the model brightened. “Yeah! A fireworks festival! We could totally go to one!”

Ryuji perked up. “Oh yeah, it’s that season, huh!”

Makoto smiled, closing the cap on her water bottle. “That sounds good to me.”

Yusuke pursed his lips. “It’s hard to ignore a buffet, but I’ll take the beauties of the summer.” He smiled. “Still, I demand that we feast during the festival as well.”

Morgana looked at them excitedly. “Do you guys own a yukata? Will you wear a yukata?!”

Airi smiled dreamily. “A yukata, huh...The last time I had one was when I was six years old...”

Ann gave her an odd look. “Why didn’t you buy one when you were out shopping?”
She pouted. “I forgot! I didn’t know we were going to plan this.” She brightened. “Oh, but I do know you can buy yukatas for cats and dogs! Morgana, would you like one?”

The feline perked up, his ears sticking straight up. “Really?! I want one!” He cheered.

She grinned and took out her phone, checking out the online specialty shop where they sold clothes for pets. “Let’s shop for one now so it’ll arrive on time!”

Purring excitedly, Morgana jumped up onto the table before settling on her lap and they browsed what it could offer.

Akira smiled. “Fireworks festival it is.”

Ryuji grinned from next to him. “Hell yeah! Let’s look for a good one!”

Makoto frowned. “Study comes first though. I won’t let you off if you fail any of them.” Her eyes sharpened, sending chills down their spines. “Are we clear?”

“Yeah.” Airi looked up for a second and smiled serenely, the sheer kindness somehow making it worse. “Let’s do our best on our exams! We’ve worked so hard, and Makoto and I are using so much time tutoring you guys…”

Gulping fearfully, Ryuji nodded. “Y-Yes, got it…”

Morgana pointed his paw up on her phone. “This one!”

Airi looked at the design and held in a squeal. “OK, I’ll buy it now!” Tapping on the checkout button and entering her credit card information, she frowned a second later when she received two emails. One was a confirmation for her order, and the second was from her bank.

Noticing her frown, Akira tilted his head. “What’s up, Airi?”

“Uh…” She bit her lip. “Nothing.” Why did her bank give her a warning notice..?

Most of the team had left to go home as it was getting late. Ryuji, Ann, and Makoto left together to catch the train back to Shibuya, while Yusuke had walked back home to continue his side project.

Airi stayed, but the three of them relocated upstairs once Akira had flipped the CLOSED sign on the cafe door, and she was fiddling with her cello. Akira had pulled out his work bench’s chair for her when she mentioned she couldn’t play from the couch, and he watched, mesmerized as she adjusted the pegs to tighten the strings.

Morgana purred with excitement on the couch. “Yukata…Yukata…”

Taking a seat next to him, Akira smiled. “Excited?”

He got a feline grin in reply. “Yes! This will be my first outfit in the human world, aside from my collar.” He pawed at his signature yellow collar on his neck. “You know...We’ve known each other for three months now, and you guys have really improved a lot since we first met. I’m kind of proud to have such a good team.”

Akira smirked. Of course they were a good team. They were the best.
A deep thrum sounded out and they turned back to Airi who was experimentally plucking the strings. She hummed thoughtfully before nodding. Picking up her bow, she tightened her bow until the fine horse hairs were pulled taut and correct. Placing it right before the bridge, she looked up and gave them a smile.

Airi admired it. There was no fear, no hesitation, nothing to hold her back from playing the instrument she so clearly loved and held dear. She had come so far from breaking down just from him being near the instrument, to now just carrying it everywhere and playing it anywhere for whoever to see. Taking out his phone, he opened his music recording app. “Can I...record it?”

She looked at him in surprise. “If you want to…” She hummed. “If you have trouble sleeping or any anxiety, maybe I can play a relaxing piece for you so you can use it whenever?”

His lips quirked. Always so thoughtful. “I’m up for it.”

Smiling softly, she took a deep breath, straightened her back, and dragged her bow against the strings. This piece was something she had stumbled upon a few nights ago when she was looking up new music on the internet. It was recommended due to being influenced by Studio Ghibli music and she clicked it on a whim. It led her to search up the original song, and even though the rendition was played on a violin, she adapted it to her deeper and lower pitched instrument.

The music flowed smoothly like water, the deep and gentle tones reverberating around the attic. Her fingers slowly moved from each inch on the board, making sure each note cascaded without pause. It created an image of a vast wildland, grass and water abundant underneath the bright sun.

Dew shined off each healthy green leaf, the mist from the clouds kissing his skin and Airi closed his eyes, envisioning it as if he was right there, floating in the celestial sphere. Airy enough that it felt like they were flying through the soft white clouds that decorated the sky, but the tone that rang out from the melody gave off a tinge of sorrow and acceptance.

All too soon however, the music stopped and he sighed as he was brought back to the reality of his attic.

Airi smiled at his forlorn expression. “Was that OK?”

Morgana purred, having laid down on his back while she played. “Better than OK, it was amazing…”

Akira nodded in agreement, a dreamy smile on his lips. “I want to fall asleep to that every night…”

She blushed, smiling happily at their compliments. It was nice to have her skill in music be recognized, and it was even better to know that it helped relax her boyfriend and “son.” It was just another way for her to support them.

Keys clacked in a continuous rhythm as she typed onto her keyboard. Various monitors surrounded her on the desk, streams of code and encryptions flying down in green and black, and yet she archived every single one with a quick glance of her purple-gray eyes. Her blocky glasses reflected the bright lights from the monitors, a harsh contrast to the darkness of the rest of the room.

Any sort of light that could’ve entered the room was blocked off by glow-in-the-dark star curtains, the ends of the fabric just catching the feathermen action figures she had set up on the metal rack. Bags of trash were pile up to her right, a constant that she now ignored, and she crossed her mostly covered legs on her computer chair.
She held a hand to her large headphones as the feed from the cafe entered her audio bugs. “Fireworks festival it is.”

“Hell yeah! Let’s look for a good one!”

“Study comes first, though. I won’t let you off if you fail any of them. Are we clear?”

“Yeah…” She perked up at the familiar voice. “Let’s do our best on our exams! We’ve worked so hard, and Makoto and I are using so much time tutoring you guys…”

“What’s wrong, Airi?”

“…Uh…Nothing…”

“Airi?” She whispered to herself, before resuming her typing.

Time passed, she didn’t know how much as she never bothered to keep track, until her bugs caught more conversation. “If you have trouble sleeping, or any anxiety, maybe I can play a relaxing piece for you so you can use it whenever?”

She placed a hand on her headphones again, listening in as music caressed her ears, the smooth notes unknowingly relaxing her small and tense shoulders. Reaching out with a finger, she recorded it on a program, making sure the sound was crisp and clear.

Maybe it could help her too…

I ended up finishing both of Airi’s Last Surprise outfit and her High Cut armor lolol I'm still a new artist, I've only been drawing for 3 months on a tablet, but I'm happy with my progress!

For her Last Surprise, the constant is corset + gloves + romper/shorts + black socks. I made her corset into a traditional lace up built into the romper, and her thigh highs + heels are of lace design with her heels being clear acrylic!
For her high cut, the armors had themes like biker, RPG, etc, so I went with fantasy, specifically elven! It goes well with the "inhuman" aspect of the Aeon, and fits her sense of style. I also made
sure it was sexualized as per Atlus’ rule :P
The piece Airi plays is Seycara Orchestra's piano and violin rendition of "Shelter" by Porter Robinson and Madeon! I highly recommend giving both songs a listen to, but maybe be prepared to cry if you watch the official MV.

Just as an announcement, if you want to reach me on other platforms, I'm always open at Airikimisawa on both Instagram and deviantart! I also made a discord at AristoMercu#1464, though I'm still lost on how to use it ;w; I made a server for this fic and other related stuff at https://discord.gg/FMqFyuN so if you want to chat with me or with each other, please feel free to! (I will update this on the front page of the fic)
Chapter 157

Chapter Notes

So many people joined the discord server, thank you so much!! I’ve been really enjoying talking to you all in a casual setting <3 Also, thanks for 1071 kudos and 41.2k hits!! Just knowing that this fic keeps growing and growing leaves me speechless tbh

See the end of the chapter for more notes

---7/11, MONDAY, EARLY MORNING, SUBWAYS

“What a refreshing morning.” Akechi walked up to them on the train platform with a sunny smile on his face. “How are you all doing?”

They greeted him with half hearted waves, Airi doing her best to cool herself with a folded fan. “Good morning.”

He hummed. “...I didn’t expect the Phantom Thieves would suppress a man that even the police had trouble with.” His face fell. “The fact they have so much support online is worrisome. I’m in a bind since I previously denounced them.”

Airi tilted her head. “Are they...insulting you?” She asked, a tad bit concerned.

Akechi pursed his lips and avoided their gazes. “Their words are...unkind, to say the least. All the interviews these days ask me about the Phantom Thieves, which does not help. Still...can we really say the Phantom Thieves are on the side of justice with just this example?”

Akira shrugged. “Let people talk. It’s what they do and what they will do, regardless of your feelings on it.” He should know. People at school still pointed to him as the transfer student who may or may not have a knife on him (he might) and honestly, as a TV celebrity, shouldn’t the student detective be used to both positive and negative comments?

Akechi sighed. “I suppose you’re right...I was originally investigating the mental shutdown incidents. People change suddenly and cause strange accidents or horrible crimes...Don’t you think it’s similar to the change of heart that the Phantom Thieves are doing?” His eyes darkened for a moment before returning back to normal.

Airi furrowed her brow. That darkness looked familiar...

“Now that I think about it,” He continued as if he had never stopped. “Their actions mirror the mental shutdown cases, with the rate of victims. It’s impossible not to see a connection there…”

Yusuke raised a brow, but continued to stay silent. He had already voiced his displeasure about their constant run ins with the student detective, and so to keep the peace, opted to say nothing.

Checking the time on the electronic board, Akechi gasped. “Ah, sorry. I don’t want to make you all late. I’ll see you again.” He nodded to them before heading out of the Ginza Line and disappearing into the morning crowds.
The train arrived just a second later and they boarded, grunting as they were packed in like a can of sardines. A station officer even came up and had to push them further in so the doors would slide close. “Ngh…” Morgana winced as he was squished from all sides inside the bag. “It’s even more packed than usual today.”

Airi grimaced as another person’s arm stuck to hers due to their sweat, even with the train’s AC blasting snowy winds above their heads. “Ugh…”

“Now for today’s Train News. Today’s headlines are…” Shibuya Crime Ring Reveals All!” The leader’s confession has led to the arrest of other key members. “Sudden Rampage? Highway Accident!” The driver’s death has been confirmed, taking the total count up to four. “Hotspots of Tokyo!” Come see the summer fireworks show on July 18th!”

Yusuke raised a brow. “It seems Kaneshiro’s confession has led to the arrest of all his subordinates.”

Morgana snickered. “It’s falling like a house of cards.”

“The Phantom Thieves…” Hiruta-sensei sighed, his well groomed haircut sitting in place with just a small snap of his head. “In this internet society, every silly little thing gets its five minutes of fame. But just like a fleeting firework, they are destined to be forgotten once summer ends.”

He hummed. “Now that I think about it, there’s an organism that has its own short-lived glimmer. That’s right- fireflies. They’re probably something akin to magic creatures to you city kids.” His gaze landed on a certain transfer student who stared absentmindedly out the bright and sunny window. “Kurusu-kun. You haven’t been completely tainted by city life yet, so here’s a question. What is the name of the light-producing substance in fireflies?”

Akira sat up and silently snorted. This was one trivia he ended up remembering because he thought it was hilarious. “Luciferin.” Let the devil bring light.

Hiruta-sensei clapped. “Well done. When luciferin combines with oxygen, it undergoes oxidation and emits light.” He sighed lamentably. “A firefly cannot cry, so it burns its body...or so they say. Their light is actually a chemical reaction called a cold light- it doesn’t produce heat like fire.”

“Whoa, it’s called luciferin?”

“Who named it that?”

“Now that I think about it,” He continued. “There’s a fireworks show next week. It may not be a bad idea to go see them. However, don’t become so blinded by the far-off lights that you can’t see the exams in front of you.”

Three phones in the room buzzed.

R: Finals end on the 16th, so that should be good, right?
Y: What are you talking about?
R: The fireworks festival.
An: You’re really quick to look up stuff like that...
Ak: Impressive, Ryuji.
R: It’s easier to work when you got a goal in mind, yeah?
Ai: So you want to do the sleepover the same night?
R: Yeah! If everyone’s OK with that.
Ma: Hey, we’re in the middle of class. Talk about those things later.

“I used to be scared of going to Shibuya,” Nakamura murmured quietly as more and more students gathered into class 2-D for their second to last study group. “But it’s safer now, thanks to the Phantom Thieves. It looks like they saved me again. I guess I’ll become a fan of them, after all.”

“I hope Akechi-kun isn’t too shocked from all the backlash he’s been getting online…” Harada fretted, nervously wringing her hands together, a phantom habit from a few months ago. “I’ll still believe in Akechi-kun though! I mean, he’s so handsome! Like, ridiculously handsome!”

Airi sweatdropped but smiled softly at their chatter. Just three months ago, these girls would’ve been covered in bruises from volleyball practice and who knew what else. To see them being more chipper and lively was real proof that they had saved them.

Her and Makoto then began the study session, helping new and old faces with their questions and problems. Makoto began to flounder by the end of the first hour, as if she was slowly losing patience with how slow their comprehension were. In turn, Airi took over most of the personal questioning, letting the council president do the overall lectures.

Their team of thieves didn’t have to call them over, knowing that they had received extra tutoring as it was.

After the study group, Airi had walked out into the hallways and spotted Yumeko and Ikesugi chatting, the former stalker apologizing with a red and shamed face. She walked closer to hear what they were saying.

“-I, uh, I w-wanted to change...your h-harp! I mean, your hard!” Yumeko cringed and ducked her head. “Wait, no, that’s even worse…”

Ikesugi rubbed the back of his head. “Are you all right? You’re sweating a lot…”

She reddened so much that steam could rise from her face. “I-I-I…”

Staring at her for a moment, he smiled sympathetically. “I’m not sure what’s going on, but just relax. Let’s take our time, and try to talk normally.” He soothed.

Yumeko teared up at his consideration. “O-OK…”

Smiling at how cute they could be, Airi walked up to them. “Everything OK here? Was the study group all right for you two?”

Ikesugi turned to her and smiled. “It was great, Senpai, thanks! Oh, and I stopped getting stuff in my locker so I think I’m fine now.”

Yumeko ducked her head and bowed at the waist, her back parallel to the floor. “I’m sorry, Senpai!” She cried. “I’m really glad you weren’t hurt, and I-I made sure to delete the blog!”

Ikesugi only blinked, tilting his head quizzically. “Blog..?”

Huffing with amusement, the cellist straightened the other girl up with her hands. “It’s all right. Just make sure you don’t do this to anyone else.” Huddling closer, she covered her mouth from the
oblivious boy’s eyes. “Make sure to tell him your feelings soon, OK?” She whispered and Mogami squeaked. “Y-Yes!”

Akira sighed once the clock hit 5PM and the study group dispersed. He had to go to the doctor, maybe ask for Oyamada’s full name. He could just research it, but he needed her permission. Just her telling him Oyamada’s name would mean on some level, she wanted his Heart changed.

Packing up their bags, the thieves made their way to Yongenjaya. Sojiro looked up at their large group and sighed, letting them shuffle upstairs since there were a few customers in the cafe proper.

Letting his friends settle into their spots around the table, Akira glanced at his phone. “I’ll be back. I gotta do a supply run at the clinic.”

Leaving the cafe, he turned the corner up to the second hand store before turning at the next corner to the entrance of the clinic building. Riding the elevator up to the third floor, he opened the door to the clinic. There wasn’t a single person in the waiting room or even the reception desk, and he slowly walked further in, finding the examination room door opened.

Walking in, he bowed slightly to the forlorn doctor who was sat at the desk chair. “Good afternoon.”

“Hey…” Takemi greeted lethargically. “I’m thinking of resigning.”

Taken aback as he sat down, he gaped. “What?”

She shrugged and crossed her legs, her lab coat brushing against her strappy high heels. “Several of my suppliers have stated that they’re going to stop selling to me. If I can’t get my hands on medical supplies, I won’t be able to get what I need to complete the new medicine, or even to make my current ones.” She looked away. “They’re probably being pressured by Oyamada to stop doing business with me. So I figure it’s over.”

He furrowed his brow. “What about Miwa-chan?”

Her lips tightened. “It’s fine.”

He looked at her in disbelief. How was this fine? This was her life’s work, her goal, and she was just going to stop?

She sighed and slumped her shoulders. “I confirmed with the hospital Miwa-chan was being treated at…Oyamada was telling the truth.” She frowned wistfully. “Miwa-chan was apparently smiling until the very end. She probably didn’t want to worry anyone. I wish I could’ve cured her…” She murmured. “I didn’t want fame or money. All I wanted…” She sighed shakily. “Was to keep her smiling…”

She looked away, blinking tears from her eyes. “This isn’t just about her though… I was going to help every single person who was suffering from that disease…!” She clenched her hands around her clipboard. “I was a sickly child when I was young too…I was always in the hospital, and was rarely well enough to attend school at all. Medicine was all that kept me alive…That’s why I wanted to become a doctor. So I could save people, just like I was saved…But I guess this is where it ends…”

She shook her head. “The medical industry is a business, after all, and the chief decides what’s best for it.” She bowed her head. “I’m all out of allies…”
Clenching his jaw, Akira leaned forward in his seat. “I’m your ally. Airi is your ally. My friends are all your allies. You helped us.”

Looking up at him, Takemi gave him a minuscule smile. “Yeah...You and your friends...I really appreciate everything you’ve done.” She chuckled. “My practice increased thanks to your nosiness, and in the end, I felt like a real doctor again. So...thank you.”

He furrowed his brow. “And your patients?”

She sighed. “There are other clinics they can go to...This is where it ends, although it frustrates me.” Her lips twisted. “I can’t do clinical trials anymore, so you can go home. Thanks again for all your help, and good luck on those entrance exams. Bye...”

“What’s his full name? Oyamada I mean.” He interrupted. This was his chance to help her.

She narrowed her eyes. “Why? I hope you’re not planning to get revenge for me.”

“It’s for research.” He replied coolly.

Observing him for a few moments, she shook her head and sighed. “…You’re such a weird kid. His full name is Oyamada Shoichi. He’s a very influential Chief of Staff in the world of medicine. Is that all?”

His lips curled into a smirk. “Perfect. I’ll see you later, Doctor. Don’t close your clinic just yet.” He got up and walked out of the room, leaving her to stare after him in bewilderment. “…Take care.”

Quickly leaving the clinic and running back to the cafe, he slowed to a walk once he entered, passing by the barista, and headed up the stairs where his friends were already deep into their studying session. “Sorry guys, emergency request.” He announced, taking out his phone.

Makoto looked up from her seat on the couch in surprise. “What? Now?”

Airi blinked. “Is it for Dr. Takemi?”

Akira nodded. “Dr. Takemi was framed for a Chief of Staff’s mistake that killed a little girl named Miwa-chan. She’s being forced out from the medical business because he doesn’t want her to blab.”

Ryuji looked at him in horror and outrage. “What?! That’s fucked up!”

Yusuke scowled. “Blaming others for one’s mistakes…” He clenched his hands, his mechanical pencil creaking under his grip. “I will personally join this one.”

Ann nodded in agreement, frowning angrily at the news. “A little girl died because of him. That’s horrible...!”

Morgana darted down from the table. “We should take his Heart before our good doctor closes her clinic then!”

Akira looked at all of them. “All in favor?”

Everyone nodded and he took out his phone, accessing the MetaNav. This was the first time he was using it in his room. The creaky wooden floorboards underneath their feet began to waver and their surroundings warped, twisting, widening, thinning.
Appearing in the entrance of Mementos, he stopped when the app vibrated and the map expanded on the screen. “A new area has been confirmed in the depths. Updating guidance information.”

Panther raised her brows behind her mask. “That’s the place we found last time. How much bigger is this place gonna get?”

Skull rolled his shoulder. “Yo, Mona,” He addressed their smaller feline thief. “Can’t you turn into some kinda high-powered radar or something? We’d know how deep it goes if you could.”

Mona scrunched up his face. “That’s impossible..!”

Queen grasped her chin thoughtfully. “Hm, it would be dangerous to wander blindly. We simply do not have enough information.”

Fox sighed. “Just driving around won’t likely do us any good either.”

Mona slumped. “Yeah, but...The path keeps going forward! We’ll reach the depths eventually!..I think.”

Elegant nodded. “Plus, if this is the collective human unconscious for just Tokyo, we don’t know how far it could go. There’s over 36 million people in this city, after all…” She leaned down to rub the feline’s head. “Even if Mona could do that, it’s just not possible for one person.”

Skull grumbled and looked away. “I guess…”

Accessing the map again, Joker moved them to the beginning of Chemdah. Queen took the wheel since she was the only one with a real driver’s license and they all piled in, driving down into the dark yellow depths. They ambushed each Shadow on the way, taking their money and items, before finally making it down to Area 2.

Ramming the bus into an unsuspecting Shadow, it erupted and turned into three Jack Frosts, dancing jolly-like within the dark and windy train tunnels.

Panther walked up with a confident swagger, hips swaying with each heeled step. “I’ve got this..!” Holding a hand to her mask, she called out. “Carmen!” The beauteous dancer appeared behind her, blowing a breath from her cigar. “Maragi!” With a spark, all three of them erupted into flames, charring their snowy bodies, and they fell back in a slump.

They quickly ran up and surrounded them with firearms. “Owww…” The main Jack Frost whined.

Joker huffed, his own Jack Frost backing away in his soul from its charred comrades. “Give me some money.”

The Jack Frost pouted. “I see that I’m inside you, but I have some questions first!”

He raised a brow. “Uh...OK.”

“Mister, why do adults call it “making out”?”

Joker stared for a moment. What was with these Shadows? “Ask your parents.”

“Ehh?” It whined. “That feels weird to ask my mom and dad about it...aren’t people as old as you s’posed to go “dating” all the time? Can’t you get some dates?”
He rolled his eyes. They always had to insult him in some way. He had a great date just a few days ago, thank you. “Just give me the money.”

With a pout, the Jack Frost threw ¥2800 and ran away into the depths. Skull let his bat fade away and he stared at Panther with new appreciation, mouth hanging open from her confident display.

Elegant grinned slyly as she observed this. ‘Is he impressed by her growth?’

Now that the battle was over, Queen relaxed her stance and gave Joker a knowing smile. “Yes, do tell us, Joker. Any dates to speak of?”

Joker deadpanned. “Just get in the car, all of you.”

They all snickered as they piled back inside the vehicle. Turning the corner, the bus ran over a large bump and they all bounced on their seats. “Ow!” Panther winced. “The road is so bumpy!”

The engine purred. “I can feel it…” Mona whispered dreamily. “The soft touch of a butt!”

Temple pulsing as he overheard the feline’s whisper, Skull sighed and “accidentally” elbowed the door handle. “Oops.” He voiced flatly, ignoring the bus’s noise of protest.

Driving around the corner, they finally found a swirling vortex and Queen drove them inside before stepping on the breaks. They all exited the vehicle and readied their weapons, Mona turning back into his regular bipedal form. “So that’s the Shadow of that doctor, Oyamada.”

Elegant frowned at the chuckling Shadow standing just in front of them. “He rushed production and used the untested version on Miwa-chan…”

Fox narrowed his eyes. “And now he intends for the doctor to take the fall.”

Queen cracked her knuckles. “Who knows how many others died because of his arrogance? It’s time for him to feel the consequences.”

They ran up to the wealthy doctor and he laughed at their entrance. “Everyone is trash..! As head of the medical office, I’m superior to everyone! I deserve all of your respect! You should be begging me to examine you! Be grateful I have the compassion to fix you trash!”

Joker glared at him. “That’s enough.”

Yellow eyes landed on him and Oyamada grinned. “Ah, you’re that kid who was at Takemi’s. So how’s she doing? She was sooo depressed when she heard her patient died. Oh, I’m so worried about her.” He mocked. “Poor girl…” He chuckled before it evolved into full blown laughter. “Hahaha, it’s been so long since I’ve felt so exhilarated! Did she quit being a doctor yet? If she hasn’t, then tell her she better hurry it up!”

Skull scowled. “You’re the one who should quit, ya dirtbag!”

Oyamada cried out in rage. “Wha-?! You dare talk to me, your superior, like that?!?” He growled. “Your diagnosis is “arrogance with no chance of recovery!” I better “treat” you right away, and I’ll blame your deaths on Takemi messing up again!”

With a rumble, his body contorted, black liquid spilling from the floor to envelop his form into a white baboon with a golden hieroglyphic book in his hands. “Feel the power of medicine!” Raising his book in the air, Megido spheres circled them before they exploded, causing them to wince.
The original gentleman thief appeared with a flap of his black wings. Flexing his black claws, he weakened the Thoth’s defenses with a Rakunda.

Unsheathing his katana, Fox dashed up and slashed out, ignoring the Shadow’s hoot of pain. Using its distracted self as an opening, Queen ran up and smashed her sharp knuckle dusters into his face, the spikes gouging his flesh apart. With a roundhouse kick, she sent the enemy back into a slump and they all dashed up to attack one by one, their weapons leaving their marks.

The Thoth groaned and fell to the floor. “Vital signs...diminishing…”

With a splash of black, he turned back to his human form, dropping ¥12,400. He sobbed. “How come..? How come I’m not good enough..? I want to save people’s lives. I want to do something great, and help make medical history.”

His face scrunched up in anguish. “But I’m just a mediocre doctor. I’ve only gotten promoted because of my university connections. Takemi though was so creative. She had all these ideas, and her techniques were extraordinary!…” He sobbed. “Everything I ever wanted- fame, prestige- she earned in just a few short years...I was jealous of her. That’s why I tried to take all the credit for her new drug…”

Elegant frowned disapprovingly. “The real difference was that she didn’t become a doctor for fame or prestige. She only wants to help others.”

Joker narrowed his eyes. “You could’ve done it yourself.”

Oyamada chuckled weakly. “If only there were a medication that works on jealousy…” Hesitating, he took a deep breath. “...Takemi’s patient isn’t dead.”

They looked at him in shock.

“I thought she wouldn’t recover, so I moved her to the hospice wing for terminally ill patients. But the patient’s family didn’t believe my diagnosis. She ended up transferring to another hospital.” He bowed his head. “Of course, transferring to another hospital makes our own hospital and university look really bad. That’s why I made everyone tell the same lie: the patient chose to leave the hospice, and then died. She doesn’t have much time left, but maybe Takemi could do something about it.” Glowing softly, he disappeared in white light, leaving a bud of a Treasure that Mona tackled out of the air.

Elegant brightened. “Maybe Dr. Takemi can still do this!?”

Joker nodded. “Let’s leave it for later. We still have time to look around the new level.” He gave her a warning look. “Remember, you’re not fighting past Chemdah.”

Elegant immediately frowned. “But...I’m better now. I don’t feel any nausea or anything.”

Queen walked up beside her and placed a hand on her shoulder. “Let’s not risk it. Why not leave it to us this time? We should make sure this newfound stability in your condition won’t decline.”

Fox crossed his arms. “We are only concerned for you. Please do not worry us like last time.”

Elegant let out a quiet sigh. “…All right.”

Exiting out of the Chamber, they climbed back into their van and proceeded deeper into the public’s Palace. Reaching the end of Chemdah, they walked down the escalators into the next tier.
Immediately, they noticed that the lighting changed once more from yellow to green. As they had noticed in earlier levels, the farther down they went, the more the distorted subways became disorganized and fragmented. The winds that blew past them and into the tunnels seemed stronger, as if some unknown force wanted to swallow them up.

Joker’s phone buzzed in his hand. “Now in the Path of Kaitul: Area 1. Downloading navigation.”

Skull scrunched up his face, lacing his hands behind his head. “Kaitul? The hell are with these names anyway?”

Panther crossed her arms, tapping her chin with one finger. “They’ve all been these really weird names. I don’t even know what language they’re from.”

Mona stayed silent, his big blue eyes trained toward the darkness of the tunnel opening. Elegant stared in the same direction, half expecting the darkness to stare back. In this place, that could very well happen.

“...Come.”

She blinked. What? Her eyes slid to her left and right, trying to figure out if any of her teammates had said that. None of them seemed to have acknowledged anyone saying anything. What was that?

She bit her lip. Was she hearing things..? Did she somehow trade illness for insanity?

Climbing into the vehicle, they cruised around the levels to explore. Joker gazed out of the passenger seat’s window, gripping Elegant’s hand tightly. He was ready to take out his phone and teleport them out of here at the first sign of discomfort from her. He had no idea why this damned place affected her so horribly, and knowing just how badly her condition could get, he was wary of anything and everything.

Queen stepped on the pedal and rammed into the back of a wandering Shadow, catapulting them forward into a heap. Panther leaped up from her seat and leaned forward. "Keep going!" She cheered, pressing herself against the back of the driver's seat. "Run those Shadows over!"

Queen scrunched up her face when she felt something soft brush against her short hair. "Um, Panther...is that your chest bouncing against my head?"

Blinking, the dominatrix took a seat again. "Oh, sorry!"

Skull looked on from the other side of the bench with a look of envy, grumbling to himself.

The Shadow’s skin bubbled as it transformed into its true form; a Sui-ki and Fuu-ki. Jumping out of the bus, Queen took front and center. “Johanna!” The chrome motorcycle appeared beneath her, engines rumbling. Revving the handle, she drove in a circle, letting the force from her vehicle create a shower of nuclear energy, heavily damaging the Sui-ki.

It cried out in pain as it dissipated back into the Sea of Souls and the Fuu-ki let out a roar of rage at the death of its companion. Stomping forward, the large demon twirled its staff, summoning a strong Garula to sweep them off their feet.

Skull let out a loud grunt as he was knocked down, and Mona used his head as a platform to jump off of, unaffected by his specialty. “Zorro!” The bandit appeared behind him as he leaped into the air. Curling into a ball, the small feline somersaulted downward with his scimitar and carved into the Shadow. “Rah!”
The Fuu-ki took a step back and held a hand to its face, black blood running down in rivulets. Getting back on his feet, Skull clenched his teeth. “Seiten Taisei! Let’s show ‘em who’s boss!” The legendary monkey king flew in on his mystical cloud with a wide grin, his 8000k staff held out. Rushing toward the Shadow, Seiten Taisei waved his staff like a bat and hit home run, killing the Shadow.

Now that the battle was over, they breathed out while climbing back into the bus. “It seems this area houses much stronger Shadows.” Fox murmured, crossing his legs in the back seat.

Elegant pursed her lips, sitting between the driver's and passenger’s seats. “I wonder how much stronger these Shadows will become…”

Joker hmph’ed. “We’ll always be stronger. Queen, keep going.”

The biker nodded and switched gearshift. “Roger that.”

The phantom thieves descended further, noting just how much more oppressive this layer of Mementos was compared to the previous floors. Stopping at Rest Area 6, they all took a seat for a short break.

Elegant glanced around curiously. Without the nausea, she could actually explore without becoming a nuisance to the group. She watched as a train pulled up on the opposite side of the platform, frowning thoughtfully as the Shadow people boarded.

“...It’s safe.”

“No risks…”

So she was hearing things, and it was from these Shadow people. Why was it safe and risk free, wherever they were going?

“Elegant?”

She blinked and turned back to Panther who held out a container of curry. “Do you want some?”

For once, they had brought food in with them instead of just medicine. Skull had made a throwaway comment last time about how he had ate some candy he had sneaked in and it healed a small cut he had, so this time they tried real food.

Elegant took the container with a smile. “Sure, thank you.” Taking a few bites, she blinked when she realized she did feel a bit better. How did this all work? Did the food convert straight into energy when consumed within the Metaverse? Taking another spoonful, she then handed the rest to Joker who finished it up.

Putting the container away into their supply bag, he stood up and flared out his coattails. “Let’s keep going.”

They traveled as far as they could until they reached yet another encrypted wall. Joker placed his palm upon its surface but it refused to budge.

Mona frowned and crossed his paws. “It seems like we have more work to do if we want to keep going further…”

Queen grasped her chin. “How many more layers are there to explore beyond this?”
The feline drooped in his spot. “I’m not sure...but I do know there’s something down there that might have the answer I- we need. Like my memories and why Elegant gets so sick.”

Fox turned to his pseudo-sister, almost towering over her with his height. “How do you feel now?”

Elegant took a deep breath. “I’m all right. No nausea or headaches.” She smiled reassuringly. She opened her mouth to say something else-

“...**Deeper**…”

She paused and turned her head toward the wall. That voice again. It was coming from the depths.

“...**Come deeper**…”

It was deep and masculine, almost dual toned, but there was something inherently wrong about it and it sent a shiver of dread down her spine. Who was calling out to her..?

Noticing her pause, Joker turned to her and regarded her with a frown. “Something wrong?”

Blinking out of her stupor, she shook her head. “No, nothing. We can’t go any further for now. I think we should go tell Dr. Takemi the good news now.”

He narrowed his eyes at her but slowly nodded. He’d ask later. He knew her too well now to know she was hiding something again.

They teleported to the entrance and back into reality. The unfortunate thing about using the MetaNav was that it would transport them to the location they used, but they can only exit in the same area.

They were dumped out into Shibuya station and they quickly hurried down to take the train back to Yongenjaya. Getting out of the train station, they traveled down the maze that were the back alleys with the sun hiding behind the horizon, all the way to the clinic where Akira burst through the door.

Takemi shot up from her seat in the waiting room at the loud noise. “What the-? I thought I asked you not to come here anymore.” She grimaced. “You brought all your friends too.”

Panting from the sudden exercise, he opened his mouth but was interrupted by the door opening again.

“Oh, Doctor!” The father of the sick girl greeted them, his daughter skipping next to his side. “...And Kurusu-kun, too!”

Takemi scowled at the influx of people in her clinic. “Yes?” She snapped.

“I wanted to speak with you right away!” The father explained, ignoring her crabiness. “The hospital that was on the news is the same one you used to work at, right?!”

Taken aback, she blinked. “The hospital on the news?”

The thieves looked at each other. That was fast.

“Oh dear.” The elderly granny who frequented the cafe walked in as well. “I’m afraid everyone
was thinking the same thing.” She smiled genially. “But I knew you weren’t capable of doing those terrible things.”

Eyes darting at all her guests, Takemi frowned defensively. “...Wh-What’s going on?”

The granny pursed her lips. “Oh my, you really don’t know, do you?”

“Chief of Staff Oyamada turned himself in just a few hours ago.” The father stated. “He confessed he was manipulating things behind the scenes. Turns out he was the one who made that terrible medical error, and laid the blame on his subordinate!”

Takemi gasped in shock. “Is that...true?”

He nodded. “It’s being broadcast all over the country! I just knew something didn’t quite add up about that story.”

The old granny nodded in agreement. “I never believed someone like you could have ever done something like that.”

The little girl cheered. “Hooray! Doctor! But...What’s a medical error?”

“What?” Takemi answered distractedly, still overcome with shock. “Um...It’s something that shouldn’t be allowed to happen...I guess.”

The patients began to chat about what they saw, and the doctor used the chance to turn to the thieves with a lost frown. “Is this all some elaborate joke?” She narrowed her eyes. “Oyamada surrendering himself...at such a convenient time...Why?” Pursing her lips, she sighed. “...It doesn’t matter.” She murmured. “It’s too late. It doesn’t change the fact that I couldn’t save her...”

Akira shook his head. “Miwa-chan is still alive.”

Takemi snapped her gaze to him, eyes wide. “What...?!” She gasped. “There’s...no way...”

Quickly checking the news on her phone, Airi nodded as it said exactly what the Shadow in Mementos said. “It says she was transferred to another hospital, but Oyamada lied and said she died because it would’ve affected the university hospital’s reputation.”

Covering her face, Takemi sobbed quietly. The little girl pulled on her lab coat. “Are you OK, Doctor?!”

Sniffling, she wiped her face and smiled. “So she’s...she’s alive...”

Ryuji grinned. “Ain’t it great?!”

Steeling himself, Akira walked up with a smile. “Let’s get to work, doctor.”

Takemi nodded happily. “Yes, of course!” She shooed out her former patients, and the other thieves left as well, already knowing their leader had business to take care of.

Once the clinic door closed, the doctor turned to him with determined eyes. “You’ll help me, right? I take back what I said earlier. We’ll resume development right away. I’ll compensate you well. Whatever you want, however much, just let me know.”

Akira nodded. “Don’t worry about that right now. Miwa-chan is more important.”

Her eyes sharpened. “We’re going to move quickly today, so you may experience some pain
during the examination.” She pursed her lips. “...Sorry. Just hang in there, OK?”

He sweated nervously but nodded. “For Miwa-chan.”

She chuckled. “Yes. Let’s begin.”

She herded him into the examination room and immediately swabbed his inner elbow with an alcohol wipe, then without him even taking the time to ready himself, injected him with an unknown liquid, watching carefully as it drained into his bloodstream.

He grimaced when he was immediately hit with a bout of nausea, but was able to bare with it. After ten minutes, she stuck a thermometer underneath his armpit and took his blood pressure, checking the dilation of his pupils, his heart rate, and a saliva sample, then asked for a urine sample. She even took several blood vials, already putting them into the spinner to separate the plasma and RBC.

He groaned when she finally let him go three hours later, and unsteadily got up on his feet. The world was spinning around him and he might just hurl.

Takemi ignored him, dodging into the next room of the clinic, and he glimpsed something that might be an advanced apothecary before the door slammed closed behind her.

He used the walls as balance to shuffle toward the waiting room, and looked up woozily as someone stood in front of the clinic door. “Huh..?”

Airi smiled gently as she walked up to place his arm around her shoulders, helping him out of the clinic. “I knew you were going to be sick like last time.”

He groaned in appreciation. “Thanks...Can you care for me lovingly?”

She huffed. “Of course, you big baby.”

“But I’m...” He burped, grimacing when he tasted stomach acid at the back of his throat. “I’m your baby...”
Inui-sensei crossed his arms in front of the class. “People sure are making a fuss even though it’s right before exams. Behind Kaneshiro’s arrest are the “Phantom Thieves,” the mysterious group that changes people’s hearts.” He hummed. “If I recall, there were similar rumors back during that business with Kamoshida-kun. Help the weak and crush the strong…Truly a modern legend of the gentleman thief. In the long history of humans, the gentleman thief has been seen briefly during times of turmoil. Now then, please look at this picture.”

Reaching into his folder, he pulled out a printed picture of an old Japanese drawing, depicting a man grabbing another man. “This is a painting of the most famous gentleman thief in Japanese history. Kurusu-kun, what was the name of the gentleman thief whose family was boiled alive during the Sengoku period?”

Akira raised a brow from his desk. “Ishikawa Goemon.”

Inui-sensei clapped. “Correct. As I’m sure you know, this is the origin of the term “Goemon bath,” or a bath heated from the bottom. Only stealing from the rich and powerful, and sharing with the poor…” He mused. “Goemon’s exploits have been documented in many forms of media, like kabuki and novels.”

“Wow, really?”

“So that’s a Goemon bath...Ew.”

“However,” The history teacher continued. “It’s actually unclear whether or not Goemon was indeed a gentleman thief. Rebellion against Hideyoshi, whose campaign had failed; propaganda by the government to sully his name...The gentleman thief Goemon may be no more than an illusion made by varying motivations. In actuality, most heroes and gentleman thieves throughout history are something like that.”

Morgana purred inside the desk and Akira looked down at him. “Let’s make sure people don’t think we’re just an illusion.” He whispered. “But before that, you need to be ready for the exams that are starting tomorrow.”

After one last study session, Airi clapped her hands at the front of the classroom, garnering the attention of the students cramming for tomorrow. “Please do your best, everyone! Niijima-senpai and I have run out of time to help anyone, so it’s up to you to keep going.”

Makoto smiled to her fellow students, resting her hands on one hip. “If you get stuck on a multiple choice question, remember that you can always eliminate two by default.”

“And remember to eat a healthy breakfast and drink lots of water.” Airi added. “Going in with an empty stomach is a really bad idea. But most important of all is that it’s not the end of the world if
you get a lower grade than you expected.” Together, they bowed. “Good luck!”

The students they had been tutoring for four days bowed back. “Thank you for your time.” They intoned together. Straightening up, they all left the class, knowing that soon, they would be facing the biggest challenge yet. Finals.

Right as he was packing his bag, Makoto had asked her leader if he had a moment. Akira nodded, and the two of them walked out to the courtyard where it was empty, not knowing there was another pair of eyes that followed them.

“So,” Makoto began genially once they reached the vending machines, not a soul around to overhear them. “How are you and Airi lately?”

Akira blinked. “Fine..? We went on a date on Tanabata.” He treasured that night. He even made that kiss photo his wallpaper on his phone.

Makoto smiled. “That sounds nice.” She sighed. “If only I could say the same for Eiko...apparently she has started dating a host from a club near her work. I guess he, um...hit on her one day after her shift, and that was that. Since then, he’s the only thing she’ll talk about. She even sent me a picture of their date at Destinyland.”

Akira furrowed his brow. A host dating someone? Weren’t they usually only in on it for the money? “That sounds suspicious.”

She perked up. “You think so as well? For now it seems he hasn’t forced her to spend any money at his club, but I’m still nervous...Beyond that, he calls her his “princess” and constantly tells her how special she is.” She grimaced. “It makes me sick to my stomach.”

She sighed heavily. “But Eiko refuses to listen to me. She said the idea that all hosts are bad people is outdated...She even said she was shocked to be getting advice from someone who would ‘totally flunk a test about love.’” She scowled. “Tests about love aren’t a thing though...and even if they were, I most certainly wouldn’t flunk them! I have you and Airi as study material!”

He sweatdropped. “Uh...” That sounded like she watched them 24/7.

Realizing how heated she was, Makoto quickly backtracked. “S-Sorry about that, I don’t mean I watch you, I just mean you two are an ideal example.” She sighed. “I’m probably just being biased towards him. I mean, I don’t have any proof that he’s untrustworthy...But that’s why I want to meet him and find out for myself what kind of person he really is. Um...” She fiddled with her hands. “If it’s not too much to ask, I’d like you to accompany me on this excursion as well. Uh...” She grimaced but forced herself to continue. “You...might have to play the role of my boyfriend.”

His eyes widened and Akira quickly held his hands up in a stop motion. “Whoa...OK, listen.” He started warily. “You’re my friend so I want to help, but do I really have to do that? I’m with Airi, and I would never want to betray her.” He would never want to even think about cheating on her. He wasn’t a scumbag.

“I know.” Makoto agreed. “But I think if I have a boyfriend, Eiko might be more inclined to listen to me. I would ask Ryuji or Yusuke but they don’t have the same tact, and may say something that would offend her. You’re quiet and messy enough that she would accept you. To...tell you the truth,” She fiddled with her hands. “I...actually already made plans with her and her boyfriend for a double date without accounting for a partner.” She ducked her head guiltily. “S-Sorry.”

Akira held a hand to his forehead and sighed heavily. What a mess. If he did do this, he’d be living
with a guilty conscience, but if he didn’t do this, one of their fellow students might be lured into a
prostitution ring. “...Fine, BUT,” He emphasized. “We have to tell Airi about this. I’m not going to
let her think this is real.”

Makoto sighed in relief. “Of course. I would never want to get in between you two. Let me call her
now so—”

“Don’t bother.”

They froze at the familiar voice and turned around to see Airi giving them a raised brow, leaning
against the metal fence that separated the concrete walkway from the grassy areas of the courtyard.
“Nice little hangout we have here.” She remarked coolly, not even a hint of a smile on her face.
“All alone…”

Akira paled at the insinuation and quickly reached out for her. “Airi, you’re my one and only.” He
stammered out hastily. “Makoto is just a friend and teammate.”

The council president nodded quickly, biting her lip nervously. “Yes, it’s true. I’m only asking for
him to accompany me, nothing more. I have no such feelings for Akira.”

“Yeah what she said.” Akira quickly added, his hands grasping the cellist’s and gently caressing
them as if it would reassure her of his affections. His dread grew the longer she stayed silent, head
ducked down so he couldn’t see her face. “Airi? Please believe me. I would never cheat.” He
voiced sincerely, heart pounding nervously. Please. Don’t leave him. “I love you.”

Sighing, Airi looked up at them with an amused smile. “I know. You would never hurt me.”

He breathed out a sigh in relief, shoulders slumping from the scare. “Yeah...I promised, right?”

She softened and nodded. “Yeah…” She leaned to the side to see Makoto twiddling with her hands
nervously. “Makoto, I’m loaning you my boyfriend for this, but I’m setting ground rules. No
confessions, no kissing, no sex.” She raised a brow at the upperclassman’s red face. “Got it?”

Makoto quickly nodded, face resembling a tomato. “Y-Yes, I would never. Thank you, Airi. I
would’ve asked you instead, but Eiko knows I see you as family, so…” She ducked her head
guiltily. “I’m really sorry. I don’t mean to cause any relationship problems between you two.”

Airi sighed. “It’s OK…” She voiced reluctantly. No, it wasn't OK. “You’re beautiful, Mako, but
I’m not interested in you like that.”

Makoto covered her face. “Um...Eiko thought we were initially a threesome…”

Airi’s brows shot up. “A threesome? Takao-senpai has some imagination, though…” Her smile
turned teasing. “If you’re interested, maybe Akira would let me have a taste…” The two of them
reddened, steam rising off their faces, and she burst out laughing at their reactions. “I’m joking!
OK, go ahead.” She frowned. “Don’t make me regret it.”

A phone rang out, and Makoto hurriedly dug into her skirt pocket for it, reading the message with a
grimace. “It’s Eiko and she says she wants to do the double date now...Um…”

Akira sighed, agitated by the whole situation. “Fine...Why don’t I meet you at the Diner then?”

She nodded and without another word, hurried out of the courtyard and into the main school
building.
He turned back to his girlfriend who looked down, her earlier humor filled smile gone within a flash. Worry filled his heart. Was she not fine with this like she said? “Airi…” He said softly. “You know I would never cheat, right? I wouldn’t give up this,” He held up their linked hands. “For anything.”

“Yeah…” Airi whispered halfheartedly, head still tilted down. “I know…” But she could still feel unsure about this. Even if she had given them the go-ahead, she was still hesitant. What if by doing this one pretend date, Akira would end up liking Makoto more? What if he would leave her for the more gorgeous council president? She was smarter, she was stronger, she had family connections. What did she herself have? A bigger bust maybe...

Arms wrapped around her, bringing her into that familiar warm chest which housed his heart. She closed her eyes and listened to the familiar rhythm, her hands coming up to clutch the back of his polo. “I love you.” He whispered sincerely, leaning his cheek against the top of her head. “I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you.”

“I love you too.” She interrupted him with a small smile. “You promise, right?” She held up her pinky finger.

Smiling softly, he entwined it with his own. “I promise.”

Akira tried his best not to grimace as he was forced to sit across from Eiko and her boyfriend at the Diner in Shibuya. “Yo, my name’s Tsukasa.” The host greeted as if they were already friends, showing them his teeth, yellow from excess alcohol and smoking. His dyed brown hair was styled with so much hairspray that Akira could smell it from his seat. He wore a wine red shirt underneath a crisp white suit, complimented by a blue flower corsage.

“I heard all about you two from Eiko.” Tsukasa turned his attentions to the council president. “So I heard you’re the student council prez, Makoto-chan?” He smiled. “I totally wish I could be one of your council members.”

Floundering at his borderline romantic statement, Makoto blinked. “Y-Yes, I am...Totally…”

“And Megane-kun over here is your boyfriend, yeah?”

“Y-Yeah…”

Tsukasa raised a brow. “Huh. Looks like you guys don’t get along too good though. It’s like your love level’s rock bottom. Are you seriously datin’?”

Akira inwardly screamed. No, they are not. “Love comes in many forms.” He dodged the question. Makoto perked up. “R-Right! He doesn’t really like it when I get all clingy with him…”

The host oohed. “I get it. You just don’t got any affection compared to us.”

He leaned in closer to Eiko who giggled. “Mmmmmhm!”

Tsukasa smirked down at her. “Hey babe, did you do something special today? I don’t remember you lookin’ this sexy.”

Eiko swooned and rested her head on his shoulder, looking up at him adoringly. “Oh,
Makoto grimaced at their disgusting display, continuing to stay silent while Eiko stood up. “Sorry, I hafta use the bathroom.”

“Later, lovebird.” Her boyfriend waved as she walked away towards the back.

Now that her friend was away, this was the opportune time to ask her questions. “Um,” Makoto began. “There’s something I’d like to ask you...Are you serious about pursuing a relationship with Eiko?”

Tsukasa snickered. “Aha! I was wondering’ when our honor student was gonna show her true colors! That reminds me, Eiko said you were real pumped about gettin’ to know me. Why’s that, huh?”

She raised a brow. “...I just wanted to make sure you’re good for her.” She answered coolly.


Taken aback, Makoto blinked. “Huh?”

“What’s wrong? C’mon, gimme your number.”

“I-I,” She furrowed her brow, uncomfortable at his forwardness. “Um…”

Akira glanced over at her before gazing at the host. “Back off.”

The host glared at him. “Nobody asked you, Megane-kun.” He turned back to the council president with a host smile. "Anyways, Eiko already gave me yours, Mako-chan. We good.”

Narrowing her eyes, Makoto crossed her arms. “I do have one more question to ask...You’re not going to bring Eiko to your club, are you?”

He scoffed. “What, you suspectin’ me? I wouldn’t dream of it. It’s a damn shame people think us hosts’re just flirts, but my love for Eiko is pure as snow. Don’t twist the story.”

Eiko came back from the restroom, giggling at her phone but paused when she noticed the awkward tension within the table. “Huh? Is something wrong?”

“Oh,” Tsukasa quickly smiled. “I was just gettin’ to know your little friend here, honey. Welp, I should get goin’. I’ve gotta be at work soon.”

Eiko smiled. “Ah, me too! Let’s go together! Bye Mako! Bye Mako’s boyfriend!” The two left the Diner together to Shinjuku after paying for their drinks, and Makoto sighed once they were alone. “I hope he’s not tricking her...But no matter what I might think, I still don’t have any proof...and above all, Eiko seems really happy. Am I just...” She looked down. “Getting in the way of their happiness?”

Akira shook his head. “You’re being considerate here. That guy did seem slimy.”

Makoto sighed. “I suppose so...I mean, I really am worried about Eiko here...In the end, I know this is just a hunch, but my father always stressed how important it is to trust hunches.” Her phone rang and she took it out of her pocket, raising a brow. “It seems that host has sent me something
already…” She furrowed her brow in confusion. “What is this supposed to be saying? It’s full of emojis. ‘It’s meee, Tsukasa. <3 I no we just met but I cudn't wait 2 "phone emoji" you. I'm so haP to b friends with u, MakoC. "hand emoji," "hand emoji," and "hotspring emoji."’"

She sweatdropped. “That was barely a coherent sentence, but I’ll need to get used to that if I’m going to help Eiko…” She sighed. “I’m glad you were here with me. I would have been really panicked had I been alone…I honestly despise how immature I can be sometimes, but I’m working through that with your help, so...thank you. And thank you again for agreeing to this. I’ll need to make this up to Airi somehow.” She pursed her lips guiltily. “Let’s leave now.”

Akira sighed in relief and stood up. “Good…That was really awkward.” Here’s hoping he wouldn’t have to do it again.

Airi looked out from behind the corner of the bookstore, watching Akira meet up with Makoto in front of the Diner before they went up the steps.

Even though she said she trusted them, she couldn’t help but still feel uncertain about it all. She hated that she couldn’t bring herself to have faith in her boyfriend and honorary sister, and she knew it was really her own fault. She tried to justify it; saying it’s because their relationship was still rather new, maybe they would do something in the heat of the moment, but really, she was just being insecure.

She sighed. She was a terrible girlfriend…

“Kimisawa-san, what are you doing hiding behind the corner like this?”

She jumped and turned around, eyes widening when she saw it was Akechi, still in his summer school uniform and signature briefcase in hand. “Uh...Akechi-san! Um…” An idea came to her, and it was a bad idea, but an idea nonetheless. “Are you free right now?”

He blinked. “Uh...I suppose so. Is there something you need?”

Airi pasted a fake smile on her face. “Why don’t I treat you to a coffee? You usually talk to Akira when we meet in the mornings, but I don’t really know you.” She could also use this as an opportunity to see if he was really the same kid from the institution. The more she interacted with him, the less she thought of him as the same Go-kun. Perhaps this would solve it once and for all.

Akechi tilted his head, but smiled in the end. “Well, how could I refuse such a tempting offer? Lead the way.”

Perking up, Airi led him over to the Diner where they walked up the steps. She looked deeper into the restaurant, spotting Akira and Makoto with Eiko and her boyfriend near the back, and grabbed a table far enough away that they wouldn’t be noticed, but close enough she could watch their conversations.

Taking a seat, they perused the menu, or rather she pretended to while Akechi did. Hiding her face with it, she observed the table further down with a conflicted frown, noting approvingly that Makoto and Akira did not put any real effort to seem like a couple.

“...So, I assume your reason for inviting me on this little date is so you can ignore me?”

Snapping back to her current company, Airi smiled sheepishly. “Sorry. I’m just… a little
Akechi shook his head. “No, it is quite all right. I find it refreshing to be an object of company rather than one of desire.”

They ordered two cups of coffee from a nearby waitress, which Airi sighed in relief when she realized it wasn’t Yukimi, and occasionally sipped their drinks. Her eyes occasionally darted to the table, but found herself paying more attention to the man in front of her. “So, Akechi-san…”

“Akechi-kun is fine.” He offered with a genial smile. “I think we know one another enough to call each other with more comfortable suffixes.”

She hesitated. “Akechi-...kun. How are you? Are you doing all right?”

He sipped his coffee. “I suppose I can say I am well. I am constantly bombarded with interviews regarding the Phantom Thieves now.” He sighed. “My reputation is slowly dwindling on the internet…”

Airi frowned sympathetically. Even if he did denounce their actions, he was still just a teenager like them. “I’m sorry. I don’t know if this helps, but I know some girls in my school still support you wholeheartedly.”

Akechi closed his eyes and smiled, though it seemed bitter. “Yes, that does help. And how about you, Kimisawa-san? I don’t think I have ever bothered to ask, but what is your opinion of me?”

She tilted her head, observing him. “I think...you’re trying to do what you think is right, but pressure from the media, your fans, and everything really, are crushing you. Maybe you should take a break?” She frowned worriedly. “I don’t know how you can still go to school and do all these TV specials…”

He stared at her for a moment before chuckling. “What an accurate observation. Perhaps you should be the student detective instead of I.” He sighed and combed his hand through his hair, messing up his shaggy style. “Yes, school has been difficult with my added responsibilities to the police and media. Luckily it’s almost summer so my duties will lessen for a while…”

Airi smiled. “That’s good. You should remember to never disregard your health. It’s dangerous to be overworked.”

For a while, she had almost forgotten about her mission to observe her friend and boyfriend, and she lost herself in conversation with the student detective. He was surprisingly nice to talk with, especially when it had nothing to do with the Phantom Thieves, and she even found out he ran a food blog where he reviewed restaurants. “You do?” She blinked. “I should follow it. I try to find new recipes to cook, but Yusuke always makes his fancier somehow.”

Akechi laughed. “Is that so? Well, I hope you will find some inspiration from my reviews. If you would like, we may visit a restaurant on my list together in the near future.”

Airi blinked. Was that...a date? She wasn’t going to cheat either. “Um...I don’t know my schedule after finals, so I’ll let you know.”

Not noticing her hesitation, he smiled and took out his phone. “Then perhaps it would be pertinent for us to trade phone numbers?”

She slowly smiled. “Sure…” That way, maybe she could ask about his past. It would be rude of her to do so now, though she wanted to.
They exchanged numbers and chat IDs, not noticing a certain third year taking a photo of them after her run to the restroom. “Well, this has been fun,” Akechi began, picking up his signature briefcase as he stood up from the booth. “But I’m running late. I’ll see you another time, Kimisawa-san.”

Airi smiled and waved. “Bye, good luck with whatever you’re doing!”

His expression darkened for a split second and she blinked, wondering if it was the lighting. What was that?

Akechi gave her another smile before he left, leaving her alone in the booth.

Airi turned back to look at the other table, noting with a relieved sigh as Makoto and Akira both got up and left. They hadn’t done anything. She was just being paranoid. Yet still...something bothered her.

She looked down at her half finished coffee, the heat long gone from the beverage. Was it the fact that Akira was doing things like this for other people? Or maybe because he had already helped her, so logically he would help others, but...She was his girlfriend. Was she...stealing his time?

She bit her lip, feeling insecure about her position in his life for the first time since they got together. Sure he may love her, but should that mean he should spend more time with her when other people obviously relied on his help? Was her being his girlfriend...inadvertently hurting others because she took all his attention?

She didn’t want to hurt anyone again. Pain was…

Go-kun continued to stare at her from the crack in the door for the third day in a row.

Airi wanted to concentrate, to just do the stupid lesson inside the studio and go back to her room on the other side of the catholic institution, but there was another ten minutes before she would be let go. Why did he keep following her like some stupid stray?

"Straighten your leg!” The ballet instructor shouted at her and Airi did as she was told, albeit slowly. The other girls followed her example, stretching one leg up on the beam and reaching for their toes.

The instructor frowned at her and pointed the ruler to the spot in front of her.

Airi slowly walked up, already knowing what was going to happen. Without waiting for the instructor to say anything, she slowly spread her legs, going down as far as she could to do a split. If she didn’t do this fast enough, she would be-

She flinched when the ruler whacked against her already bruised back and forced herself to go down farther, even though her inner thighs were screaming at her in protest. Just think of it as ice skating with kaa-chan again, happier times away from this hell-

Another whack descended upon her, this time on her leg, catching her by surprise. She fell over in a heap and instinctively covered her head as the instructor rained down on her with the ruler.

All that could be heard in the dead silent studio room was wood meeting flesh, the other little girls staring blankly with the exception of Rui. Beautiful, innocent, untarnished Rui.
Not like her. She was nothing. She was less than human.

This continued until the lesson was over and everyone was allowed to go. Rui was the only one to rush up to her. “Ai-chan…” She teared up as she looked at the small stains that stained the back of her unitard, signs that the bruises had split open. “C’mon, let’s go back to our room. I still have some bandages and rubbing alcohol from last time…”

Airi nodded blankly. Tears were streaming down her face, dotting the otherwise clean surface of the lacquered floor, but she didn’t make any noise. Making noise was weakness here. Letting anyone see emotion here was a weakness, even Rui. Kindness meant death.

Limping out of the studio room with Rui’s help, Airi stopped when she saw something on the floor just next to the door. The only one who could’ve done this was Go-kun.

“Oh,” Rui bent down for a second to pick up the new roll of bandages. “We got lucky!”

“Yeah…” Airi replied absentmindedly. Why would he give her this after punching her teeth out? Did he feel sorry for her? He was leaving soon anyway. The matron spoke about how he was being transferred out because of their sponsor. Whatever…

They walked back to their dorm, not noticing the pair of warm brown eyes following them from behind the corner, yearning to talk to her.

I drew canon Airi to celebrate P5A airing tomorrow!! Hope the anime won't disappoint ;w;

"Kind like a mother and works hard like an adult, she was unaware of the true situation at school until Ren transferred in. Her fellow students think of her as perfect so she tries to help everyone. She's tired but she will fight to do the right thing, even if that means death."
Chapter End Notes

Makoto rank 6

Megane - glasses
Chapter 159

Chapter Notes

P5D and P3D official opening cinematics have been released and they look absolutely gorgeous!! Also P5A released their first episode. It was um...very cliffnote of the game so far, but seeing the screenshot previews for episode 2 shows they'll be deviating a little so I'm excited for that!

Thank you for 1094 kudos and 42.5k hits!! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

---7/13, WEDNESDAY, MORNING, SHUJIN ACADEMY.

“Man, I got no sleep last night…”

“So much has happened, and now we have finals…”

“Hey, did you hear? The Phantom Thieves might be from our school!”

“No way, that can’t be true. But it would be cool if it was…”

Just walking into school, there were students nervously biting their nails and fidgeting, trying to distract themselves from the doom and gloom of their finals.

Ushimaru-sensei sneered at the class of 2-D, watching with a keen eye as several of them sat as tense as rock in their seats. “Today is the first day of your final exams...Begin!”

They flipped their exams over and began, the entire room being filled with the sound of lead scratching against paper.

Which of these phrases has its origins in this shogi piece? Airi wrote her answer down. “Nouveau riche.”

Why did Ishikawa Goemon become a popular subject after his death? “Goemon was a gentleman thief who stole from the rich and gave to the poor. His work angered Hideyoshi Toyotomi, who was at the height of power during the Sengoku period. He forced Goemon to be boiled alive, coining the term “Goemon bath.” He fought against those in power and was executed for it. After his death, he was seen as a hero by the common people.”

“Time is up. Give up already!”

Once tests were finished for the day, the thieves congregated together at the Diner to study some more. During this, Akira stayed especially close to Airi; sitting next to her, paying for her food and drink, everything he could do to show he was a good boyfriend even though Ann and Ryuji were also there.

Airi was happy, though she rolled her eyes at how much he hovered near her. He even shared his
food with her and he loved the nostalgic steak. She felt guilty, maybe because she had spied on him right in this restaurant, or maybe because she was taking up so much of his time and attention, even when they were together with their friends.

He didn’t need to pay so much attention to her, she was already his...

----7/14, THURSDAY, MORNING, SHUJIN ACADEMY

“This is the second day of finals.” Usami-sensei announced. “You may begin.”

Akira read the questions quickly. Which of the following statements are true of this organism? “It’s not related to crabs.”

What is said to be the reason why people began dreaming in color? “Television.”

Today, he gifted her flowers at her house; Anemones and Chrysanthemums. Sincere truth. He was sincere about him never cheating or betraying her.

Airi accepted them with a guilty smile, trying to thank him, but he must’ve noticed her awkwardness because his face fell. He would’ve said something but Yusuke and Morgana’s presence ensured that they couldn’t really talk, and she had to cook.

Sensing that he would make things awkward and potentially ruin dinner, Akira frowned and decided not to join them. He just silently put on his shoes and reluctantly left back to the cafe.

Airi put the already drying bouquet into a vase with a disquiet frown tugging down her lips. This was fine. He didn’t need to spend so much time on her, even if it hurt to be so distant to him.

She just...didn’t know anymore...

----7/15, FRIDAY, MORNING, SHUJIN ACADEMY

“Today is the third day of your finals.” Hiruta-sensei smirked. “Are you ready? Then you may begin.”

Ann furrowed her brow. Which of these was made using the silver ratio? “B4-size paper.”

Define “syn” and “aisthesis,” the Greek root words of “synesthesia.” “Together and senses.”

They decided not do a study group today since tomorrow would be the last day and they were all exhausted from constant studying. Akira had volunteered to go grocery shopping with her when Airi mentioned where she was going, and he carried all the heavy stuff.

She watched as he placed the bags of rice down in her kitchen with a guilty frown. Why was he doing this? He could be helping someone else right now. He was wasting his free time on her. Ryuji or Yusuke could’ve helped, or she could’ve done it herself. That’s what she used to do when she hadn't even know him yet.
Akira turned to her, expecting some sort of joking praise about his strength, but she only walked to
the counter to take out the rest of the groceries, staying quiet with her voice and emotions.

He slowly frowned, and it never left his face for the rest of the day. He would’ve said something
but he had promised Hifumi another game tonight and the time was closing in.

He had wanted to say something, anything to get rid of this awkward tension between them...

---7/16, SATURDAY, AFTERNOON, SHIBUYA

Ann groaned and stretched her arms in the air, ignoring the masses of people walking past behind
her on the Shibuya passageway. “Exams are finally over...I’m so exhausted…”

It was late in the afternoon now, and the sky glowed orange. They were learning on the railings on
the side of the passageway, overlooking the famous Shibuya crossing.

“I can get back to actually sleepin’ in peace…” Ryuji wheezed, hanging his upper body over the
metal bar. “Didn’t even get ‘ta play any games this time…”

Makoto smiled. “Exactly how it should be.”

Airi sighed as she rolled her neck, feeling the tension from hours of writing knotting up in her
shoulders. “I want to drop to the floor and sleep…”

Yusuke held a hand on her shoulder to prop her up. “Please don’t. It would be a hassle to carry you
home.”

Ann perked up. “Sleeping? I remember you guys mentioned a sleepover a few days ago. What was
up with that?”

Ryuji brightened and jumped up. “Right!” He grinned, suddenly rejuvenated. ”So I was thinkin’,
remember when we first went into Mementos and we talked about how we had to do a movie
night? We should do a sleepover for our after-party!”

Akira perked up. “Are we watching “My Neighbor Totoro”? He pointed his thumb to the feline
resting on the railing. “We still have to show Morgana the original cat bus.”

“Hell yeah we will!” Ryuji grinned. “Plus, Makoto’s gotta see how we operate outside of the
Metaverse.”

“And by operate, you mean completely disregard any grace we wield inside it.” Yusuke sighed.
“But I am for this idea.”

Airi smiled exasperatedly. “And that means cooking.”

Makoto tilted her head. “Well...I will have to ask Sis, but…” She smiled. “It sounds fun! We can
talk about our work.”

Ryuji grinned. “Yeah! Our popularity’s really gone through the roof!”

Ann laughed excitedly. “It feels like our time has finally come!”

Yusuke smiled, pleased. “I have even heard people excitedly speculating about our next target. We
will have to choose carefully.”

Airi frowned. “Don’t rush this. We’ve only just gotten over one victory, we can wait.”

“Back to the party though,” Ryuji interjected. “I hope you guys didn’t forget. It’s the fireworks festival on the 18th. I guess we’re good meetin’ up in Shibuya, yeah? Let’s say...5pm!”

Morgana sweatdropped. “You sure are on top of these kinds of things...but I can’t wait to wear my yukata!”

Airi beamed. “I already got it in the mail too!”

Along with her own, not that she was going to say anything. Things had been a little tense between her and Akira lately, what with his recent “date” with Makoto.

He kept trying to prove to her that he was loyal and only with her, and while she appreciated it, it was getting to the point where he was smothering her with his affections. She hoped that maybe if they could spend a little alone time together without any responsibilities, she could maybe talk to him about her thoughts.

The guilt was heavy now. If not...She didn’t want to even think of the alternative. Perhaps just give him more time...

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After going back to Shinjuku, Akira was able to strike a deal with Ohya at Crossroads, while also seeing the fortune teller on the streets. She perked up when she remembered him, and asked about how the girl with the pink hair was.

He told her Airi was fine now, and they were in a relationship together.

The fortune teller, Chihaya, beamed and offered him a lucky stone imbued with the moon’s power that would chase away bad luck for ¥100,000.

He balked at the price but ended up paying for it anyway. He felt like he needed something like this after this week. He had been trying so hard, but Airi seemed disappointed, or even annoyed at each attempt.

He tried giving her flowers, volunteering to go grocery shopping with her, hell, he even thought about going to Mina and buying a ring, just to show he was serious. He knew it wasn’t time for that though, and he could really only hope this stone could help somehow.

Except it broke as soon as he got back to the cafe. Goodbye, ¥100,000.

Laying down on his bed after a long night, he and Morgana curled up to sleep but his phone rang. Morgana groaned. “Who could that be at this late hour?”

R: Let’s go somewhere tomorrow.
R: We’ve been so busy with exams, I wanna do something relaxing before the big party.
R: Where would be a good place to go...?
R: I know. Wanna try going to the fishing pond in Ichigaya?

Akira grimaced. “Fishing..?”
Morgana read the messages through squinted eyes. “It sounds fun. So are you going there with Ryuji?”

He pursed his lips. He had honestly wanted to spend time with Airi and fix their bad spot (He refused to think that their relationship was failing), but he had been neglecting his best friend lately.

Ak: Sure, let’s do this.
R: Ooh, I got a bite.
R: I hope the other fish’ll bite this easily!
R: Let’s meet in Shinjuku tomorrow then. Night.

Letting his hand fall back against the bed, he quickly fell asleep, Morgana purring quietly next to him. Maybe some sleep would do him good...

Blinking his eyes, he looked around. He was in a white void, jasmine flowers spanning across the plains in little bushes. There were no buildings, or trees, or...anything really. Just flowers and their sweet scent filling his nostrils. Where was he?

He looked up at the blue sky, fluffy white clouds peacefully floating by. It was nice, wherever this was. Peaceful and quiet as if time didn’t affect this place.

“Akira?”

Perking up at the familiar voice, he turned around and saw the love of his life, standing just a few feet away from him. She was dressed in a flowing chiffon dress that went all the way to her knees, the warm sunlight kissing her bare shoulders and arms.

Akira smiled at the sight. “Airi. Where are we-”

“Um…” Airi looked away. “Let’s not do this anymore.”

He froze. What..? “Huh? Y...You’re joking, right?” He asked hesitantly, smiling awkwardly as if he expected her to just burst out laughing and say she would never want that. They had promised to stay together forever.

But no.

Her face stayed as a frown, and she refused to meet his eyes. “I’m serious. Let’s break up.” She insisted quietly. “I know you’ve been trying hard, but I’m sorry. I thought I loved you but it’s just because you saved me. I’m grateful but...I don’t…”

No. Please no. He felt like a rock was stuck in his throat and his body was encased in stone, hindering him from stopping her even when she turned and walked away, the darkness encompassing his vision the more she distanced herself. The flowers beneath his feet began to darken and their petals fell off in shriveled clumps.

The farther she walked, the more they decayed, her taking her warmth and life away with her. The sky dimmed until everything around him was only a black void, and the only light emanated from her figure, now just a speck on the horizon.

He screamed at himself to move, to go after his light, but he couldn’t. Even though she was so far away, he could hear her just as clearly as if she was right next to him.
Please don’t say it. Please don’t break his heart.

“...I don’t love you.”

With a gasp, his eyes snapped open, the faint moonlight waning through the dusty windows next to his bed. His chest constricted painfully at the dream-nightmare, and he could feel his clothes sticking to his skin from breaking out into a cold sweat in his sleep.

No way...That would never happen. Right? But why would he dream about that now when he had never doubted their relationship?

He paused. Did he doubt it now? Airi had been so...cold lately, he had no idea what to do. He just wanted everything back to normal. He wanted his warm and loving girlfriend again.

But what could he do? She hadn’t really talked to him since Tuesday. Anytime he was free, either someone else was calling for his attention or she was “busy” with work and study. There was no compromise. He hadn’t wanted his helping Makoto out to get in between his relationship with Airi. He knew it was a bad idea but he just wanted to help a friend out, and Airi had even given them permission.

He looked down at his hands. Thinking back to that moment in the courtyard though, he had unconsciously known she wasn’t OK with it even when she said it was. Her smile had seemed forced, just like every time she lies.

He should’ve known better, should’ve come up with another method in helping Makoto out, but why hadn’t Airi just said it made her uncomfortable? Was she doing that stupid self-sacrificing thing for them?

He felt almost helpless right now with no answers, as if he was sinking back into the darkness...

A memory came to him and he turned on his phone, quietly playing the recording he made on Sunday without waking up the slumbering kitty next to him. He closed his eyes as the deep cello vibrated in his ears, and the music helped sweep his anxieties away, string by string.

No. She had played this just for him, to help him when she couldn’t. He can still fix this.

He just had to make time to talk to her.

----7/17, SUNDAY, AFTERNOON, FISHING POND

Airi hummed happily as she followed Kawakami down the path to the fishing pond, the sun setting in the horizon. The teacher had invited her to her own private relaxation spot saying that they could spend some time together as family. Airi had been here once, but only to distract the fishermen while Taiki and Nishiki stole their fish.

“Now here, is a good spot!” Kawakami grinned as she sat down on a discarded crate, close to the end of the pier. “Since it’s further out in the water, there’s more variety and less competition.”

It was true. Most of the other fishermen were sat closer to land, and they had very little variety as
Airi sat down next to her, and using her spare fishing pole, clumsily cast the bait into the water. It didn’t fly very far and she reeled it back in before trying again, the hook plopping a good distance away this time. “Like this?”

Kawakami smiled proudly. “Yup!” She cast her own line into the water with a far more experienced hand, and they sat together in silence, just enjoying the peace and quiet together.

Airi sighed contently, feeling like she could unwind for the first time in a week. The last time she was this relaxed was maybe when she played her cello at Leblanc for Akira. She frowned slightly. She had no idea what to do about it, but maybe she could think up some things while she fished. It was just so tense around them now that she could barely relax.

Everything had gone wrong so fast...and it was really because of her.

Her line tugged and the end of her pole bent down from the weight. Gasping, Airi quickly reeled, fighting against the weight, and after a moment, her catch appeared. It was a small trout, still flapping its tail. “Yes!” She cheered happily as she reached out for it, flinching when it splashed its extra moisture at her.

“Good job, Airi!” Kawakami beamed, reeling in her third fish of the day within thirty minutes.

Putting her trout in a water filled bucket, Airi cast her line again and sat down. Fishing was pretty fun.

A train passed by on the hill in front of them, the noisy tracks scaring away most of the fish from the land and closer to them.

“...fish ain’t bitin’. The float hasn’t moved at all…”

They tensed at the familiar voice and slowly turned their heads around. Ryuji and Akira were sat at the middle of the concrete walkway, trying to fish something but with no success. They had no idea they were being watched, the two of them just staring at the silent waters with bored frowns. “If only there was a master fisher around. Then we could steal their ideas…”

Sharing a look, both Kawakami and Airi rescinded their lines, picked up their bucket of prized catches, and walked over. Catching movement from the corner of his eye, Ryuji snapped his head over in their direction and balked. “Whoa, that’s Kawakami and Airi! What’re they doin’ here?”

Akira perked up from his dead line and looked over at them. Stopping in front of their crates, Kawakami raised a brow. “Two boys at the fishing pond on a Sunday, huh. Why are you sitting around like old men? Why don’t you go out and do something more exciting? Steal some hearts?”

“Wha- Look who’s talkin!” Ryuji rebuked defensively. “Why’re you two here then?”

The teacher rolled her eyes. “Us hard working women need time to unwind and clear our thoughts. I thought you would understand, given how hard you’ve been studying lately.”

“Wow…” He blinked. “Soundin’ real old there, Kawakami.”

She placed her hands on her hips. “That’s Kawakami-sensei to you! C’mon Airi, let’s show them how women fish.”

Following her guardian, Airi took a seat at the edge of the platform with her back to her boyfriend,
and cast her line into the water. Though she didn’t reel in as many as her teacher, she still had at least two.

Ryuji gawked at their full bucket of fish. “Holy crap...Kawakami could be our master fisher, Akira. She’s hookin’ fish like crazy!”

Akira turned around and frowned hurtfully when he was only shown Airi’s back, her not moving to even greet him. Why wasn’t she happy with him anymore? He had promised that he was hers. He wanted to talk to her but there were too many people around that could overhear...

“It’s easy.” Kawakami soothed. “Just clear your mind and free yourself from negative thoughts.”

Ryuji oohed and crossed one leg over his knee. “So the trick is not to think!” He deflated. “How am I supposed to do that?”

Sighing heavily, Akira turned around to watch his hook bob in the water with a dejected frown. “Accept the grim reality of society.” He muttered.

Ryuji groaned, not noticing his sour mood. “I’m askin’ for tips because I WANNA get fish.”

Airi sighed and finally turned around. “Being patient helps.” She soothed. “This is my first time fishing and I’m doing pretty well.”

He pouted. “But I can’t be patient.”

Kawakami rolled her eyes. “It’s a nice, sunny Sunday. I didn't think I’d be stuck fishing with you two on my day off. This was supposed to be a nice one on one bonding time with Airi.” She sighed as she reeled in yet another fish. “But I guess where she goes, Kurusu-kun goes, and where Kurusu-kun goes, Sakamoto-kun follows.”

Ryuji observed in awe at the flapping fish in her almost full bucket. “She keeps gettin’ fish even as she nags...I’m impressed!”

Akira huffed. “Call her Kawakami-sama.”

They all turned around to stare at him and he sweated awkwardly. Rolling her eyes, Kawakami smiled. “Once again, it’s Kawakami-sensei.” Reeling in her hook, she stood up from her crate. “C’mon Airi, we caught enough for today.”

Airi smiled and nodded, getting up as well with her fishing pole. “I think we could have a lot of grilled fish with this. I could save some for Morgana.”

Kawakami brightened. “Oh yeah! That cute cat! All right, let’s take these back and cook them!” She hummed as she marched back toward regular land and Airi made to follow her with their fish bucket.

“A-Airi!”

Airi stopped and turned around to see Akira look up at her with hopeful eyes, as if he expected her to say something.

She bit her lip. Half of her wanted to stay (more than half if she was honest) but she had all this fish with her and she promised Kawakami...“Sorry, I’ll see you guys tomorrow.” She smiled awkwardly before beelining down toward the shore, not seeing the crestfallen expression on her boyfriend.
Akira turned back to his fishing pole and sighed, half listening to Ryuji’s babble. She was really avoiding him then. What could he do..? He didn’t want his nightmare to be real.

Descaling the fishes in the kitchen sink once she was back home, Airi handed the finished ones over to Kawakami so she could degut them. They had spent the entire day together and Airi was trying so hard to be happy about it, that they were bonding like real family, but she could only be distracted by the one person who had always been in her mind since she met him. Akira.

She felt so guilty for brushing him aside earlier, and she tried to justify it in that she already had plans, but she hadn’t needed to be so cold. She had yet to even tell him she had spied on him. She violated his privacy. He could do whatever he wanted, she had no right to monopolize him.

Sure he was her boyfriend, but he was also their leader, friends with other people she knew and didn’t know, doing things she wasn’t aware of...

She paused, the water dripping down her knife and onto the fish in the sink. His pretend date with Makoto had stirred up something inside her. Maybe she was jealous that other people, other girls that she may or may not know, spent time with him. Maybe she was jealous that she had to share him with other people, that they knew Akira in ways that she didn’t know.

She knew he volunteered for Yoshida’s speeches, goes to their weapons dealer, helps their doctor with experimental drugs, but who else? How many others did she have to accept simply because they were in Akira’s life?

That was it then. She was frustrated that her boyfriend wasn’t just hers, he was everyone’s, and she was also guilty that she wanted more of him for herself. She was stuck between being selfish and being considerate.

At what point did she cross off the line? Was she even that special to him?

“-ri? Airi?”

Snapping out of her thoughts, Airi handed her guardian the next fish. “Sorry. Lost in thought.”

Kawakami took the fish and eyed her carefully. “...Are you having relationship woes?”

Airi blinked. “How did you-?”

“You only became like this when we bumped into Kurusu-kun and Sakamoto-kun earlier. I noticed Kurusu-kun giving you those puppy eyes but you didn’t.” She frowned worriedly. “Did something happen between you two? Was it the exams?”

Airi shook her head. “Not really...It’s just me, I think. He had to help Makoto with something and it made me realize...There are parts of him that I will never know, or maybe I do know them, but he shows them to others too.” She confessed guiltily. “And I feel so horribly selfish that I want to keep him to myself. He isn’t just my boyfriend, he’s also the leader of the Phantom Thieves, and he’s friends with lots of people. He helps them, and they help him, and I have no place in that, nor do I have any idea how far they will go.”
She sighed, shoulders slumping. “I don’t want to accept that he can’t just be mine…but I also know that he does this because he’s such a kind person, so I don’t want to get between that…I want him to be mine, but they need him too…”

Observing her for a moment, Kawakami stayed silent but reached over to shut off the sink. Drying their hands, she led her to the dining table where she sat her down before taking a seat opposite of her.

“Listen.” Kawakami began quietly. “I don’t know what he does exactly with other people, but I know that young man does everything to be with you. I can’t really say since I haven’t been in a relationship in a long time, but he truly loves you, and you need to tell him these things so he could understand.” She placed a hand on top of hers. “He helped me too, and even though you were upset about it when you found out, you accepted it and look at us now! We’re a real family. I’m sure you’ll meet these other people too because where he is, you are, and where you are, he’s there.”

She smiled. “Don’t shut him out. He’s gone through too much to be hurt by the one person he holds most dear.”

Tearing up, Airi bit her lip and finally nodded. “...You’re right. I’m being selfish. I thought maybe if I distance myself a bit, he could do these things, things that should take precedence over me because they need it more, but...I guess I’m also one of his top priorities and I should talk to him about this.” She sniffled and sighed. “Thanks, Nee-chan.”

Kawakami grinned. “It’s what big sisters are for. You know you’re his number one priority no matter what. When I went over as his maid, we would always talk about you, and he would mention how you help him and how you’re so kind to him. He worships the ground you walk on.”

She patted her hand. “I’m going to go back to preparing the fish, it’s the only thing I’m good at with cooking. You just sit tight for a bit and think on what you want to say to Kurusu-kun.” Getting up, she returned to the kitchen to descale and de-gut the remaining fish.

Airi stayed in her chair and sighed. She really was being selfish and in turn, that hurt him. She just didn’t want to be left behind by the person she loved most. He was so busy helping others because he was such a kind person, and she had to accept that. He still loved her too.

Her phone buzzed.

R: Tomorrow’s the fireworks festival! Let’s meet at Shibuya at 5!
An: Airi, Makoto, are you wearing a yukata?
Ma: I’m planning on it.
Ai: Maybe.
Y: Yukatas are a great part of the summer tradition...They truly heighten a woman’s beauty.
Y: I think I will wear mine as well.
R: You’ve got one..? How about you, Akira?
Ak: I don’t have a yukata.
An: Hey, I know! Why don’t you come without your glasses?
Ma: What’s the point in that?
An: I dunno, you don’t get to see fireworks every day, so it’d be sad just wearing normal clothes!
An: I was just thinking he might want to go for a change of pace.
R: That sounds great! You should totally come without glasses!
Ak: Uh, OK.
R: You guys better not be late tomorrow!

Airi sighed. Maybe… Maybe a good way to apologize would be to just message him?

She started a private message, her thumbs flying over the keyboard.

Ai: Do you think I should wear a yukata tomorrow?

A tense moment later, she received a reply.

Ak: I think you would look beautiful no matter what.

She reddened. She hated (loved) that he could make her blush so easily. He was always free with compliments when it came to her.

She blinked, realization sinking in. That’s right. He always complimented her, whether it was her hairstyle, her clothes, her music, her cooking, anything and everything she did. That was something he didn’t do for their other friends, which meant it was something he only did with her.

She smiled softly. Maybe she really did have that special piece of his heart that was reserved only for her. She may have to share his kindness but she didn’t have to share his love.

Ai: But should I?
Ak: I would love to see it.
Ai: OK.
Ak: Are we...OK now?
Ai: I love you.
Ak: And I love you.

Airi smiled softly and opened the photo they took together on Tanabata. She took in their blissful smiles, how close he was to her, how they spent that night together with no one else around. The affection she could see in his eyes and in the quirk of his lips. That was already answer enough.

She was such an idiot to ever doubt him.

Super thank you to Cyanna for this fantastic pencil/marker drawing of Airi!! She looks so epic with her hair blowing in the wind <3
Chapter End Notes

Hifumi rank 2
Ohya rank 1
Chapter 160

Chapter Notes

Holy wow, thank you for 1117 kudos and 43.2k hits!! I've been getting a lot of messages from new readers telling me how much they love this fic and I'm really touched and honored! To take time out of your day to read what I wrote, and then to enjoy it? BLESSED

Thank you so so much for your continued support for this ridiculously long ass fic, and for your support of AiKira!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

----7/18, MONDAY, LATE AFTERNOON, SHIBUYA STATION

“It’s so hoooooot…” Ryuji complained as he fanned himself with a hand in the extremely humid station.

Him and Akira were both wearing their casual summer clothes while Yusuke had shown up in a dark blue yukata with a dark gold obi. The station was absolutely swarmed with people trying to get to the festival. Adults in suits getting off of work, teenagers enjoying a small break after Finals, kids running around in bright and colorful yukata. It was an absolute myriad of colors and people, and only enhanced how hot it was inside the station.

Yusuke had said Ann and Makoto had come over after school ended and the girls wanted to get ready together without any of them looking.

Akira couldn’t help but be excited, as seen by him constantly tapping the front of his shoe against the floor and looking around the busy station for that familiar head of pink hair. Those texts last night had alleviated his heart from the gloom of the week. Whatever funk she had been in seemed to have passed, and they seemed to be all right now. His nightmare wasn’t coming true...He hoped.

He hadn’t even held hands with her in days.

Morgana groaned inside the bag, the upper half of his body hanging out. “I feel like I’m being baked…” He panted, tongue sticking out in an effort to cool himself down.

Pitying him, Akira held up his half finished water bottle and gently poured it into the feline’s mouth.

Ryuji kicked the front of his sneakers against the tiled floors. “Those girls are way too late…”

Yusuke idly smoothed out his yukata. “It must be taking time for them to put on their yukata. Ann insisted on doing their makeup.” He eyed the two with disdain, noting their lack of traditional clothing. “Why aren’t you two wearing one?”

Akira shrugged. “I never packed one when I came here,” he answered flatly.

Ryuji rubbed the back of his head. “I don’t got clothes like yukata. But man…” He scrunched up
his face as he looked the artist up and down, taking in the deep blue yukata that fit his frame perfectly. “You look way too normal in that.”

Yusuke raised a brow. “People often say that to me.”

Akira agreed. The artist had the traditional Japanese charm to him that made yukata and kimono look at home on his androgynous form.

“About the exams…” Ryuji began awkwardly.

Morgana snickered. “I bet you got a big fat F on them.”

Ryuji recoiled defensively. “Shuddup! We- We don’t know that yet! I think I did real good this time!”

Wooden geta sandals clacked as two heavily made-up girls in flowery yukatas walked up to them in the busy station passage. “Are you going to the fireworks festival?” One of them asked cutely, fluttering her lashes. Of course, she wasn't speaking to all three of them.

Yusuke turned to them and nodded, unaware of their attempts to flirt with him. “That’s right.”

The one in a darker yukata smiled. “Us too! Wanna go together?”

Eyes wide, Ryuji leaned in closer to his leader. “Are we...getting hit on?!” He whispered excitedly.

“C’mon,” The girl in the pink yukata simpered flirtatiously at the oblivious artist. “Let’s go together.”

“Do you happen to be a model?” Her friend asked while looking him up and down admiringly. “You look great in that yukata.”

A grin slowly grew on Ryuji’s face. “Waitin’ around’s a pain,” He whispered to Akira. “So can we just go with these chicks?”

Akira gave him an unimpressed look. “No way.” He had a girlfriend and if he was correct, she was dressing up for him. He wasn’t missing that for anything.

“C’momnnn,” Ryuji egged, even going so far as to elbow him in the side. “We’ll both apologize to the others later!”

“That’s enough!”

They turned to watch Yusuke who frowned disapprovingly at the two girls. “You’re disgracing your yukata,” he scolded. ”You should be more aware of your womanhood.”

Sharing an equally weirded out look, they both walked away without another word, leaving Ryuji hanging with his mouth open in dismay. “How could you?!” he screeched.

“Why don’t you go after them then?”

Ann, Makoto, and Airi walked up to them, all dressed up in yukata and geta sandals. Ann had on a light blue robe with red and yellow flower petals, held with an orange red obi, while Makoto had on a peachy white with red cherry blossom and maple leaves, held with a yellow obi.

Airi walked up behind them with the clack of her wooden geta and Akira felt his heart skip a beat.
She wore her hair in a braided bun near the lower back of her head, leaving only her bangs to frame her face. The hair barrette he gifted her on her birthday was pinned at the top of it, complimenting her silver-purple yukata, held together with a dark indigo obi. The thin line of black eyeliner on her eyelids only enhanced her warm gaze.

She smiled up at him with none of the tension of the last week and his breath hitched, warmth blossoming in his chest at the sight. His lovely jasmine was back.

“So those are the kinds of girls you like, Ryuji.” Makoto remarked with a raised brow.

Ryuji sputtered. “Uh, well...that’s…” He looked away and rubbed the back of his head.

Ann frowned, a tinge of hurt and jealousy in her eyes, before looking away from him and moving her gaze to Yusuke. “You know,” She began, looking the artist up and down as he greeted them with a nod. “Yusuke’s such a pretty boy, but he is really missing out because of what he says.”

Airi smiled sheepishly, breaking her staring contest. “I don’t think he wants any action so it’s fine.”

Makoto nodded in agreement. “He’s more likable since he stays true to his ideals.” She side-eyed a certain ex-runner. “Definitely more than somebody I know.”

Morgana purred on Akira's shoulder. “I heard that Ryuji’s pretty much failed his exams.”

The ladies snapped their eyes at Ryuji and he sweated fearfully.

“Oh?” Makoto whispered dangerously. “Is that so?”

Airi sighed with a look of disappointment. “What a shame. After all we did to make sure he was prepared.” She shook her head. “Come here, Morgana.” She walked up to her boyfriend and “son,” rummaging through her small purse that only held her house keys, cell phone, a tiny umbrella, and his yukata. “Let’s dress you up.”

Morgana perked up excitedly and climbed onto Akira’s shoulder as a perch, raising his paws in the air. “I’m ready for my yukata!”

Stretching up on her toes, Airi pulled the light blue yukata with tiny fish decals on him before tying it with a yellow obi. Settling back on her heels, she beamed. “You look so handsome!”

He proudly puffed up his chest at the compliment and she couldn’t resist the urge to take out her phone to take a picture. She was spoiling him but she didn’t care. He was her son.

“Hey, it’s gonna get crowded if we don’t get going,” Ann reminded, taking a few steps toward the exit where most of the people were headed.

Yusuke nodded, making sure his foldable fan was secured in his obi. “Agreed.”

Ryuji ducked his head and grinned, not noticing they had already begun to leave. “But man, you three look amazin’ in yukata! Talk about Japanese beauty…” He looked up and gasped when he saw their retreating backs, and ran after them. “Hey!”

Walking together as a group, they made their way along with crowds and crowds of other festival goers towards the main street where the fireworks were to be held. Airi walked behind the main group and Akira fell back to walk beside her, letting the others chat without them. They traveled close enough that their hands occasionally brushed against each other.
Sneaking secret glances and smiles without their friends noticing, they played something similar to footsies where their fingers would dance on the other person’s hand, every so often letting them tangle with each other. She wanted to say something, maybe an apology for her cold behavior, but it wouldn’t be appropriate when everyone was looking forward to a fun night.

Though, she could show him she was sorry by being more affectionate. She just couldn’t resist him anymore.

Even exiting the station was a challenge as there were people everywhere in normal clothes and yukata, crowding the streets. Airi stuck closer to her friends, grasping the back of Akira’s white shirt jacket since he was taller and broader. “It’s so busy…”

Large booms echoed in the skies and Ann looked up, trying to spot where they were. “Oh, it started already…Ah!”

Over one of the nearby buildings, they could see red sparks light up the dark sky like a sea of fire, their ears popping from the loud bangs. “I see it!” She tried to jump up to get a better view, but it was impossible to move an inch in the sea of people.

Airi sighed, knowing they were stuck in place, and used the opportunity to take out her phone. She wanted a photo of everyone together, to keep this memory close. “I don’t think we can move for a while. Let’s take a photo first since we dressed up!”

Bunching up as one, they smiled at the camera and just as she pressed the shutter, she flinched as a drop of water hit her from above. “Huh..?”

Another drop hit Morgana on the head and he yelped, circling closer to Akira on his shoulder.

A few more droplets turned into several as it began to rain, and they all looked up at the dark sky with disappointed frowns. “Why now…” Makoto lamented, the water quickly soaking through their clothes.

With a start, the crowds started to shift to try to find some shelter. “Aw man, it’s raining!”

“Oh no, my yukata is getting wet!”

“Ugh, let’s go back into the station…”

“But I wanna watch the fireworks! I came dressed up and this is what I get?!?”

The thieves tried to walk back into the station but they were pushed back by a throng of pedestrians who were clamoring first. Airi yelped when thunder began to rumble overhead, lightning flashing in the sky soon after the last firework blew up in the air, and she rummaged through her bag for her umbrella.

The others went to duck underneath a 777 convenience store awning to escape the downpour and she made to follow them, her geta splashing against the already wet asphalts of the road.

Finally pulling her umbrella free from her little bag, she popped it open, sighing in relief when she was no longer rained upon. Another person joined her underneath and she looked up to see Akira smiling down at her, tiny droplets falling from his curls as he escaped the onslaught as well. “Hey…”

Airi smiled shyly, adjusting the umbrella for his height. “Hey…”
They stared at one another as if it was the first time they met all over again, three months ago. He stared at her with his mouth slightly open, but his gaze was more familiar and warm now. He had gone from being a stranger to being the one person she trusted the most, the one person she loved.  

How time flies…  

She bit back a smile. “What a terrible day to start the week, huh?” She joked, repeating her first ever words to him.  

His smile widened, remembering their first ever meeting, and quickly caught on. “Yeah, I didn’t bring an umbrella.”  

They laughed at their re-enactment, and this time they were even under an umbrella together as a couple.  

With a soft expression on his face, Akira slowly reached out with the pad of his thumb and wiped away a raindrop that was trailing down her cheek, making her redden at the gentle touch. His hand slid down from her face to her free hand and lifted it up, kissing the back of her palm while still maintaining eye contact with her.  

Airi smiled, cheeks blooming like fireworks, and she felt him smile against her hand as well.  

His lips moved and she could feel him mouth “I love you” against her skin, prompting her eyes to well up with un-shed tears. He would only ever do this with her. No one else would know his affections and love like she did. He was everyone’s, yes, but he was hers first and foremost.  

“I love you too…” She choked out, heart almost bursting with emotion.  

“WHAT?!”  

They looked up and saw Ryuji and Ann gawking at them while in the midst of wringing out their clothes, Yusuke, Makoto, and Morgana smiling indulgently next to them. Blushing, the couple joined them under the 777 awning and Airi put away her umbrella.  

“Tell Me. Everything!” Ann screamed excitedly in Airi’s face, letting the bottom of her yukata splat down against her legs again. “When did you get together?!”  

Ryuji pushed her out of the way. “They definitely just got together so that means I win the bet!”  

Ann glared at him and jabbed her finger in his chest. “No way! That looked way too natural!”  

“They’ve always looked that natural!” He argued, swatting her hand away. “Gimme my ¥3000!”  

Airi sighed and pushed them out into the open rain, both of them yelping when they were immediately drenched by the storm. “We got together last month.”  

Running back under the awning, they wrung their clothes out again. “So that means I win the bet!” Ann grinned, wringing the bottom of her yukata of excess water, not realizing she was showing off her long creamy legs for everyone to see. “Pay up, Ryuji!”  

He didn’t answer, too busy staring at the display with a hint of blood trailing down his nostril.  

Following where his eyes went, Ann scowled and grabbed him by the straps of his yellow tank top. “Come on!” She complained, cheeks red.  

Ryuji looked away. “Looks like you need some help…” He muttered suggestively.
Already tired, wet, and now angry over his shallowness, Ann shook him roughly. “Then why don’t you go buy me a towel already, huh?!”

Makoto sighed and walked up next to Airi, wiping some of the stray moisture in her hair with a handkerchief. “These two…”

Airi smiled sheepishly, brushing a hand over her yukata to make sure it wasn't ruined. “I wonder if they ever will get together.”

Yusuke raised a brow from behind her, back facing the store's windows. “You’re asking for an explosion the same magnitude of fireworks.”

Akira chuckled at his analogy. “That’s definitely accurate.”

“Attention, all festival goers. Due to the change in weather, the rest of the fireworks show will be canceled for this evening. We apologize for any inconveniences…”

They sighed with disappointment as the announcement continued over the public loudspeakers, but a black car caught his eye and Akira turned his head to look. Noticing his gaze, the rest of them watched as a familiar looking young woman with short light brown hair was escorted into an expensive black car by her chauffeurs before it drove away on the now empty streets.

With nothing left to do, they decided to walk inside the convenience store, huddling in one of the aisles. Ryuji eyed the crowded store with a grimace, couples and friends huddling together as their soaked clothes dripped onto the white tiles. “Ack...We’re just tryin’ to get outta the rain, but look how crowded it is…”

Ann sighed, shoulders drooping. “I guess everyone had the same idea…” She turned to Makoto who continued to gaze out the glass doors. “What’s up?”

Slowly shaking her head, Makoto turned back to the group. “Mm, I think I just saw someone I know…”

Airi tilted her head. “You mean the girl in that black car? I think I recognize her too, but I’m pretty sure I don’t know anyone rich like that…”

Ryuji pouted. “She had a nice ride…” With a grin, he turned to the robed feline who was now back in the dry warmth of Akira’s bag. “Time to show your skills, Mona! We need you as a car!”

Morgana leaned out on Akira’s shoulder and sputtered. “It’s not possible in the real world!”

Ann whimpered and they all turned to her. “My feet hurt...It’s cold…” She resisted the urge to cry, though her baby blues were starting to mist over. “The festival’s been canceled...This sucks…”

Smiling sympathetically, Airi brushed some of her blonde strands out of her face. “Cheer up, Ann. You can dry off at my place.”

“Yeah…” She replied sullenly, still upset.

Ryuji sighed and hung his arm over her, letting her leech off his body heat. “So much for that.” He muttered, a slight red hue in his cheeks when he felt her press closer. "We did so much and this is what we get? Laaame.” He turned to the other guys. “Aren’t heroes that lurk in the shadows boring?”

Akira shrugged. “That’s how it should be. If you wanna be a hero in the spotlight, just look at how
Akechi’s being treated on the internet.” And was it harsh. Everyone who sided with the student detective had fallen under the Phantom Thieves banner, and even threw insults at him.

Ryuji winced. “Yeah, those internet trolls are pretty harsh…That’s what he gets for tryin’ to slander our name.” He sighed. “But I wanna change the world with a loud bang, like a huge firework!” He slumped. “Then again, we aren’t gonna find someone bigger than Kaneshiro that easily.”

Yusuke glanced out the window, noting the downpour had lessened into a light drizzle. “The rain is letting up. Though it’s regrettable we could not enjoy the festivities, we can at least spend a dry night at our home.”

As a group, they left the convenience store and made their way to the train station again, their geta and sneakers splashing against the wet puddles that littered the streets.

Taking the train to Yongenjaya, Ryuji stopped and groaned in the middle of the alley. “I didn’t bring any clothes…”

Akira huffed. “I doubt you’d fit Yusuke’s stuff. I’ll let you borrow some of mine.”

Splitting off from the group, Akira went down another alley to Leblanc. Opening the door, he stopped when he noticed a certain prosecutor sat at the bar, a finished cup of coffee in front of her. “So you won’t tell me, no matter what?” Sae asked sharply. “You’re the only one alive on the team who has the information I need.”

Sojiro glared at her from behind the counter. “I have nothing more to say to you about that.” He said shortly.

Her brow ticked with irritation and she abruptly stood up. “I see. In that case, I have ways of making you talk.”

He furrowed his brow. “Huh? What’s that supposed to-”

“Thanks for the drink.” She turned around and walked out, giving the teenager a spare glance.

“H-Hey!” Sojiro yelled after her. “We’re not done here yet!”

Akira looked between the just closed door and the barista. “What’s wrong?” He asked concernedly. “Why is Niijima-san here?” Was she asking about his old job?

Sojiro sighed harshly. “It’s nothing.” He turned around and took off his apron. “It’s past closing time. Clean this place up.”

Akira hesitated. “Um…We were planning to have a sleepover at Airi’s…”

Sojiro looked up with a glare but sighed. “Fine. Clean up first, then you can go have fun.”

He nodded, putting his bag down on one of the bar chairs and putting on his green apron. Turning on the kitchen sink, he washed the loads of dishes and cups that were piled high while the news played on the TV. “...These are the details of the message that are posted on Medjed’s website. ‘To the Phantom Thieves causing an uproar in Japan: Do not speak of your false justice. We do not need the spread of such falsehood. We are the true executors of justice. However, we are magnanimous. We will give you an opportunity to repent your ways. If you agree to a change of heart, we will accept you as our own. If you reject our offer, the hammer of justice will find you. We are Medjed. We are unseen. We will eliminate evil.’ Akechi-san, why do you think this
Akira paused and finally looked up, mind already working out every piece of information that he just heard. They were being threatened by the international hacker group for promoting false justice. Why?

“I don’t know the details,” Akechi’s familiar voice rang out in the quiet cafe, Sojiro frowning deeply at the screen. “But there’s no doubt that they were provoked by the Phantom Thieves. Whether it’s a sense of rivalry or a simple attention grab given the recent trends, I cannot say...Regardless.” His voice sharpened. “It’s quite a nuisance.”

“A nuisance?"

“Both Medjed and the Phantom Thieves are nothing more than groups that uphold an egoistic justice.”

Sojiro sighed harshly. “What a stupid thing they’re getting riled up on…Phantom Thieves, huh? What in the world are they? You know about them?’”

Akira kept his back to him, still cleaning the remaining dishes. “Who?”

He felt a glare at his back. “I’m the one asking you. Don’t return a question with another question.” Sojiro snapped but sighed. “Well, it’s about time I go home. Make sure you lock the place up when you leave. Also, about the stuff in the fridge-" He paused. "...Well, I guess it’s fine. Just don’t use too much of it. Night.” Without another word, he turned and left the cafe, the bell jingling on the door.

“It’s possible that more people like these will continue to appear due to their influence.” Akechi continued harshly. “In that respect, the Phantom Thieves face a very serious crime.”

Turning off the faucet, Akira dried his hands and frowned. There it was. Their next target then.

Drying off the dishes, he packed his pajamas as well as a spare for Ryuji before making sure everything was fine inside the cafe. Picking up his bag, he locked the front door of the cafe and walked down the road to Airi’s place.

Ringing the doorbell, her serious face was the first thing to greet him, freshly washed from a shower. “Medjed.”

He nodded, stepping inside the entryway and closing the door behind him. “I just saw. We’ll have a meeting now.”

She nodded and walked back into the living room where everyone was seated with a cup of tea, sitting down in her black tank top and beige sweat shorts. Akira took a seat next to her and picked up his own tea. The TV played the announcement over and over again, as if the news couldn’t help but rerun the message.

“Medjed…” Yusuke murmured, holding his cup in his hands as he crossed his dark sweats covered legs. “That name seems to come from one of the obscure gods from the Egyptian Book of the Dead.”

Ann took out her phone and scrolled through the comments on the Phan-Site, already dry and dressed in a hot pink tank-top and black shorts, hair put up in a high ponytail. “Everyone’s going crazy over it…”
Makoto sighed, crossing her legs over her plain black leggings and blue sweater top. “For some reason they think we speak of false justice…”

Ryuji leaned forward in his seat, cargo pants still damp from the rain. “Why don’t we go after them as our next target?”

Airi blinked. “Them? That was fast…”

“I mean they’re like bad hackers or somethin’, right?” He grinned excitedly. “We could totally take them down!”

Makoto sipped her tea. “Technically, they’re crackers. Those who use the internet to illegally access and alter data. Medjed is an organized group of such people recognized by the larger international community.”

Akira frowned. “So they’re global.”

Morgana purred. “A world class target, huh?”

Ann gasped. “They’re bigger than even Kaneshiro!”

Ryuji grinned and bumped shoulders with her. “Right?! Then it’s settled. Our next target’s gonna be Medjed.” He took out his phone and opened the app. “I wonder if the Nav’ll get a hit if we put in Medjed…”

Airi sweatdropped and placed her cup down on the coffee table. “But that’s just their group name, and the Nav only works on individuals.”

Makoto nodded in agreement. “Exactly. It must be a pseudonym, and it doesn’t even imply how many people there are.”

The two blonds deflated. “Oh…” Ann pouted, finishing the rest of her tea.

“But,” Ryuji argued. “Wouldn’t we get at least one member’s info if we try and look for it though?”

“Even if we did, how would we discover their location?” Makoto shot back. “The only confirmed presence of Medjed has been online.”

Akira huffed and leaned back in his seat. “They could also be from a foreign country.”

Yusuke sighed. “This is a greater problem than simply finding their keywords.” He raised a brow at the ex-runner who slumped in his seat. “Unless you have any more ideas, Ryuji?”

“No…” Ryuji mumbled with a sigh. “But we can’t back down now! People are gettin’ all excited over it! Our reputation’s gonna plummet if we don’t face this shit.”

Airi pursed her lips. “True…If we don’t do anything, we’ll lose any support we got from Kaneshiro’s confession.”

Yusuke grimaced. “They would think us cowards…”

Makoto sighed. “Medjed has taunted us publicly, after all…Can we ask Mishima-kun about this? Technology is more his forte.”

Akira nodded and took out his phone, messaging their manager.
Airi tilted her head. “Maybe Niijima-san might know something? Even a little more than what we currently know would be helpful.”

Makoto furrowed her brow. “It’s highly unlikely but sure, I’ll ask tomorrow. I think she told me she was in the area earlier…”

Morgana waved his tail languidly. “If we can change Medjed’s heart, it’ll most definitely affect Mementos. Let’s try to gather intel on them, and then we’ll pool our information together. I hope we can figure out a good way to fight back!”

Several stomachs growled, interrupting any sort of conversation they could’ve had. Ann slumped and held her stomach. “We didn’t get to eat anything at the festival and I’m starving…”

Ryuji grimaced as his stomach rumbled emptily. “Same…”

Sharing a look, both Airi and Makoto stood up. “Leave that to us.” Airi smiled. “I still have plenty of fish left over from yesterday’s fishing trip and I already stocked up the fridge.”

Makoto inclined her head. “Then you may leave the side dish to me. I can at least do that much.” They both walked over to the dining room where they took ingredients out, already beginning to cook up a storm. After a moment, Yusuke joined them, and the three worked on the meal that would satisfy all of them.

Two pairs of eyes honed in on him now that half the team was across the house and Akira slowly leaned away into his seat on the couch. “...What?” He asked warily.

Ann and Ryuji scooted over on both his sides, and Morgana darted on top of the coffee table to avoid being squished between them. “So…” Ann began slyly. “Tell us.”

“Yeah.” Ryuji grinned suggestively. “Tell us allll about your relationship, man. We’re dying to know.”

Akira sweatdropped and sighed. “OK, OK. We got together June 27th at 4:35PM.”

Ann blinked. “Wow, you memorized the time too?” She grinned and elbowed him, ignoring his sharp exhale at the jab. “You’re so romantic! How did you confess? Or did she confess first?”

Akira looked away shyly and rubbed the back of his neck. “Uh...She wanted to thank me so she was going to kiss my cheek, but...I moved so she would kiss me on the lips. I was going to confess but she beat me to it, and then…” He shrugged. “We got together.” It was an oversimplification but he didn’t want to go into details. That would be between him and Airi only.

Ryuji let out a low whistle. “Daaaamn. You’re pretty smooth, bro. No wonder you weren’t interested in those girls earlier. That means more for me next time!”

The smile fell off Ann’s face and she turned away. “I’m going to go to the bathroom.” Getting up from her seat, she walked over to the first floor bathroom and closed the door behind her, the doorknob clicking shut louder than it should.

Not noticing her change in mood, Ryuji continued to badger his best friend. “So whaddya guys do together? Have you gone on a date yet? Have you guys…” He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively. “Done it?”

Akira sweatdropped at the interrogation. “We...do what we always do. Hang out and stuff. We went on one date so far…” He wanted to go on more, many more if he had any say, and done “it”?
Close.

He cast a worried glance toward the closed bathroom door though. Had Ann been jealous..?

Airi seared the fish in the pan while Makoto chopped up the vegetables on the counter that separated the kitchen from the dining room. She had left two whole fishes uncooked just for Morgana, which Yusuke was now slicing up into fine thin strips on the cutting board on the other side of the room. She liked cooking together like this, and though it was crowded since her kitchen wasn’t that big, it felt so homey and family-like that she didn’t mind.

Placing the last seared fish onto a plate, Airi sighed and wiped the sweat from her forehead. “All right, that’s all done. Makoto, are you finished with yours?”

Makoto nodded next to her at the counter, throwing chopped potatoes, leeks, spring onions, radishes, and chicken bones into a boiling pot of water on the stove. “Yes, this will make a nice and hearty stew which we all need after that rainstorm.” She placed the lid on top and turned the stove on high so it would boil faster.

“Um…” Makoto turned around and stood awkwardly. “I noticed over the past few days that it has been...tense, between you and Akira-kun. I’m sorry again if it was because of me.” She frowned apologetically, making sure to be quiet so the artist wouldn’t overhear them. “It was very tactless of me to ask a taken man on a pretend date, even if it was just to interrogate Eiko’s new boyfriend. She’s so stubborn that I need to take drastic measures, but my wanting to protect her had hurt you. I’m sorry, Airi.” She clasped her hands together and looked her in the eye. “I promise you, I have no feelings for Akira-kun except for friendship. I would never betray you like that.”

Airi quieted, her actions in front of the stove slowing to a stop. “...No, it’s OK.” She smiled a tad bitterly. “I was a little jealous, yeah, but I know I can trust you. It wasn’t just that though…” She bit her lip. “I came to realize that Akira does a lot of things that I can’t help him with, or even know about. He spends a lot of time without me helping others. I just thought I could give him some time to do these things, y’know.” She looked down as she slowly sprinkled parsley on the seafood. “It’s not you, I promise, and I already made peace with it.”

Makoto awkwardly nodded. “If you’re sure...I just want to be clear: I have no such feelings for him...or anyone, for that matter.”

Airi huffed a small laugh. “Are you sure? What about Akechi-kun?” She teased. "I hear you bumped into him at a University fair."

Makoto grimaced at the thought. “We would sooner kill one another with barbed compliments. No, I would rather my friends around me be happy. Just seeing how Eiko is with her boyfriend makes me sick for some reason, but seeing you and Akira together…” She smiled softly. “It’s like watching a fairytale come to life. The sort of romance every girl dreams of having. I’m glad you have that together.”

Airi smiled tenderly, cheeks reddening at the description. She was glad too.

The knife sang as Yusuke expertly sliced open the second fish, and with one stroke of the blade, removed its head and spine. His long fingers held the seafood steadily as he cleaved the soft meat before he delicately decorated the white plate with it, topping it with a small sprig of ginger. “Voila.” He smiled satisfactorily. “A feast for our feline friend.”

Airi huffed in amusement. “Nicely done, Yusuke.” Sticking her head out to the hallway, she called out. “Sorry for the wait. Dinner’s ready!”
Akira, Ryuji, Ann, and Morgana appeared in the doorway and inhaled the aromas. “Mmm...I’m starvin’!” Ryuji drooled at the variety of dishes laid out on the dinner table. “Let’s eat!”

Taking their seats, they dug into their meals. Grilled and pan seared fish, breaded chicken, seaweed, vegetable chicken soup, and a big helping of rice. “Sooo good!” Ann munched happily on her fish. “I hope there’s dessert, too! This almost makes up for getting rained on!”

Airi laughed, coughing up a bit of her soup in the process. “I thought you quit sweets! What happened to taking care of yourself?”

Ann pouted. “It’s OK once in a while...I’ll just work it off later!”

Makoto shook her head but smiled. “Yes, we did make sweets, but it’s for later during the movies.”

Akira hummed as he chewed his mushroom and garlic stuffed trout, noting that Airi had the same. He remembered from her birthday this was something she enjoyed, and it was nice to see she had remembered to treat him with it again.

Morgana drooled as he ate his sashimi slices. “Fiiiish~!”

Finishing their nice dinner after a terrible evening, Ryuji and Akira were made to wash the dishes while Airi went upstairs to grab blankets and pillows from the closet. Pushing the chaises out more, the ladies laid out the blankets on the floor and used one of the couches as back support. “Ryuji,” Airi called out down the hallway. “Did you bring the movies?”

“Yeah!” He yelled back from the kitchen. “Just go through my bag!”

Ann unzipped his bag that was laying in the corner with the rest of their things and took out several old ghibli DVDs, brightening up when she saw Howl’s Moving Castle. “This one was my favorite! Can we watch this first?!”

Yusuke furrowed his brow as he sat down on the fort. “Didn’t we say we would show cat buses?”

Morgana perked up next to them. “Yeah! I want to see!” He was actually still in his yukata, and he would occasionally purr and rub his chin against the soft fabric as if it was a dear treasure.

Makoto stood up. “I’ll get the sweets, Airi you set up the TV. We shouldn’t stay up too late, we still have school tomorrow.”

Ann plopped herself down and fidgeted excitedly. “Yeah yeah, doing this makes me feel like a kid again!” She giggled. “I haven’t had a sleepover in a long time…”

Finishing up the dishes, Ryuji and Akira took turns upstairs to shower, while Makoto brought in the cake pops they made earlier. Placing the tray on the coffee table, she sat down next to Ann while Airi turned on the TV and placed “My Neighbor Totoro” into the DVD player. The nostalgic sounds of wind chimes and flutes played as the main menu pulled up, showing Totoro, Satsuki, and Mei sitting on a tree branch over a river on a sunny day.

“Oh man!” Ryuji walked back in, freshly washed and wearing a spare of Akira’s clothes. “That brings back memories!” He threw himself down on the blanket fort next to Ann and grinned, taking one of the cake pops for himself. “Let’s play it already! Mona, you gotta pay attention, OK?!”

Morgana nodded and watched the screen attentively as the movie started.
They huddled together on the floor with the lights off, and watched the beginning where Satsuki and Mei moved to the countryside with their father, Yusuke quietly commenting on the beautiful brushstrokes of the backgrounds and of the greenery.

Airi jumped a bit when she felt someone come up behind her but quickly relaxed when she realized it was Akira, dressed in a dark long sleeved shirt and beige sweatpants after his shower. He sat down behind her and she scooted on the blankets so she would sit between his legs.

He wrapped his arms around her and enjoyed the movie with them, finally able to show affection with all their friends around. He nuzzled his cheek against the soft rose strands, letting his chin rest against her shoulder. His hands twitched minutely, as if to make sure she really was in his embrace.

Airi felt herself redden but smiled, resting her hands over his and leaning back against him.

When the grinning cat bus finally appeared on screen after Totoro called for it, Morgana gasped and perked up. “That’s me!” He sat up and watched with wide eyes, ears and tails twitching at the jazzy music as Satsuki and Mei were flown high in the night sky by the catbus. “Whoa...I wish I could fly…”

Ryuji scrunched up his face and looked down at him. “Honestly, I thought ya could. You can transform into a bus so why can’t you do this?”

Morgana pouted. “It’s hard! Buses are a normal part of human cognition, and so are cats. This shows cat buses, so a bus that has feline features are normalized, but a flying bus? That’s not a common conception.” He scratched his ear. “Plus, it’s hard to train myself to change forms. You should be grateful I can even be a bus.”

Smiling softly, Airi reached over and massaged his ears. “Thank you for being our little cat bus then.”

Ann grinned and hugged the feline. “Yeah, thanks Morgana! It makes running around in Mementos so much easier!”

Blushing at all the compliments, he purred ecstatically and they all enjoyed the rest of the movie.

Afterward, they switched the disc for Howl’s Moving Castle where Ann openly sniffled when Sophie destroyed the castle and tears actually began to fall when she and Howl embraced after she saved him.

Furrowing his brow, Ryuji slung an arm around her shoulders and pulled her close, letting her hide her face in his neck. Makoto and Airi shared a secret smile behind them while Akira sweatdropped at their matchmaking. Morgana looked up dejectedly and slunk away, settling beside Yusuke who gave him an idle pet.

They tried to watch Spirited Away next, but they were so tired from the ruined festival, the rainstorm, and then a full dinner, that Ann and Ryuji fell asleep before any of them, laying down together on the blanketed floor and softly snoring away.

Makoto stood up and curled up on one of the chaises, closing her eyes as she let the sounds of Haku comforting Chihiro lull her to sleep.

Yusuke took the other chaise, climbing over the two blonds, and continued to watch until he couldn’t fight the snare of his dreams and closed his eyes, lacing his hands on top of his stomach.

Airi leaned back against Akira, watching through half lidded eyes as Haku finally remembered
who he really was and told Chihiro he loved her while falling through the night sky. “They’re so cute…” She whispered quietly, conscious of the others sleeping just inches away.

Akira smiled and kissed the top of her head. “Aren’t we cute, too?”

She pouted. “You can’t turn into a dragon though…”

Morgana silently padded up to them and jumped into her arms, curling up into a ball as sleep finally took him as well. They continued to watch sleepily as Chihiro finally left the spirit realm, One Summer’s Day playing at the lowest volume from the TV.

“Remember when you played this for me on your cello?” Akira murmured. “It felt like it was so long ago, but it’s only been three months…”

Airi laughed quietly. “We’ve been through so much, time just flies.”

Pursing his lips, he fought with himself before gathering the courage. He had to know. “Can I ask why you’ve been so...weird lately?” He asked cautiously. "You’re back to normal now, but the last week…”

Biting her lip, Airi turned a bit so she could lay her ear against his chest, listening to his strong and steady heartbeat. “…I’m sorry.” She whispered. “I’m sorry I’ve been cold this past week. I thought it was just because I was uncomfortable letting you and Makoto do that pretend date, but...it was really part of a bigger problem I had.”

He furrowed his brow and wrapped his arms around her protectively. “Like what? Is it...with me?” He voiced self-consciously.

She sighed, conscious of the slumbering kitty in her arms. “…You’re not just mine. You’re our leader. You’re their confidant, you’re their hero. You make deals and befriend people who I don’t know, and I don’t know what you do to maintain these favors.” She ducked her head. “It sounds selfish, but there are parts of you that I will never know like they do, and...I didn’t know how to feel about that as your girlfriend. I just wanted to give you time without me...I take up too much of it anyway, so…”

Stunned at the unexpected divulgence, a frown slowly settled on his face. It was true. He had deals with people all over the city, and she had never met Hifumi, Igor, or the twins, and who knew how many others he would strike deals with. He had to conserve every day to keep these relationships, plan out who and when and where. They had been together for a month and yet had been on only one date, and even though they saw each other almost every day, they spent it with others in their company as well. They were never really alone. But…

His arms tightened around her and he rested his chin against the top of her head. “I’m sorry I can’t just be yours, but you’re the only one I love. There’s no one else for me.”

He felt her nod. “I know that now...I just felt guilty because we’re already together, and you could be spending time helping others. And…” She hunched her shoulders. “I...might’ve followed you and Makoto...that day.”

He stilled. “You did?”

Airi felt her face flush a deep red with embarrassment and guilt, to the point where the skin of her shoulder was cooler than her face. “Yeah...I just wanted to make sure you two wouldn’t do anything.” She winced. “It makes me sound like a stalker, and I realize I violated your trust and privacy. I said it was OK but I still went behind your back.” She bit her lip. “I’m sorry…”
He mulled it over in his head. It hurt to know she didn’t trust him enough to keep his hands to himself, but it just meant he had to prove that she was the only one he would ever love and desire. Honestly, if she had been in his spot, he probably would’ve spied on her too if only so the other party wouldn’t do anything untoward to her. If he had even let her go on a pretend date without him.

“Well...that makes up for when we stalked you three weeks ago when Hisoka was around.” He awkwardly joked. “I’m not gonna lie, it hurts to know you didn’t trust me not to cheat, but...Please.” He whispered, leaning his cheek against the top of her head. “I don’t care how many times I have to say it, I’m yours.” He voiced sincerely. “We made our wish to be together forever, remember?”

She nodded and closed her eyes. “I do. I trust you with everything...except maybe cleaning.”

He deadpanned but couldn’t resist the urge to smile. Reaching up with one hand, he tilted her chin up. He brushed his lips ever so carefully against hers, and closed his eyes when he felt her respond back. This. This was what he missed so dearly over the past week. The warmth of the person who loved him, who cared for him, who he cared and loved in return.

They had their rough spots, this latest one proving to him they weren’t perfect fantasy soulmates, but it only meant that they would work through it together because what he wanted was her happiness with him. The threats against them only grew larger, but with her, he knew that no matter what, they would win.

They were the last to fall asleep, sharing secret kisses and words of affection while the moon hung high in the sky.

I drew this one several months ago. I was tempted not to post it because wow it's so sloppy and terribly colored, background is trash, etc etc, but I know we all wanted one thing...Morgana in a yukata. He's definitely too tiny too but who cares because it's cute-
Updated art using P5R (11/11/19):
Congrats to me for going over 600k words LOLOL (no life)

Please comment about your likes/dislikes, thoughts on this chapter! I'm always happy to hear from you guys~
Chapter 161

Chapter Notes

I gave up on the anime LOL Thank you very much for 1134 kudos, 43.9k hits, and 88 bookmarks! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

---7/19, TUESDAY, EARLY MORNING, YONGENJAYA

Muffled giggling was the first thing that registered in his head as Akira slowly came back to consciousness. He scrunched up his face, wanting to curl up with the warmth next to him and go back to sleep.

“Ssh...I think he’s wakin’ up…”

“Ow!” Someone hissed in pain. “Ryuji! You stepped on my foot!”

“Sorry...Ow, hey! Why’d you elbow me?”

“Both of you, be quiet before you’re grounded!” Airi voiced crankily from his side, and he felt her burrow into his shirt.

“Sorry mom…” They both intoned sheepishly, their footsteps shuffling away.

Akira finally cracked his eyes opened and yawned, rolling over to cradle their host in his arms and bury his face in her hair. “What time is it..?”

“It’s almost 7AM.” Makoto’s voice carried from the kitchen. “Best wake up now so we won’t be late. We have school today.”

Footsteps padded down the stairs and Yusuke walked over to the living room, smoothing out his purple blue uniform top after recently finishing his shower. “I suggest going to freshen up now, before Aneki claims the bathroom.” He advised before going into the dining room.

Akira only sighed and buried his face into rose strands, inhaling the calming scent of peppermint. “Airi.” He whispered, voice muffled and eyes closed from the bright lights. “We have to wake up.”

He felt her shuffle in his arms, one hand clutching his shirt. “I really don’t want to…” She murmured sleepily. “You’re warm and comfy…” She nuzzled deeper in his chest, resting her head right above his heart.

“You wanna skip school and just cuddle the entire day?” He offered languidly, half joking.

“Mhm.” She answered into his nightshirt without hesitation. “We can fool around…”

Fool around? He felt his brows raise up. He liked the sound of that. Maybe he could continue where he left off a week ago and-

A foot kicked him in his back and he grunted, turning around to glare up at Ann. She smirked
teasingly at them. “C’mon lovebirds. We have school and they’re releasing the test results today!”

Snapping her eyes open, Airi rolled out of his arms and stumbled to her feet. “Test results!” She gasped. “I have to see how everyone did!” She looked down at her boyfriend who stayed on the blankets. “Akira, get up. You better have stayed in the top percentage!”

Akira grumbled and turned on his side. “I don’t wanna…Come back to my arms.”

Ann winked at her before walking to the kitchen. Airi rolled her eyes. Kneeling down, she blew hot air into his ear. “Akiraaaa…Don’t make me use drastic measures.”

He shuddered at the sensation but remain staunch in his position, even curling his legs up.

Pouting, she held up her hand and brought it down with a resounding smack.

Eyes snapping open, Akira yelped and turned to stare at her with wide eyes, his rear stinging from the hit. “Did you just slap my ass?!”

She raised a brow. “I did say I would be taking drastic measures…” She smiled vixen-like. “Should I do it again where all our friends can hear?”

Heating up from two parts embarrassment and one part arousal, he shot up from the floor and dashed down the hall upstairs, prompting her to pout. Now she would be the last to get ready. He did have a nice butt though.

After a rambunctious breakfast together where Ann and Ryuji got into an argument about western versus eastern breakfast foods and needing the two presidents to break them up, they all finally left the house. Airi looked back mournfully at the mess that was the living room and dining room before closing the front door, but knowing that it was because so many of her friends, her family, had had fun…it made up for it.

Transferring at Shibuya, they waved goodbye to Yusuke as he continued on his way to Kosei while the rest of them exited the station at Aoyama Itchome. Walking down the small street to their school, they stopped behind the crowd of students near the entrance that surrounded the scoreboard.

“Oh, our grades are out…How’d you do?”

“Wow, I did better than the midterms!”

“You went to the study group, right? I wish I could get in the top ten…People look at smart people differently.”

Airi jumped up a little to try to glimpse above their heads but to no avail.

Grimacing nervously, Ryuji parted the gathering with his broad shoulders and forceful attitude, creating a path for the other thieves to walk up to the board. Noticing who was pushing through, most of the students fled for their classes and only a handful, notably their classmates of 2-D, stayed.

Scanning the hundreds of names in the second year slots, Ann perked up and pumped a fist. “I’m still above average! I think I actually went up five spots!” She grinned happily. “All my hard work has paid off!”

Makoto smiled from beside her, scanning the third years for hers. “Congratulations, Ann. I’m glad
we were able to help you.” Her eyes found her name at the top of the board and her content expression was traded for one of disappointment and shame. “Third place…”

Airi placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. “It’s OK, Mako. We have the exams after summer break to make up for it.”

Ryuji sighed in relief when he found his right in the middle of the listed scores. “Average...Ma’ll wanna celebrate that.”

Akira smiled at him before turning his gaze back to the scoreboard, eyes widening with surprise when he realized where his name was. “I’m in first place..?”

Airi snapped her gaze to the top where at the very top of the list was “Kurusu Akira,” and right underneath was her name “Kimisawa Airi” at second place. “You beat me..?” She breathed in shock.

He gave her a worried glance, unsure of how she would react, but she only smiled brightly at him. “Congratulations, Akira! All those study sessions really paid off, huh?”

Morgana snuck his head through the small opening in the zipper. “You’re not mad? You were in first place for a long time, right?”

Turning away from the scoreboard, Airi smiled. “I’m not mad. It’s weird to be bumped down but it’s only one spot.” She smirked. “I’ll beat you next time.”

Akira felt his lips quirk. “I’d like to see you try.” He goaded playfully, now way more confident in his own intelligence than at the start of the school year.

Glancing between them, Ann lightly pushed their shoulders toward the stairs, Ryuji and Makoto following after. “No flirting in school.” She teased. “C’mon or we’ll be late.”

Before classes started, Mishima had come up to their desks and said he’d talk to them later during lunch break about their current situation. Akira nodded just as Kawakami came in and began her lesson.

Takeda had stared at them for a moment from his seat behind him and Airi slightly furrowed her brow, pasting on a smile and asking him if something was wrong. After a moment, he shook his head and went back to his books.

Airi turned around to face the front of the room as well. Did he know something? Just as she turned back, she caught Otani, Fujiwara, and even Ando glancing at her with wide eyes before they shot their gaze to the front. Even Matsumoto had given her a heartbroken pout before reluctantly paying attention to the teacher.

She gave them an odd look. Was there something on her face?

Once the lunch bell rang, some of their classmates, mostly the male ones, had left the room, but almost every girl had stayed.

Akira finally looked up as he stood from his chair and paused, noticing the many eyes that were directed to his right. He was about to open his mouth to ask but Mishima signalled to him, gesturing outside in the hallway.
Closing his mouth with a frown, he reluctantly made to leave the room but not before he subtly placed a hand on Airi’s back for just a second, quick enough that no one noticed. Ann followed after, giving the cellist a curious look but knew to trust her to keep things under control as class president.

Once the doors slid close, Airi looked around at all the eyes on her and she tilted her head. “Can I...help you guys? Is something wrong?” She smiled, a hint of nervousness coming through. Why were they all staring at her? “Were the exams hard?”

Chair skidding back as she stood up, Matsumoto towered over her with a tearful frown. “Senpai…” She whimpered. “Tell me it’s not true.”

Airi blinked. “H-Huh..?” What wasn’t true?

“Senpai…” Otani spoke up from the front of the room, turning around in her seat to face her. “Is it really true? You have a boyfriend?”

Her eyes widened. What? How did they find out? “Uh...You...You all know?” Airi asked, stupefied. She thought Akira and her had been inconspicuous about it, but given how he had a tendency to catch her off-guard with quick pecks in the mornings and afternoons, someone must’ve seen them and the word spread. Then again, why would Matsumoto be crying about this? She had been the one to say she “shipped” them.

Ando nodded, frowning angrily. “Yeah, we all saw the photo. When were you gonna mention you were dating THE Akechi Goro?”

… What.

Following Mishima down a floor to stand in a corner across from the entrance to the cafeteria, Ryuji and Ann joined them. “I got your texts last night about Medjed, just when I was about to text you.” The Phanboy informed them quietly. “The news about them and the Phantom Thieves has caused quite the commotion.”

Akira frowned. “What can you tell us?”

Mishima crossed his arms. “They started out as hackers of justice, but now they only look out for their own self-interests.” He sighed. “That’s all I know though. There really isn’t much information about them. Nobody’s actually sure who Medjed is, but,” He smiled brightly. “If this works out well, it’ll be the Phantom Thieves’ world debut, no?”

Ryuji rubbed his head in defeat. “Dude...I thought you’d know more…”

Ann sighed and idly played with a ponytail. “I guess only a hacker could find out more about them. What could we do then?”

The Phanboy smiled. “Don’t worry, I’ll be rooting for the Phantom Thieves, and I’ll get the forum mobilized as well. If anyone on there knows anything, I’ll let you guys know.” He turned to the transfer student and gave him a sympathetic pat on the shoulder. “Hey, uh...Sorry for assuming your relationship. I thought Senpai was with you but I guess not.” Not noticing Akira’s confused look, he continued. “Anyway, I’m gonna head to lunch before break ends. Seeya!” With a wave, he headed into the cafeteria, leaving the trio to turn to each other.

Akira furrowed his brow. What did he mean by that? He thought Airi was with him, but the way he
worded made it seem like that wasn’t his conclusion anymore. What was going on?

Morgana snuck his head out from the bag and pouted. “Well, that was fruitless…”

Ryuji sighed and took out his phone, opening the chat. “Wonder if anyone else got any info.”

Akira and Ann took out theirs as well, ignoring the murmurs from their fellow students that passed them by.

"Did you hear?..."

"Yeah, with that student detective guy..."

"Huh. Wasn’t expecting that, but then again, perfect people stick with perfect people, right?"

R: Mishima was pretty useless. You guys get anything?
Ma: I tried asking my sister earlier on the phone, but it seemed as though she didn’t know much about them.
Ma: She doesn’t specialize in cyber crime, after all.
An: I tried looking into them too earlier, but I didn’t come up with anything.
An: There are really just no leads.
Y: Hm, our opponent is truly elusive.

Akira sighed and put his phone away. “Nothing…”

Ann frowned. “Airi didn’t reply? Did the class grill her too hard?”

Ryuji looked up from his phone and blinked. “What happened?”

Akira shrugged. “No idea. All the girls in our class were just staring at her. Was this just a girl thing?”

Ann tapped her chin and entered a new search on her phone. “I wonder…”

Footsteps approached them and Makoto appeared from the staircase. “Um…” She began hesitantly, gaze darting up to her leader before glancing away. “I’m sorry.”

Akira gave her a blank look. “Huh?”

Makoto nervously tucked some stray hair behind an ear. “Do you remember when Eiko went to the bathroom at the Diner? Well…” She would’ve continued but Ann’s gasp interrupted her and they all turned to look at her as she stared down at her phone with her mouth agape. “What?! Akechi-kun’s girlfriend is Airi?!"

Akira felt like his heart stopped. What?

He moved to read the article from behind her shoulder, but she continued to read it aloud herself. “‘Could this be Akechi-kun’s girlfriend? A photo had been submitted to one of his fan forums yesterday, showing our handsome detective with a girl of similar age, sitting together in a private booth at a restaurant in Shibuya. With her rose colored hair and kind face, it was a no brainer as to why he would be dating her.’” She read, flabbergasted. “‘How does he find time to juggle school, work, TV appearances, and now a romantic partner? We’re all so jealous of her...’”

Akira felt like throwing up, an uncomfortable tightening sensation in his chest. Airi hadn’t mentioned this at all.
Ryuji took a step back in shock. “Huh?! With Akechi?! But…” He turned his eyes to his leader. “But I thought you guys were dating! You said so yesterday!”

Akira kept quiet. They were...weren’t they?

Makoto winced and fiddled with her hands in front of her skirt. “Eiko bragged to me today that she took the picture and forgot to post it until yesterday. The whole school has been gossiping about it. I’m really sorry she’s causing so much trouble.” She pursed her lips. "I wasn't aware Airi and Akechi-kun knew each other, though."

Akira only closed his eyes, beginning to really dislike the upperclassman. If Eiko had taken the photo, then it meant it was when Airi had spied on them. Did she use the detective as a decoy? Or...had she bonded with him in a way that...

His jaw tightened and he shook his head. No. She wouldn’t. He had faith in her.

Morgana frowned from his spot on his shoulder. “I don’t recall smelling him on her. Since Akira here is constantly around her and they do…” His nose twitched. “Couple things, there’s always a hint of his scent on her.”

Akira relaxed minutely. That proved it then. She was only being friendly with their frenemy, but she only loved him. The gossip was just gossip, but he should clear this up with her. After last night, he knew they had to work on their communication together.

They separated back to their classrooms, and Ann and Akira found their class president swarmed by the other girls in their class. Her eyes were swirly as question after question was shot at her, and she held her hands up weakly. “Uh...Akechi-kun and I are just friends.” She stated sheepishly. “I promise, I’m not dating him.”

Matsumoto looked up hopefully. “Then..! Is the ship sailing?”

Airi blinked. “What? Uh...I don’t know?” She answered but voiced it as a question as she didn’t know what she meant.

Looking at each other, Fujiwara slumped in relief. “So Akechi-kun is still available...We should reply to the forum and get this straight.”

Ando rolled her eyes and headed back to her desk. “Well that was a waste of my time…”

The bell chimed, signalling the end of lunch break, and the group of gossip hungry girls reluctantly went back to their desks. Airi sighed in relief and quickly munched her bento. That took up so much of her energy.

Ann and Akira entered the room proper and went back to their desks next to her. “Was that about you and Akechi-kun?” Ann asked in a hush.

Airi groaned. “Yeah...I don’t know why they think we’re dating.”

With a raised brow, Akira took out his phone and pulled out the exact photo Eiko had taken and posted on the forums, now plastered all over the internet. “Maybe because of this.”

Her eyes widened, taking in the photo of her and Akechi sitting in the booth together at the Diner. “What..?” When had that happened? Was it when they were too engrossed in their talk about food?

Akira frowned and put his phone away. “Why didn’t you ever mention you were alone with him?”
He asked, a hint of hurt bleeding into his question.

Sensing this might be a sensitive conversation, Ann turned back in her seat to face the front, trying to give them a little privacy.

Airi ducked her head guiltily. “I’m sorry. I honestly forgot...I was kind of...” She looked away. “Distracted.” Thinking about how she couldn’t have her boyfriend to herself and how much of his time she was taking up. She knew better now, but at the time, it had been the main thing that plagued her mind.

Akira sighed before pursing his lips. “You...You’re not cheating on me, right?” He weakly joked. “Sensei joked it was with Yusuke, but to find out it’s Akechi? I’m hurt, babe.”

Her head shot up and Airi quickly shook her head in a panic. “No!” She whispered, making sure no one else could hear. “Of course not! I would never do that to you.” She smiled shyly. “There’s no one else for me but you.”

Gazing at her for several moments, Akira finally relaxed and nodded. He knew but he always had to make sure. Giving her a tender smile, the one she knew that he reserved only for her, he mouthed “I love you” just as Kawakami entered the front of the room.

Heart fluttering, Airi hid her red cheeks with her hands and focused on the teacher, though she smiled blissfully to herself. No matter how many times he said it to her, mouthed it to her, and showed it to her, she couldn’t help her heart skipping a beat. It was just such a wonderful feeling to know someone loved her and she loved him.

“I know summer vacation is due to begin next week, but I have an unfortunate announcement to make.” Kawakami announced at the front of the class. “We will be holding an emergency assembly on Monday the 25th. Please come to school that day.”

The entire class erupted in loud groans of protest. She sighed. “I know, I know, but settle down!” She clapped her hands, gaining everyone’s attention again. “We’ve had many strange incidents: the psychotic breakdowns, students being dragged into crime rings...”

At that, she glanced toward the thieves in the room before focusing back in the center. “Hence, Principal Kobayakawa has instructed all teachers to caution the student body. It’s inconvenient for us teachers too,” She laughed sheepishly. “I had a whole trip planned that day...Anyway, please do come. Your safety is our utmost priority.” She continued the announcement but three phones buzzed in the room and their attention was diverted.

R: How’re we gonna find Medjed?
An: I’m not sure. No matter how hard I look online, all I find are just unreliable rumors.
Y: They have carried out corporate terrorism, yet they still manage to elude arrest somehow.
Ai: I’m not sure how we can do this then. I could ask Nishiki but cyber crime isn’t how yakuza operate.
R: Did we bite off more than we can chew?
Ak: Not sure. We don’t know anything except their group name.
Ma: Yeah...We don’t even know whether it’s a single individual or a conglomerate of people.
Ma: And even if we do manage to get a lead, what do we do from there?
Ai: We also don’t know if they’re in Japan.

Ai: Their message was in English.
Ai: If they’re out of the country, we would have to travel to wherever their Palace is, and
that’s only if it’s one person.
Ai: I don’t know what we can do...
R: Shit...this stuff’s really not going so good...
R: Argh, can’t believes this happens right after our celebration.
An: Well...Back to business for us.

Morgana yawned, showing his tiny pink tongue as school dispersed for the day. Akira held out his bag for him and he jumped in, snuggling into the fabric. “If we can’t identify who Medjed is, there’s nothing we can do.” He pouted. “Let’s wait till they make a move…”

Ann turned around and grinned halfheartedly. “We’ll just have to see what we can do against them…”

Airi tilted her head at her forced expression. “Is something wrong, Ann?”

Her face fell, replaced with a somber expression. “…Shiho is moving in two days.” She whispered. “She told me...She told me she wanted to come here tomorrow, once school lets out…”

Airi gasped. “What? But…” But this was the place of her nightmares. This was where she was mistreated, abused...raped. This was where she almost died. Did she want to face her fears head on?

Akira frowned worriedly. “Is she ready for that?”

Ann sighed and hunched her shoulders. “I don’t know...but I know this: She’s strong.” She murmured. “I admire her so much. Just wanting to come back here? Even after everything that happened? She has a will of steel.”

Airi smiled softly. It seemed ever since she finally allowed herself to grieve and move on, Shiho had been healing her soul as well. “Then...should I be there tomorrow?”

Ann nodded. “You, Akira...even Ryuji. You all helped her too.” She clenched her skirt. “Please help her one last time...before she moves away.”

Akira nodded. “Got it. Tomorrow then.” His phone rang out then, and he took it out, reading the messages from Mishima asking him to meet him at Shibuya. “I’ve gotta get going then.” Since no one else was in the classroom but them, he quickly leaned in and pecked Airi on the lips, giving her a sly smirk before leaving the class.

Airi squeaked and held a hand to her lips. “Every time…” She pouted at herself.

Ann burst out laughing, holding her stomach at the display. “You two are so cute! I’m so glad I won the bet!”

I finished this a while ago but I can finally show it before posting more fanart showcases: Airi’s all
out attack end pose! Of course, it's very musically inspired~

Chapter End Notes

Thoughts, likes, dislikes about the chapter? Let me know!
Meeting Mishima in front of the rental store, they walked down the less busier streets, even winding down a few alleys as they talked about what they could do with Medjed. The Phanboy had some talent in coding, but that wasn’t hacking and he wouldn’t be able to help them with it.

Akira sighed. Their opponents seemed to get bigger and bigger…

"So," Mishima fidgeted with his phone. "Airi really isn’t dating Akechi, right?"

Akira resisted the urge to scowl. "No." He gritted out. "She’s dating me."

"R-Right." Mishima laughed sheepishly and rubbed the back of his head. "I knew that weird rumor online had to have been false. Honestly, I’d rather you than him. With how adamant he is about putting the Phantom Thieves in jail, there was no way he would treat her well." He grasped his chin thoughtfully. "Though Akechi is usually really active online, so why didn’t he dispute this? It must’ve made it back to him by now…"

Akira frowned darkly. Was the student detective trying to make a move on his girlfriend in such a underhanded way? Just because she had had a coffee with him didn’t mean she liked him. He was already careful about being near their frenemy, but now he had to be extra cautious.

Turning into a deserted alley, they paused when they saw Akiyama on the ground, having been beaten by two delinquents. The middle school bully was kneeling on the asphalt, a dark purple bruise on his cheek and blood trickling from his split lip. He held a hand to his stomach, most likely having been the spot his tormentors had punched.

Mishima gaped. "A-Akiyama-kun?!"

With a wince, Akiyama looked up and despaired. "...Mishima."

One of the delinquents in a white designer tracksuit turned to them with a sneer. "Ahhh, there’s our guy. Look, Akiyama-kun says he’s not gonna be able to pay up this month.” He informed with a gravelly voice, already destroyed from constant smoking. "How ‘bout you spot him? That’s what friends’re for, right?"

Mishima looked up at them in surprise. “F-Friends?"

Akira observed tensely, a hand straying into his pocket. He didn’t carry a knife on him in the real world, but keys were more than enough if the situation escalated. But...His gaze slid to his companion. What would he do?

The thug raised a brow. "Huh..? You guys ain’t friends?"
The other thug scowled down at the former bully. “Don’t try n’ mess with us, Akiyama...Is this loser s’posed to be the “friend” who was gonna help you?!”

Akiyama stayed silent, but clenched his eyes, knowing that whatever the Phanboy would say could decide his fate right here and now.

The track suit delinquent scowled at the two Shujin students. “If you don’t got anything to do with this little bitch Akiyama, I suggest you get outta here.” He turned to his fellow tormentor. “C’mon, Tohru. Looks like we’re just gonna have to go have a nice chat with that girlfriend of his.”

At that, Akiyama gasped and bowed his head. “P-Please, no! I’m begging you..!”

The thug turned to him with a sneer. “Sorry, but you broke our promise. Now she’s gonna be the one to pay us back...” A perverted grin spread on his face. “If you catch my drift. This is just what you get for tryin’ to screw us over.”

Tohru laughed. “You’re so cruel, Yuuta-kun!”

Akira narrowed his eyes. Threatening his girlfriend who’s innocent? That’s low even for scum.

Mishima observed this with a conflicted expression. “Akiyama-kun...” Shifting a bit, he angled his mouth in the phantom thieves leader’s direction. “Akira.” He whispered, brows furrowed determinedly. “Run.”

Akira stared at him from the corner of his eye. “I’m not leaving you.”

Mishima blinked. “A-Are you sure? I don’t want to get you involved...” He smiled slightly. “Though having you here is definitely reassuring. I think I have an idea. It’s risky...but it might just work.” He hardened his frown. “If anything happens to me, take care of Akiyama-kun, Akira.”

Akira stared at him before smirking. What a hero.

Turning back to the delinquents who were about to raise their fists toward their defeated victim, Mishima yelled out. “H-H-Hey, you guysh!” He winced. “C-Crap, I bit my tongue...”

Yuuta turned to him with a sneer. “Huh? You’re still here..?”

Akiyama looked up at his former victim and grimaced. “Run away, you idiot...” He whispered weakly, but another kick from Tohru had him choking on his own saliva and he keeled over.

“U-U-Ummm...” Mishima took a deep breath, heart pounding apprehensively in his chest. “You’d better lay off Akiyama-kun!” He held out his phone, showing the screen had on a video stamp. “I’ve been taking a video of this whole conversation!”

They paused. “...Huh?”

“If you do anything to Akiyama-kun or his girlfriend,” Mishima glared. “I’ll bring it straight to the police! Oh, and don’t get any ideas about breaking my phone. It backs up to the cloud automatically.”

Nervous about the threat, Tohru stepped up behind his fellow delinquent. “H-Hey, what should we do?”

Yuuta tch’ed. “We’ll be fine. The police ain’t gonna do shit ‘cause of a stupid little video.” He cracked his knuckles intimidatingly. “Why don’t you run along home to your anime girls? We
don’t got time to deal with losers like you.”

Seeing how his front didn’t work, Mishima grimaced and took a step back. “Urgh…”

Akira glanced over at him. “Believe in yourself.” He murmured. “You’re one of us. Take their Hearts.”

Wide panicked eyes darted over to him before they relaxed at his confidence. “Akira...You’re right.”

Yuuta gave them a weird look. “Huh?”

Taking a deep breath, Mishima squared his shoulders. “Look, I know you guys are supposed to be tough and all, but are you sure it’s really worth getting arrested again over something like this? I mean, this video is definitely enough to get you guys busted given your previous criminal records.”

Yuuta took a step back in shock. “How’d you know about that??”

Mishima glared at them. “It doesn’t matter how. Just leave Akiyama-kun alone and we’ll be even! Then if you keep your word, I’ll delete the video. The backup too.”

Yuuta glared at him. “You’ll delete them now.” He commanded through gritted teeth.

The Phanboy stood his ground valiantly. “N-No!”

Face twisting up in anger and frustration, the two delinquents turned around and left, leaving the two Shujin students alone with their former victim. Now that they were gone, Akiyama finally had the strength and courage to stand up, though he stumbled and his back hit the metal shutters behind him.

Mishima left out a shaky sigh of relief and his entire body relaxed from its previously tense state. “M-Man, I thought I was gonna have a heart attack…” He whimpered. “My whole act would’ve broken down if they didn’t back off when they did.” He laughed weakly. “I really suck, huh?”

Akira shook his head and snorted. “You were really cool though, standing up to them with evidence and everything.”

Mishima rubbed the back of his head and laughed bashfully. “The truth is, I’ve dealt with enough bullying to know guys like that have probably been arrested at least once. Oh, and…” He smiled shyly. “Thanks for sticking by me, Akira. We can’t let injustice like that go unchecked. I think I really get it now…” He looked down at his hands. “This feeling is what made me want to help you guys to begin with. That’s why I started the Phan-site...To make sure that nobody has to go through stuff like this again!”

Akira smiled and nodded. “Glad you finally got it through your head, Yuuki.”

Beaming, the Phanboy turned to his former bully. “Akiyama-kun, are you OK?” He asked concernedly. “It looks like they really laid it on you…”

Akiyama looked up, still nursing his bruised jaw. “Mishima…” He whispered. “Why’d you help me? You didn’t need to get involved…”

Mishima looked down. “S-Sorry…” He stammered dejectedly. “It looked like you were really in trouble though...so I stepped up.”
Akiyama looked down at his scuffed jeans and sneakers with an unknown emotion. “...Is that so.”

“Anyway,” Mishima looked up. “Can you walk? Do you need us to call an ambulance?”

He slowly shook his head, still not looking at his former victim. “I’m fine. Just go.”

Pursing his lips, Mishima turned around. “...All right.” He whispered quietly. “Let’s go, Akira.”

Looking at the beaten bully once more, Akira nodded and followed him out of the alley and back out into the more populated streets of Shibuya. After that encounter, neither of them were really in the mood to discuss business, and so they went their separate ways.

Getting back to the cafe once the sun was traded for the night sky, Sojiro looked up from behind the counter. “Summer break’s soon, right? Must be nice, being a student.”

Akira shrugged. “I guess...I got first place in my finals.”

His brows rose up closer to his receding hairline. “Is that so? Well, you’re pretty smart then. Keep this up.”

He nodded but felt his phone buzz in his pocket.

Y: So, I looked into Medjed.
An: Did you find anything?
Y: As you know, Medjed is a god that appears in the Egyptian Book of the Dead.
An: Huh?
Y: Its name apparently means “the smiter.”
Ai: Oh, he means the mythology.
Y: It seems nobody is actually sure that Medjed is a real name.
Y: On top of that, almost everything else about him is unknown.
Y: Even his form is unattainable.
Y: An unseen god that flies through the sky and shoots from his eyes...
Y: He truly is an elusive being.
R: Dude.
Y: Everything about his existence is shrouded in mystery.
R: Stop.
Y: Fundamentally speaking, ancient Egyptian art always depicted gods drawn in a side profile.
Y: However, Medjed is facing straight ahead in all depictions of him.
Y: Taking all of this into account, he seems to be quite the alien being.

Akira sweatdropped. That...really had nothing to do with their opponent, but he had to commend him on his research.

Ak: Well done.
An: You definitely did your research...
R: Hey, there’s nothing to be impressed about.
Y: I hope that information was at least somewhat useful
Ai: That was honestly very fascinating to read.
Y: Should I look into it more?
Ma: That was enough, thank you.

Morgana sighed from his shoulder. “So we still don’t have any tangible clues…”

The TV was on, so Akira walked up to listen to the news which showed a neon green screen of the Medjed logo. “Medjed, a group of crackers, recently issued an ultimatum to the Phantom Thieves. In the past few years, the damage they have caused has grown to several hundred billion yen. Even this year, there have been several cyber attacks attributed to Medjed.”

Akira furrowed his brow. “Why do they do this..?” He checked his phone again, seeing Ohya had actually written an article about the Phantom Thieves. People on the forum were posting about it, citing how they were excited for the showdown. Guess they really couldn’t back out of it now…

”Hey.” Morgana whispered. “Why don’t we go see that fortune teller again? We need a refund for that broken stone!”

Akira scowled. Right. She had scammed him out of ¥100,000.

Changing out of his school uniform and into his casual clothes, he left Yongenjaya and traveled to Shinjuku. The loud music and crowds of party goers pierced his eardrums the instant he left the station, and he walked down the streets. He passed by the advertisers with ease, now more in-tuned with the general atmosphere and how easily they fish in innocent people, and turned the corner.

Chihaya was sat at her usual fortune telling table in front of a gated door. She already had a customer sat across from her, a young woman with several bruises peeking out from her long sleeved shirt and skirt.

Akira stopped a few feet away furrowed his brow. An abuse victim?

Unaware of the teenager standing just a few steps away, Chihaya frowned worriedly. “…How are you healing?”

The young woman looked down at her fragile hands. “I-I’m fine.” She murmured, skittish about being in such a loud and busy environment. “It’s my fault anyway. Yuya said so...He says he doesn’t want to hit me, but I just make him so mad…”

Chihaya shook her head. “I suggest you break up with him.” She suggested carefully. “Things are only going to get worse at this rate.”

The woman panicked. “B-But I’m the only person that cares about him! If I leave, how will he survive..? Please,” She clasped her hands in front of her in a plea. “Is there any other way?”

The fortune teller looked down at the table and sighed. “…Let us ask the tarot. O divine power, shed light upon her fate…” With a deft hand, she shuffled her signature deck and placed the cards on the table in a rectangular formation.

Flipping them one by one, Akira narrowed his eyes when he noticed reality seemed to be...blurred, for a split second. “Yes, I’ve seen everything.” Chihaya voiced quietly, a troubled frown occupying her face. “Hm...I can sense a dark presence within your boyfriend. His heart seems to be possessed by a demon. This demon may hide itself away at times, but when it strikes, it will bring with it great misery.”

The woman trembled fearfully. “Wh-What kind of misery..?”
Chihaya looked up at her with a disquiet frown. “You will be hospitalized for severe injuries suffered in a domestic abuse incident, and he will be arrested.”

She gasped. “What? Hospitalized?! A-Arrested?!?” She teared up. “I knew I shouldn’t have let Yuya throw my Holy Stone away!” She looked down in self-loathing. “He said I shouldn’t be wasting my money on some dumb rock...that I should be giving it to him instead. This is my punishment for letting him do that, right? Please,” She looked up desperately. “Let me buy another one from you!”

Chihaya widened her eyes. “Wh-What..? You want another?”

She nodded. “My next stone will need to be even bigger. I’m a little low on cash at the moment…” She bit her lip. “But you said I can pay in up to thirty six installments, right?”

Conflicted, Chihaya shook her head. “Um, truthfully,” She began hesitantly. “I feel breaking up with him would be the best-”

“I can’t abandon Yuya!” The woman cried out.

Unable to keep silent, Morgana leaned over Akira’s shoulder. “She really thinks her boyfriend will stop being abusive as long as she has a Holy Stone?” He whispered incredulously. “There’s no way that could be true...right?”

Akira pursed his lips. “That thing was fake, remember? She’s deluding herself…”

The feline deflated. “Right. It would make our jobs way easier if you could really change someone’s heart with a Holy Stone. It’s clear that Chihaya has some fortune telling skills, but that stone isn’t going to do anything…”

An idea coming to him, Akira slid his gaze to him. “But we can.”

Morgana perked up. “You’re right! We can change this Yuya guy’s heart! This is a perfect chance for the Phantom Thieves to save her!”

Furrowing her brow as her ears caught the distinctive sound of a cat, Chihaya turned her gaze from her client to them. “Meowing..?” Her eyes caught his figure and she pouted indignantly. “H-Hey! Were you eavesdropping on us? That’s an invasion of privacy, you know!”

Akira walked closer and inclined his head. “There’s another solution.”

Chihaya huffed up. “Some fates in this world are simply inescapable.” She turned back to her client and deflated. “The demon within your boyfriend’s heart…” She sighed. “Cannot be exorcised by normal human methodologies. Fate…” Her eyes darkened. “Is absolute. A-Although,” She looked away guiltily. “I guess you might be able to control the demon’s temper if you bought another Holy Stone…”

Akira pursed his lips at her shady behavior, but the young woman spoke up. “U-Um,” She began hesitantly, looking up at him with wary yet hopeful eyes. “I’m not entirely sure who you are, but do you know of any other way I can approach this problem..?”

Akira rested his hands in his pockets, one hand fingering his phone. “What’s your boyfriend’s name?” He asked politely.

She blinked. “Mine? Oh...You’re talking about Yuya, aren’t you? It’s Uchimura Yuya...Um,” She bit her lip nervously. “Why do you want to know? What are you planning on doing?”
Puffing up, Chihaya pouted at him. “Y-Yes! What do you expect to change with that meager information..?”

He smirked, a hint of Joker peeking through. “I’m going to change fate.”

Offended, she gasped. “What..? You honestly believe you can do something?!?”

Staring at him for a moment, the young woman looked down at her bandaged hands and slowly nodded. “I...I trust you.”

Chihaya turned to her in shock. “Excuse me?!”

“It feels like he’s telling the truth. Besides, Yuya has all my money. He’s going to pay me back someday...But for now,” She took a deep breath. “I would rather put my trust in this one boy than in thirty six payments for a Holy Stone.” Without waiting for another word, she got up from the tiny stool, bowed her head, and left toward the train station with a slight limp in her steps.

Flabbergasted, Chihaya turned to the teenager with puffed up cheeks and stood up from her chair. “You!” She accused. “What do you think you’re doing?! If you keep making false accusations like that, the divine power will rain punishment down upon you!”

Akira stared at her with amusement. He already had otherworldly powers on his side. He was sure whatever “divine power” she spoke about wouldn’t be worse than seeing Kamoshida in a speedo.

Chihaya blinked and furrowed her brow at his disposition. “You look so pleased with yourself…” Her eyes glowed for a moment before she nodded. “Hm, I’ve seen everything. A vision of you groveling on the ground. Fate cannot be changed…” She frowned. “And I will prove that fact to you! If that woman stays with her abusive boyfriend, she will meet a horrible injury within a year’s time. Now, if you honestly believe you can change her destiny, go ahead and try! But once you realize the error in your thinking, come back and let a true expert handle things. I will save her…” She clenched her hands. “With a Holy Stone..!”

Akira sweatdropped at her tenacity. If she really thought it would be better to let an object, even if it was magical, prevent her fate instead of taking things into her own hands...he’d just have to prove action was better than inaction. “All right, I’ll prove it to you. I’ll be back soon.”

She fumed at his casual statement. “How arrogant...Please go! I’m very busy…”

Shrugging, he turned around and walked away down the street. Morgana rested on his shoulder. “Tomorrow? Do we have enough time to take his Heart?” He asked.

Akira glanced over at him. “We have you, Yusuke, and Airi in the neighborhood. That’s a full team already. We can get this done before dinner.”

Before that though, he was going to drop by Crossroads to pay Ohya a visit. She had mentioned she would be here tonight if he wanted to share any news of the Phantom Thieves. He would have to be careful about what he could reveal to her. Perhaps just stuff people at their school already knew..?  

Ohya hummed thoughtfully, nursing a gin and tonic as they were sat at the bar in Crossroads. “I see...A bulletin board, huh..?”

Lala was there in her usual purple kimono and wig, occasionally mixing a drink for the reporter.
She had given him a coffee, which he gave a grateful nod for.

“So the calling card they used for Kamoshida was different…” Ohya smirked. “Now that’s a scoop. That kind of information usually doesn’t see the light of day. You have any photos or videos of it?”

Akira pursed his lips. “Mishima might…”

She grinned approvingly. “Nice! You have some great connections.” Taking a sip of her drink, she chuckled. “But seriously, the “Phantom Thieves of Hearts”? They sound like kids on a playground, not valiant fighters for society…I mean,” She shrugged. “They act all high and mighty, but I’m not sure they’re really worth very much in the end.”

Ohya groaned and leaned her upper body against the counter. “Why? It’s the truth.”

The bartender tsk’ed. “There you go again…” She shook her head, her purple bouffant fluttering from the movement. “You used to be so positive.”

Ohya scoffed and put her empty glass down, Lala immediately refilling it for her. “What, you don’t think they’re really virtuous, do you?” She asked pessimistically. “In my line of work, there’s no clearer sign of deception than goodwill. You know, like the shady actions of a charitable organization, or the actual criteria of a peace prize. Same goes for the Phantom Thieves.” She shrugged. “You just have to learn to take some things with a grain of salt.”

Ohya scowled. “What about their justice?”

She groaned and leaned her upper body against the counter. “Why? It’s the truth.”

The bartender tsk’ed. “There you go again…” She shook her head, her purple bouffant fluttering from the movement. “You used to be so positive.”

Ohya blinked. She did? Had something happened to make her so disillusioned?

Ohya snapped. “Oh, shut it!” She turned away with a stormy expression. “…Gimme some sushi.”

Ohya sighed and rested her chin against her palm. “Geez, you’re such a child sometimes…”

Ohya turned to the teenager and jerked her head toward the rows and rows of drinks behind the bar. “Hey, you wanna drink? You can have some of mine if you want.”
Tensing, Lala slowly turned around to face them with a stone cold expression. “..AHEM.”

Leaning away from her, Ohya raised her brows. “Whoa...That’s some scowl you’ve got.” She sighed and turned back to the teenager. “Anyway, why are you coming to a bar if you can’t even drink alcohol?”

Akira shrugged. “I like the atmosphere.” That wasn’t a lie. The bar, while seedy and in the heart of the biggest prostitution district in Japan, was quiet and warm. Though it held a different atmosphere to Leblanc, it was inviting in a way that made him relax, even though it catered to adults.

Lala smiled and fluttered her heavily made up lashes, sliding the newly poured whiskey on the rocks down the bar counter. “Mm, that makes sense. Feel free to visit whenever you want, honey. Bring Kimisawa-chan and that cute blond with you, too. It’s been a while since I’ve seen them.”

Ohya snickered. “Wow, that’s seriously the only reason? You’re so uptight. Must be from having such a mannerly girlfriend.” She picked up her new drink and took a sip. “Well, at least now I know you’re gonna be pretty useful. I’m not all that interested in the Phantom Thieves myself, but keep the info coming, all right?”

Akira nodded and finished the rest of his coffee.

Ohya downed the rest of her whiskey and glared at the bartender. “Where’s my next drink?! Do they call you Escargot ‘cause you move as slow as a snail?”

Lala gave her a flat look. “We’re all out of booze...A certain sloshed reporter drank it all.”

Grinning, Ohya clasped her hands in front of her coyly. “Can’t you just go buy more? I’ll wait for you...forever~. Just kidding!” She laughed boisterously, causing Akira to sweatdrop at her drunken behavior. He should probably get going…

Though he told the whole team via chat that there was an immediate Mementos request to fulfill, he only took the other Yongenjaya residents with him since they were already together. Makoto and Ryuji both mentioned they were in the middle of dinner, while Ann was at Shiho’s home on the other side of the city, helping her pack.

Once they took care of the abusive boyfriend, Akira and Morgana had joined the artistic siblings in their home for dinner. Airi had served up a nice helping of honey brushed chicken and pea shoot leaves, saying she wanted to try out more exotic recipes than just fish and beef.

While Morgana was slightly disappointed there was no fish for once, he still happily wolfed down his plate before taking a nap inside his bag. Yusuke volunteered to clean up the dishes, leaving Airi and Akira to sit back and relax in the living room. “Hey...” Airi spoke up as she leaned against his shoulder. “Do you think that woman will be all right?” She asked quietly. “Now that her boyfriend has changed…”

Akira wrapped an arm around her shoulder and leaned back in his seat on the couch, stomach content from his dinner. “I’d say so, we took his Heart and everything. Why do you ask?”

She bit her lip and moved her head down enough that she could listen to his strong and steady heartbeat. It always calmed and reassured her. “I just wonder...We have a relationship where I know you would never purposely hurt me, but...He really liked hurting her. The way he bragged...”
about how she was his to beat was sickening.” She sighed and closed her eyes. “Maybe I feel guilty, knowing I have such a wonderful boyfriend while other people out there are unhappy, or even being abused by their partners.”

Akira felt his lips quirk. “Well…we’re doing what we can to help them.” He reached over with his other hand to grasp hers. “I don’t think those are or ever were happy relationships, and,” He grimaced. “We can’t save everyone, but we’ll do what we can.”

Airi nodded minutely. “Yeah…it’d be naive to think we could fix everything in this world…You know, this request also made me appreciate just how much of an amazing person you are.” She looked up at him with a soft smile, cheeks dashed with a hint of red. “I know you would never hurt me like that.”

He looked down at her with wide eyes before gathering her in his arms. “Of course…” He whispered coarsely. “I would never think about hurting you…” Just even trying to imagine it made him sick to his stomach. Any time she was attacked by a Shadow while they were in the Metaverse, he would feel inexplicable anger running hot in his veins before he reined himself in. Having her hurt at all, no matter by who or what…he’d never forgive them, and he’d bring the wrath of hell itself to take vengeance.

Airi closed her eyes and leaned closer to him, taking in the scent of coffee that always surrounded him. He was so safe and secure and loving. What had she done to deserve him? Her first ever relationship and she lucked out to the stars. Even though he was so busy, he always made time for her, especially now after their little falling out. He hadn’t needed to stay for dinner (though she could boast she had a wider variety to offer than Leblanc), and he hadn’t needed to stay now, just to indulge her.

Tilting her head up, she brushed her lips against his, heart racing when she felt him lean in with a content hum. The ever present feeling of the rim of his glasses pressing into her cheeks registered in her head, but at this point, it was almost synonymous with kissing him. She loved him so much, she hoped she was able to support him as much as he supported her…

”Fascinating…”

Breaking apart, they turned to see Yusuke standing just a few feet away with his hands up like a frame, observing them through his angled thumbs and pointer fingers. “A love as true as yours should be embossed on a medium of art.” He murmured appreciatively. “Perhaps...no, I am too biased.”

Akira blinked. “Uh...what?”

Yusuke shook his head. “I was going to request you allow me to paint you both as a path to true art, but I fear my own biases will taint the final piece. I would not be able to capture your relationship with the justice it deserves. Therefore, I must find another couple, one that I don’t know and therefore cannot be biased toward.” He shook his head. “Another time, perhaps at Inokashira Park. Akira, I would like to request your presence then.”

Airi smiled with amusement. “Are you sure you’re not cheating on me with Yusuke, A- ki- ra?” She teased. “Going on a date at a park?” Though he was her one and only, she couldn’t help but admire just how handsome her boys were. Ryuji was a rough and rugged type of handsome, while Yusuke had a graceful androgynous mystique going on. Akira himself was both, his dark smirks contrasting with his soft smiles. Couple that with adorable Morgana who was always at his side, he had attractiveness in spades.
She couldn’t help but envision the three of them shirtless together, or more...

Akira deadpanned and lightly pushed her away, ignoring her perverted giggles. “Haven’t I proved enough that you’re the only one for me?” He raised a brow. “Maybe I should show you again…”

Her muffled laughter ceased and she looked at him with wide eyes, cheeks as red as fire. Show her again? Her body was clearly receptive toward it, given how hot she felt.

With a pout, she shooed him off the couch and to the entryway, Yusuke watching with a raised brow before he retreated upstairs. “It’s getting late, you should go home.”

Akira snickered at her reaction, though he began putting his shoes back on. “So no fooling around?” He asked cheekily. “How about making out?”

She rolled her eyes and crossed her arms. “Hm, how about no? You’ll need to work for it.”

Tapping the front of his shoe against the ground, he turned to her and smirked, gray eyes hooding seductively behind his glasses. “Oh? And how should I do that, mistress?” He all but purred, making her freeze in place like a deer in headlights.

An aroused deer in headlights. “Uh…” She tried to speak but he took a step closer, the small difference in height from the entryway and the floorboards making them match eye to eye.

She was about to move away but one hand slammed next to her, trapping her between him and the wall. She eeped and covered her flaming cheeks. A kabelon?!

Smirking at her flustered reaction, Akira leaned in closer to the point where their breaths mingled. “Well?” He whispered. “What is it you want, Ai- ri?”

Her wide eyes stared at him before darting down to his lips. “I…” She swallowed instinctively, becoming lightheaded at his close proximity and just him. “I want you…”

His pupils dilated at her invitation and he closed the distance between them, moving his lips against hers. She let her hands fall to grasp his black shirt, whimpering as his tongue wormed its way inside her mouth. He was being so dominating that she couldn’t help but willingly submit...

Feeling her press herself against him, he reluctantly moved back, lips quirking when he noticed she tried to follow him. “You’ll have to work for it.” He repeated her earlier words and with a satisfied smirk, he left her with her mouth hanging open as he exited the house.

Walking down the back streets to Leblanc, he lifted a hand to his lips and grinned to himself. Her reactions were like a soothing balm to his ego. It was satisfying to know he could render her speechless with just a heated kiss, though he had to adjust his jeans. They couldn’t fool around that much.

Getting back to the cafe, he hummed to himself as he got ready for bed, Morgana already asleep next to his pillow. Akechi would never be able to steal her away. Akechi didn’t know her like he did. Akechi didn’t know her body like he did. Akechi didn’t have her heart like he did.

Plopping down on his lumpy mattress, Akira closed his eyes in content. Life was great…

Or not.
He snapped his eyes open when he felt the mattress under him turn into a hard plank of wood, water routinely dripping somewhere nearby.

Blue light glowed near the top of the bed and with a reluctant groan, he stood up from his pathetic excuse of a cot and walked up to the bars, the chains around his wrists and ankles jangling noisily as he did so.

Caroline turned to him with a frown. “It seems you’ve got your share of problems, Inmate.”

Justine flipped the papers on her clipboard to his left. “To think you would relax under such circumstances. Either you’re quite bold…” Her one eye slid up to him. “Or quite foolish.”

Akira pursed his lips. So what if he wanted to have some fun. Was it a crime?

She stared at him for a moment, as if she wanted to ask him something, before turning back to attention.

Igor chuckled ominously at his seat in the middle of the prison, tapping his heel against the blue velvet carpet underneath his desk. “One with an “unseen” form, hm? It seems you’ve been targeted by troublesome company.”

Akira frowned. “You mean Medjed?” Or his other “unseen” enemy...

Igor chuckled, his ever present grin widening under his long nose. “I’ve been enjoying this endless dispute over “justice.” However, it will soon come to an end- and through the appearance of an unexpected force, of all things. She has already changed your fate, and now this…” He chuckled. “Engaging with formidable enemies is also part of your rehabilitation. I ask that you overcome this. After all, you must hone your powers...and become a magnificent thief…”

Akira narrowed his eyes. But for what? Why does this being have such a vested interest in him? The twins had already shown that though they were rough with him, their number one concern was helping him. Igor had never explained why he had given him this power, or why he wanted him to right this world. Not that he wouldn’t, but still...

Wait. Didn’t he mention “she”?

Akira was about to open his mouth to ask but a shrill ring pierced his ears and he fell back, falling through the dark abyss…

The warden watched the trickster disappear back into the real world. “…Will she answer the call?”

He chuckled to himself, too quiet for the twins to hear. “The results would be very interesting to witness…”

Thank you so much to Nigel for this amazing artwork of Airi with Akira's glasses! The art style and coloring makes it look as if Soejima-sensei drew it himself haha!
Chapter End Notes

Mishima rank 8
Ohya rank 2

Kakeden - When a man/dominant puts their hand against the wall next to the woman/submissive's head to be closer and more intimate. "Kabe" means wall and "don" is the sound effect of a person hitting a surface
---7/20, WEDNESDAY, EARLY MORNING, SUBWAYS

Airi groaned quietly as she fanned herself with a foldable paper fan. It was extremely humid today, and her polo was already sticking uncomfortably against her back.

Akira glanced down at her. He himself wasn’t quite as susceptible to the hot climate, but he could understand why she was so sweaty. Only the trains themselves were air conditioned, meaning the stations were ice cold in the winter time and disgustingly hot in the summers.

An idea came to him and he held a hand to his temple, settling Jack Frost in the forefront of his soul. Last time, she had stuck close to Yusuke claiming that he was cool to the touch, and given that this Persona was ice-based…

Moving closer, he wrapped an arm around her. “Does this help?”

Gasping when his hand touched her bare arm, Airi leaned in and sighed appreciatively. He was nice and chill like sticking her head in the refrigerator. “Yes... Did you change your Persona?”

Akira quirked his lips as she snuggled up to his side. “Yeah. Jack Frost is your favorite, huh.” The little snowman giggled in the back of his head. Since they were a part of him, all his Personas showed a sort of fondness when it came to his significant other, but the little snowman most of all since he knew a caricature of him was sat next to her bed.

Even Morgana snuck out more to lean against his neck, closing his eyes in content as if he was the oasis in a bone dry desert. Yusuke watched this with an amused smile. “Thank you for taking on the burden. It’s uncomfortable for myself to be the air conditioner.”

Akira sweatdropped. “No problem...” He jumped when he felt hands crawl up inside his polo shirt, dainty nails lightly scratching his skin as they did so. “A-Airi!” He hissed quietly, red overtaking his cheeks. “Not in public!” The way her nails tickled him reminded him too much of their... “fun” nights, and he didn’t need his pants tightening, especially in a crowded train station.

“But you’re so nice and cold...” She moaned as her hands fondled his cool abdomen and back, idly noting his muscles flexing underneath her palms. She snuggled up against his neck, sighing contentedly at the chilly temperature even as she felt his pulse skip.

“Ah, it’s really summer now.”

They turned around at the familiar voice to see Akechi walk up to them with a pleasant smile, a bead of sweat running down from his shaggy hairstyle. “I get sweaty just walking a little bit.” He looked down at Airi who subtly took her hands back. He seemed to not care that Akira tugged her closer and gave him a frown full of suspicion. “Hello Kimisawa-san. Had you tried any of the restaurants I recommended on my blog?”

Airi blinked. “Uh... No, not yet. I did try out one of the recipes you mentioned, though. The honey brushed chicken one?”

Akechi perked up. “Oh, that’s nice to hear! I hope it ended up well for you. Unfortunately for
myself, I haven’t found the time to check out any new restaurants lately. Medjed pouncing on the Phantom Thieves has kept me quite busy.” His smile slowly fell into a more neutral expression. “Interesting things keep happening this year. Their influence knows no bounds...I underestimated it, honestly. I wonder what the public thinks of this. Are they entertained? Or perhaps inconvenienced?”

Yusuke frowned and turned away, not deigning to give an answer.

Akira pursed his lips. “Probably entertained.” He responded shortly. He was still wary of their frenemy, especially after yesterday’s rumor. “I thought you would know since you’re always online.”

Akechi looked down. “Entertained, huh…” He whispered, bittersweet. “A luxury for the uninvolved. I know they mean no ill intent, but it’s hard to correlate that when they disregard us who are stuck right in the middle. I haven’t had much time to check my phone lately due to interviews. Even my attendance has been poor. Oh,” He checked his watch and grimaced. “I don’t have time for a conversation. I’ll see you around, Kurusu-kun, Kitagawa-kun, Kimisawa-san.” He waved and headed out of the Ginza Line, disappearing in the morning crowd.

Akira blinked at his departure. So he actually wasn’t aware of his “taken” status that his fans had gossiped about.

The train arrived a moment later and they squeezed themselves into the packed cart, sighing in relief at the blast of cool air even as they were squashed like sardines. Akira and Airi got off a few stops later, waving bye to Yusuke as he stayed on the commute, and they walked to school with other students journeying the same way.

Leaving the train, hot air immediately greeted them along with the bright sun that shone down like a heat lamp. Airi couldn’t help but grimace when she was once again forced to endure the humidity.

Unfortunately for her, she couldn’t just latch onto her boyfriend here. Another reason for keeping their relationship secret was because it was frowned upon by school administrations. Romantic relations technically weren’t allowed, though they couldn’t enforce it off school grounds, and so they couldn’t just show they were together with so many of their fellow students around.

“There hasn’t been any news on the Phantom Thieves vs. Medjed showdown…” A person in front of them remarked. “Which of them will come out on top? They’re both just criminals pretending to be heroes.”

His friend scrunched up his face. “If you ask me, Medjed causes way more trouble. They attack every company they set their sights on. I hear they’ve been targeting banks lately, too…”

“I see…”

Airi blanched. So that notice she received two weeks ago was real. Her bank had been hacked and her account information might have been one of them. ‘Fuck.’

Morgana tilted his head from the small opening in the bag. “What’s wrong, mom?”

Quickly hiding her ire, she smiled and shook her head. She should make sure of this first before she worried anyone else with it. “This heat is just driving me crazy. I hope it won’t be too bad this summer…”

Akira snorted quietly. “You’d hate my hometown then. This is the usual temperature during spring
and fall.”

Airi grimaced. “Don’t take this personally, but I already dislike it then.”

Akira grinned at her reaction. “Nah, I agree.” He held no love for his hometown.

“Well,” The guy in front of them continued. “I just hope something happens soon. But you gotta tell me- who do you think will win?”

His friend shrugged, just as they arrived at the school building.

The thieves shared a look. Seemed like a lot of people were invested in their next fight…

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Airi handed over his bento and Akira took it with a grateful smile. He honestly wouldn’t be eating so healthy if she hadn’t been feeding him every day. His diet still consisted a lot of curry, cup noodles, and coffee, but she made sure to jam pack his lunch with real nutrients.

Morgana purred, catching his attention. “Your phone was buzzing a lot earlier.”

He blinked and took it out, furrowing his brow when he saw he had multiple messages from an unknown sender.

???: Nice to meet you.
???: I am the one they call Alibaba.
???: I want to ask you something.
???: You’re a phantom thief, aren’t you?
???: You and your girlfriend.
???: Can you really steal hearts?

Their eyes widened at the blunt texts. “Who is this?” Morgana whispered hurriedly. “Why does he know that you’re a phantom thief? And mom, too?”

Airi looked over, overhearing the last part. “What?” She furrowed her brow and scooted her seat closer to read the messages as well.

???: There is someone whose heart I would like you to steal.
???: But I’m not asking for charity. Let’s make a deal.
???: You wish to know about Medjed, correct?
???: I can give you information about them if the change of heart is successful.
???: If you so desire, I can take care of them as well.
???: Do you believe in my skills?
???: I can track down their accounts, just as I have with yours.
???: I’ll even secure your girlfriend’s bank information.
???: But this is all I can prove at the moment.
???: I’ve prepared the necessary tool on my end.
???: Look forward to it.

Akira furrowed his brow at the messages. “What does he mean, ‘secure your bank information’?”

Airi bit her lip. How did this stranger know? “...I wasn’t going to mention it until I straightened it out with my bank,” She began slowly and carefully. “But that day when I bought our yukata online,
I got a notice my bank might’ve been hacked,” She sighed. “Now we know it might be Medjed. Which means my information might be out there, too.” It wasn’t too big of a deal since she was a minor, but it would mean her name, her home address, her social security, all of that might be out there on the internet for whoever to see.

Akira gave her a flat look. “Can you stop keeping such important stuff from me? That’s really serious.”

She laughed sheepishly. “Sorry, it’s a bad habit since I’m not used to sharing the burden.”

He bumped shoulders with her. “You’re supposed to be able to rely on me.” He frowned. “And I rely on you to watch my back. Let’s see what this Alibaba can do then.” He turned back to his phone and tried to send a message, but all he got was a notice saying there was no recipient to send it to.

Morgana frowned as he read the screen. “I don’t know what this is all about, but we should probably let everyone know about this…”

Akira leaned back in his seat and furrowed his brow pensively. “But how did he know we were phantom thieves?” He murmured. "Did he go through our messages as well?”

Airi grasped her arm. “But then...Going by that logic, doesn’t that mean he went through thousands of phones before he found yours? He knew that you specifically are a phantom thief, and me by extension somehow since he mentioned 'girlfriend.’”

She sighed as she glanced at the clock on the wall, the hands signifying they only had a few more minutes of break before the bell rang. “C’mon, let’s eat...We still have to support Shiho when she comes later. We can talk about this after with everyone else.”

Once school let out, Ann, Ryuji, and Akira went down to the school entrance to wait. Ryuji had been told yesterday night and he joined them with a somber frown, mimicking the other two who stood silently.

Airi had went around the building making sure the closest staircase would be empty and they would be left alone without any judging gazes. Her phone buzzed in her skirt pocket and she took it out.

Go: I was not aware we were in a relationship.
Go: Would you like flowers and sweets? Perhaps a date at a pancake place?

Airi scowled at the screen but another text arrived before she could even begin formulating a reply.

Go: I am only joking, of course.
Go: I saw the post online just a few minutes ago. If you are unaware, someone took a photo of us while we were at the Diner and assumed our relationship.
Go: I must deeply apologize to you if I have caused you any grief. It was not my intention.

Taking a deep breath, she slowly sighed. How could she stay angry when he was already apologizing?

Ai: Well, there are rumors about me dating you all throughout my school.
Ai: I already confirmed it with the gossip mongers that it’s not true, so hopefully they’ll lay off.
Ai: I’m sorry if this causes you any trouble as well.
Go: Thank you. I mean no offense when I say this but I am not interested in you romantically, though I don’t deny that I find you intriguing.
Go: You and Kurusu-kun.
Go: Oh, my interview is beginning soon so I have to cut this short. I look forward to speaking more with you.
Ai: Don’t overwork yourself.
Go: Thank you for being concerned about me.

Airi reread the messages and bit her lip. He honestly did seem like a nice guy, and no matter what, she wouldn’t wish him harm. However, she could still be annoyed with him “flirting” with her at a time like this. She and Akira had only just gotten over a hurdle, they didn’t need any more people trying to butt into their relationship. Not Makoto, not Akechi, not-

“Oh, Kimisawa-chan!”

Her. Airi slowly turned around to see Eiko walk up to her, chewing gum loudly in the meanwhile. “How was your date with Akechi-kun?” The senior grinned. “I saw, you know. You two looked sooo into your conversation.”

Airi only stared at her with a blank smile. So it was her fault. Well then. “I’m sorry to disappoint you Takao-senpai, but I’m not dating Akechi-kun.”

Eiko frowned. “Really? That’s a bummer. I would’ve thought someone like you would be dating someone like him.”

Airi tried not to frown. What did that mean?

“Anyway, I know you’re the class prez for 2-D where Kurusu-kun’s in, right?” Eiko smirked. “You know he and Mako-chan are dating? Now that’s something I never expected! Mako’s so like, uptight and stuff, so I didn’t think she would go for a bad boy.”

Airi tried to keep a friendly smile on her face, she really did try, but hearing how her boyfriend looked good with their friend hurt. It hurt to hear, but what was even stronger than the pain was the indignancy. Maybe she was biased, but every single person around them had assumed she and Akira were together. It was apparently obvious to everyone but them, and now that they were finally able to reveal that they really were together, here was one person who unknowingly objected to it.

“Is that so.” Airi finally answered after a long and tense pause, her smile now as cold as marble. “I’ll be sure to ask when I see them later. Why don’t you go home, Takao-senpai? School is over and there are no club meetings.”

Eiko frowned at her reaction. “What’s up with the frigid air? Are you like, jealous or something?” She crossed her arms. “I know you’re the perfect princess here, but don’t think your act’s gonna fly with me. I’m not gonna kiss your feet like everyone else in this school.” She sneered. “You think you’re so much better, trying to seem like a helpful friend to everyone. Well I’m not buying it!”

Airi stared at her with wide eyes, taken aback by what she was saying. “Wha..? Perfect? I never claimed to be perfect.” She argued quietly, her brow furrowing at the many accusations. “I’m not better than anyone in this school. If I see someone who needs help, or if they ask me for help, then
I would try to help. That doesn’t mean I’m perfect in any way.”

The third year’s expression darkened. “There you go, trying to seem all modest and crap.” She took a step forward, seeing eye to eye with her junior. “I’m gonna tell you right now: you’re everything I hate.” With a hmph, she walked past her, purposely bumping her shoulder, and left down the stairs.

Airi was frozen in her spot, eyes wide and unblinking. What had she done to deserve that..? Takao-senpai didn’t even know her except her name. She hated her because she was “perfect”?

Rubbing her temples, Airi let out a long sigh and continued to make sure this area of the school would be empty for later. There was no point right now in wondering why Takao-senpai hated her. Shiho was more important.

Walking back to the entrance of the school building, she saw she was the last to arrive. Ann, Ryuji, and Akira were already there, waiting on the steps. Airi walked up next to Akira and lightly took hold of his hand, feeling his fingers curl around hers.

Airi looked down at her with a smile but paused when he noticed her unsure expression. “Everything OK?”

Biting her lip, Airi nodded. “Yeah…” She knew in her heart that Akira was hers and she was his, but it bothered her to hear Takao-senpai thinking otherwise, even though she was ignorant of the true situation. “I love you.”

He blinked questioningly. “And I love you.” He responded without thought.

Airi truly smiled at that, and turned back to the school gates.

When Shiho had arrived, driven here by her parents, they looked at her in shock as she was wearing her Shujin academy uniform, complete with black shorts underneath her plaid skirt as well as her black knee brace. She gave them a minuscule smile that was dwarfed by the void of trepidation shown in her dark eyes.

Ryuji and Akira gave her understanding nods and held out their hands to her, helping her up the steps into the school as well as up the staircases. Shiho winced when she had to put extra weight on her just healed leg, but made it up to the rooftop with only a fine sheen of sweat. Ann stayed behind her, ready to catch her in case she fell backward.

Airi closed the door behind them with a nervous frown. She glanced out toward the very same spot where she had failed her, but took a deep breath. The sun shined warmly down at them, orange rays casting their shadows. It was cooler now that it began to set, but the air stayed humid much to their displeasure.

Ann took out a handkerchief and gently wiped the sweat off of her best friend’s face, frowning worryingly. “You OK, Shiho?” She asked quietly.

Panting, the ex-volleyball player nodded. “Sakamoto-kun, Kurusu-kun...I’m pretty heavy, huh? Thanks for the help.”

The two male thieves gave her small smiles and refuted her claim with a shake of their heads.

Ann grinned slightly. “Aren’t they super reliable?”
Shiho giggled slightly. “Mhm, just like you were telling me.” She turned to the cellist and softened. “Hello Airi-senpai.”

Airi smiled gently at her. “Hi Shiho. You can drop the “-senpai,” you know.”

Shiho nodded slightly before her gaze turned toward the ledge and without another word, slowly walked over to the chain linked fence that blocked her. “We’re so high up…” She whispered with an unreadable emotion on her face.

Akira frowned worriedly from just a few feet away, ready to intervene if need be. “It’s dangerous up here.”

Shiho slowly blinked and looked over at him. “Huh? Not with this fence here. I can just look out over the courtyard…” She turned back to the fence. “To tell you the truth...I wanted to reenact that moment.”

Airi tensed and gripped the edge of her skirt, balling it up in her clenched hands. She wasn’t going to let anything happen to her again. She wouldn’t fail this time.

Ryuji stepped up with a frown. “Suzui…”

Shiho looked down at herself. “Wearing these clothes, standing here again…” She murmured. “I wanted to know what it would feel like. If I really meant what I said.”

Ann tightened her jaw for a moment before taking a deep breath. “...What about back then?” She asked tentatively. “What were you thinking?”

Shiho trembled as she recalled that exact moment. “I...I didn’t want to die.” She admitted shakily. “Even though I cried and fought Airi every step of the way, deep inside I really didn’t want to. I just needed to escape…” She slowly brought her hands up to hug herself, her nails digging into the fabric of her white turtleneck. “It was like another person inside of me was screaming, telling me to come up here…” She closed her eyes. “It almost felt like that person was trying to kill me…”

Airi bit her lip, sorrow welling up inside her. It sounded almost like her Shadow…

Ann looked away for a moment, anguish overtaking her features. Ryuji took a step behind her and placed a hand on her shoulder, silently supporting her.

Shiho turned around and slowly exhaled. “But I know that person was part of me too...My weakness. So, I wanted to see if she would show up again now.”

Akira gazed at her sympathetically. “She’s gone, isn’t she.”

Shiho nodded and smiled slightly. “Yeah...She doesn’t exist anymore.”

Ann tried to smile. “...You’re so strong, Shiho.” She admired. “The only reason you can stand here now is because of how hard you worked for your rehab.”

“Maybe…” Shiho softened. “But that was all thanks to you, Ann, and you, Airi.” She bowed her head toward the cellist. “I really wouldn’t be here right now if it weren’t for you. You gave me another chance, a chance to recover...a chance to stay with Ann.”

The model gasped in surprise. “Huh..?”

Shiho turned to her with a vulnerable smile. “Because I saw how hard you were trying too. Trying
to be strong, to be cool...Wanting to be an action star...Striving to be a better model...You were so positive. Your eyes sparkled with motivation. Airi had told me you were doing all this for me, and with you putting that much effort in,” she clenched her hands. “I couldn’t just let my life go to waste in a hospital bed. That’s why I wanted to stand again...It was because of you.” She smiled softly. “Being able to change others...That’s what true strength is.”

Ann stared at her with wide eyes. “Shiho...” Moisture clouded the blue sky of her eyes and she shook her head. “I’m not strong...I’m nothing without you.” She choked out, holding a hand to her face to wipe away the tears that crawled down her cheeks. “I’m just a lonely, scared half foreigner who did nothing to save you when it mattered most...When you needed me the most.”

Shiho gazed at her sorrowfully. “That’s not true. Airi did her best, but...no one could have convinced me at that moment. Not even you. I was too desperate for an escape...” She slowly walked over to her best friend, stopping just in front of her. “I’m sorry...for deciding to transfer schools...”

“Shiho...” Ann whispered before shaking her head, determination replacing her guilt. “I’m...I’m going to become a real model! That way you’ll be able to keep seeing me no matter where you are...and keep giving life your all...”

She tried her best to smile, even as she continued to cry. “I’m gonna be in a bunch of magazines, and I’ll say tons of good stuff in interviews about the person who inspired me...So...” She choked and swallowed her tears. “So...Stay healthy.” She smiled shakily. “Work hard, but not too much...and keep in touch. I’ll visit you when I can. All of us even.” She bit her trembling lip and wiped her face again. “Just...take care of yourself.”

Softening, Shiho gently wrapped her arms around her crying figure. “I love you...” She whispered sincerely. “Thank you for being my best friend. Once I can smile again from the bottom of my heart, and when I can breathe again in this city, I’ll come visit. You won’t be alone because I’ll always be with you in your heart.”

Ann hugged her back, gripping on for dear life. “Y-Yeah...”

Ryuji gazed at this with sympathetic eyes, uncharacteristically quiet as he let his middle school friends hug one last time for a long while. Airi smiled at the sight, not minding that she was left out. They had a special bond that she couldn’t intrude on. As long as Shiho could heal in peace, she was more than all right with it.

Slowly letting go, Shiho turned to Ryuji and smiled slightly. “Thank you, Sakamoto-kun. For helping me with my leg, and for being friends with Ann. Please take good care of her for me. I’ll keep my lucky duck plush that you gave me.”

He nodded, a solemn frown on his face. “I promise I’ll keep her safe, and I hope it’ll help ya out.”

She then turned to Akira. “Thank you, Kurusu-kun. For your kind words and encouragement.” Her lips quirked slightly. “I don’t know you well, but I know you’re a nice guy. I hope the school has left you alone with those rumors.”

Akira smiled and nodded. “Thank you, Suzui-san. You were one of the first people to be kind to me here and I wish you the best.”

She nodded and finally turned to the last person on the roof with them. “Airi...Thank you.” She bowed at her waist. “For trying to save me when you didn’t even know me, for visiting me, for mothering me in a way that my own mother can’t understand. She wasn’t here...you were.” She
softened. “You know what happened to me and never judged me for it. I’m so grateful that Ann has you again.”

Ann sniffled and chuckled weakly. “Yeah...she’s our mom.”

They all let out a quiet laugh. Turning to look out to the courtyard one last time, Shiho closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “...I’m ready to leave now.”

Ann nodded, and they all helped her down the stairs and out of the school, back into her parents’ car. They had waited patiently on the curb, and Suzui-san gave them a thankful smile as Shiho got in.

The mother stepped out of the car for a moment and after making sure the windows were up and that her daughter wouldn’t be able to hear, she turned to the thieves. “Thank you very much for helping my daughter.” She smiled softly. “It’s been hard on all of us.”

Ryuji rubbed his nose. “Naw, don’t sweat it, Suzui-san. We’re glad to help even a little bit.”

Suzui-san chuckled. “Still, thank you. Since you were all involved, I feel that I should tell you something. Myself, as well as the other parents, will be appealing the court for a harsher punishment on Kamoshida Suguru.”

They stared at her in shock. “What?” Ann gasped. “Why didn’t you tell me earlier, Ba-chan?”

The smile fell from the mother’s face, replaced with a grim frown. “His trial was missing several key pieces of information that could help lengthen his sentence, specifically from his...victims.” She spat. “I heard from the prosecutor that none of the students were called in to speak their pieces, something about the school denying the incidents. I will not let Shiho near that monster ever again, and the only way to assure that is to make sure he is put away for life.” She sighed. “Shiho won’t be attending the second trial, but she said she will submit her side. Ann-chan, if you want, you can submit yours as well, be it in person or in a letter.”

Ann stared at her, falling silent. She could testify against him? With all that had happened, she almost forgot...

She was so focused on Shiho’s side, her traumas and injuries, that she had pushed her own frustrations and shame to the back of her mind. When Kamoshida would pressure her for conversations in the hallways, dug her number from the student files, texting and calling her about dates and then finally pressuring her for more. She hated all of it, she hated how degrading it was, and most of all, she hated that she felt that she had to sacrifice herself just so her best friend could stay in the volleyball team.

She shouldn’t have had to do that, and Shiho shouldn’t have had to go through everything she did. They would never have to go through it again if she testified right now to put that son of a bitch in a dank hole for the rest of his life.

The other thieves looked at her with worry as she stood there silently, and Airi reached out to touch her arm. “Ann?” She whispered.

Ryuji stepped up behind the model and lightly placed his hand on the small of her back. “Need us to be there?” He murmured. “We got your back.”

Snapping out of her thoughts, Ann gave them both a thankful smile before turning back to her aunt in all but blood. “...Yeah, I will. Not just for me but for Shiho too.” She turned to the ex-runner. “What about you?” She mumbled quietly so the older woman couldn’t overhear her over the
engine of the running car. “Your leg…”

Ryuji gave her a smirk and a thumbs up. “If you’ll go, I’ll go. No way am I letting that bastard get away with anythin’.”

Brightening, Ann nodded with a smile. “Yeah.”

They waved when the Suzui family drove away down the small street and toward their new future, knowing that they wouldn’t see her for a long time.

Ann took a deep breath once they left and squared her shoulders, feet planted firmly on the pavement of the street. “I need to be the number one model around.” She declared determinedly. “I made a promise with Shiho, so there’s no turning back now.”

Akira smiled and nodded. “You’ve been doing well already.”

She turned to them with a firm gaze. “But I can do better. I’m gonna study how to properly exercise, and even relearn how to walk the runway. I want to pick up on some other languages and cultures too so I can start doing overseas events. Because, well…” She looked down at her hands. “The only way I can help Shiho is to show her how hard I’m working. I want to be her guiding light.”

Ryuji gave her a confident grin. “You can count on us to help ya out!”

Airi nodded and smiled. “We believe in you, Ann.”

Ann grinned. “Yeah! If I can do that, Shiho…She’ll definitely…” Her breath hitched and though she tried to hold it in, a tear rolled down her cheek. “Dammit,” She covered her face. “I told myself I wouldn’t cry...But it just...won’t stop…” She choked out. “I guess...I’m alone again, huh...I won’t have Shiho with me anymore…”

Frowning, Ryuji slung an arm around her shoulders and let her cry into his neck, not minding as his skin grew moist from her tears. “You’ve got me.” He refuted, voice rough at seeing her like this. He wrapped his other arm around her, bringing her closer. “You’ve got us. Suzui told us to watch your back and we’re gonna do that.”

Sniffling, Ann nodded and desperately grabbed onto his shirt as if he was a life line. “Ryuji...Thank you.” She voiced vulnerably and he nodded, eyes softening for her.

Akira smiled at the sight and placed a hand on her shoulder. “Yeah, you’ve got us. We’re a family, remember? We take care of each other.”

Squeezing between her boys to hug her front, Airi patted her back comfortingly. “We’ll be with you every step of the way.” She soothed. “Let’s show Shiho that she has nothing to worry about.”

Lips trembling, Ann smiled gratefully and brought them into a group hug, ignoring how uncomfortable it was to squish four people together. “Yeah, you’ve got us. We’re a family, remember? We take care of each other.”

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Airi beamed and hugged her back, ignoring how two very male gazes were stuck to their chests that were pushed against each other. “That’s right! Let’s all do our best!”

“Oh yeah, totally…” Ryuji answered absentmindedly, gaze glued downward inside their group hug.
Akira too, was occupied in a similar manner. “Mhmm…”

Letting out a content sigh, Ann finally noticed how silent they were and followed their eyes. She pushed the two of them away with a pulsing temple and latched onto the other girl, ignoring their protests. “C’mon Airi.” She huffed angrily, anchoring herself to the volatile emotion to abstain from crying more. “We don’t need them! Let’s get Makoto and have a girls only night.”

Airi sweatdropped as she was led down the small road that branched out to the main street of Aoyama-Itchome. “That might have to come later. We have something to tell everyone.”

Catching up with them, Ryuji laced his hands behind his head. “Wassup?”

Akira adjusted his bag on his shoulder, Morgana napping inside. “We have a new problem aside from Medjed.”

Thank you to Nigel for this one as well!! I’d make it the cover art of this fic but AO3 doesn’t support that kind of formatting lol so it'll be the cover art for the FFNET version!
Chapter End Notes

Ann rank 9

Akechi is confirmed to run a food blog reviewing restaurants, and also going around to take selfies at various places for his fansite.

Ba-chan - Auntie (Baa-chan with an elongated "a" sound means grandma)

I love you Shiho <3

Thoughts, likes, dislikes? Leave me a comment! I'd love to hear from you all (except you troll) Special thanks to secretlovers for defending my fic last chapter!
Oooo Thank you for 46k hits wow! And 1173 kudos <3 I wonder if we can hit 2000 comments before June?

P5D is coming out in a few days, but still no english localization. To be honest, I'm not very interested at this point because of how it's been handled. (Don't even get me started on the blatant sexism)

Meeting with everyone at the hideout in the Shibuya passageway, Akira passed his phone around the group, letting them read the mysterious messages. Each of them reacted promptly with their eyes widening as well the occasional swear from Ryuji. “Considerin’ he mentioned stealin’ hearts, he knows, doesn’t he?” He asked faintly, eyes wide at the screen.

Makoto grimaced and crossed her arms. “It seems so…”

Yusuke held back a snarl. “How were we found out?” He asked shortly.

Airi bit her lip. “They said they can ‘take care of Medjed,’ so that must mean they’re some sort of hacker too…”

Makoto narrowed her eyes. “Then he may have traced our chat logs, but how would he have known all those details with just that..?”

Yusuke crossed his arms thoughtfully. “Do you think there is another cause?”

The council president nodded. “Yes. I’m not sure why, but that’s the feeling I get.”

Ann tilted her head and took out her own phone, looking it over. “Hey, is it that easy to look at someone else’s chat log?”

Airi nodded. “If you look at your phone bill, the company lists every single call, text, and whatever data you use.” Her own bill had been mostly empty until April. “Someone could probably pull up that information inside the company’s database and dig a little further.” Probably. She didn’t really know much about how computers worked, but as thieves, they knew if something existed, it could be stolen.

Ryuji scowled. “So they can just go through our phones like that?”

Makoto huffed. “But that doesn’t explain how he knew Akira-kun was a phantom thief. There are millions of chat logs to go through…”

Ann pursed her lips. “And why’s Akira getting an error when he tries to reply?” She asked curiously.

Makoto shrugged helplessly, frustrated that she herself couldn’t answer with certainty. “Perhaps the receiving end doesn’t exist?”
Ryuji gawked. “That’s possible?”

“Don’t ask me everything.” She sighed sharply. “I told you I don’t know much about it.”

Yusuke frowned. “If this is what they refer to as hacking, then this is another unknown party next to Medjed.”

Airi looked up worriedly. “Do you think this is one of Medjed’s agents trying to trick us?”

Morgana whipped his head back and forth, trying to keep up with the conversation. “I don’t get all this high tech stuff!” He grimaced. “What does this mean? Do we have another opponent?”

Makoto shook her head. “I doubt it, considering he says he wants to “deal” with them. That is,” Her eyes narrowed. “If we take his words at face value.”

Akira rested his hands in his pockets and leaned against the railing. “So what should we do about this guy?” He asked quietly. “If he could go through my chat logs then he knows we’re all phantom thieves, but he’s only contacting me.”

Ryuji nodded. “Yeah, that’s weird. Guess he knows you’re our leader?” He perked up. “Hey... Wouldn’t it be great to get this guy on our side then?”

Airi shook her head. “We can’t trust him. We don’t know his motives.” She reasoned quietly. “We don’t even know his name except he wants us to call him Alibaba.”

Ryuji shrunk back. “I don’t think it’s a bad deal, though. We ain’t got a way to deal with Medjed except him…”

Yusuke turned to him with a frown. “Even if Alibaba turns out to be a criminal? I am not helping anyone of that sort.”

Ryuji winced. “Oh, right. That wouldn’t be good…”

Morgana jumped out of the bag and climbed up Akira’s figure to perch on his shoulder. “The ‘I prepared the necessary tool’ part makes no sense either.” He added. “Did he plan this in advance?”

Ann twirled a ponytail, shoulders hunched in with worry. “Could this just be a prank?”

Makoto scowled. “He knows an awful lot for this to be a prank.”

“If he knows who we are, couldn’t we get caught?” Ann fretted, brows furrowed together.

The council president shook her head. “No. If he wanted to report us, I think he would’ve done it already.”

Akira pulled up the chat log again, reading it over. “He offered us a deal for changing a heart.”

“His objective aligns with ours, if only to achieve our goals.” Yusuke concluded. “I’m certain he’ll contact us again.”

Airi sighed. “But when? It could take days before we see another message from him.”

Makoto grasped her chin thoughtfully, calculating the optimal way to go about this. “It’d be best if we stay together then. If something happens, we can act without delay.”

Ann nodded. “Yeah. So, somewhere we can wait and hide for long hours…”
They all slowly turned to look at Akira and he blinked, realizing they meant Leblanc. “Why not Airi’s house?”

“You give us free coffee and curry.” Airi lifted a brow. “How could I beat that?”

Sweatdropping, he nodded and they all traveled to Yongenjaya as a group. The sun was setting on the horizon now as evening replaced the hot afternoon, leaving the back streets warm from the earlier humidity.

Entering Leblanc, the door jingling at their arrival, Akira paused when he noticed his guardian reading a slip of paper while leaning against one of the barstools, unaware his new guests. He walked up to him and Sojiro blinked, putting his papers down on the counter. “Oh! Another study session?”

They all waved. “Hi Ojisan.” Airi smiled, letting the door shut behind her.

“Good evening.” Ann greeted. “We were thinking of putting our plans together for our summer.”

Sojiro nodded. “It is that time of the year, huh…” He caught sight of the council president and hummed. “Your last name was Niijima, right?”

Makoto blinked. “Uh, yes. Is there a problem?”

Staring at her for a moment, he shook his head and smiled reassuringly. “No, nothing at all. Anyway.” He gestured to the envelope he was holding earlier along with his paper. “That’s addressed to you, Akira. This old man’ll leave you kids be. The store’s all yours.” Passing by them, he gave Airi a pat on her shoulder before leaving the cafe to them.

They put their bags down in the middle booth. Akira scooped some curry and rice for them all while Yusuke went to the restaurant next door to order some takoyaki since he was in the mood for them. Ryuji went out for a soda and before long, they all sat down to eat while watching the news on the TV.

“We have late-breaking news on Medjed, whose notoriety rose since their statement the other day.”

The news showed Medjed’s logo, a neon green flag with their name in English printed in the middle. “Just moments ago, a new message has been released on their website. They have announced their victory over the Phantom Thieves.”

They sat up in their seats in alarm. “What?!” Ann yelped, wide eyes glued to the screen.

“Medjed also warns any Japanese citizens who praised the Phantom Thieves to stop doing so. We will report any further actions by Medjed as they arrive.”

Both blonds took out their phones to search up the message the news was talking about, but Ryuji groaned when he got to the website. “Oh, come on! It’s in English!”

“Let me see…” Ann replied absentmindedly as the page loaded for her. “‘The Phantom Thieves remain silent at our question. This proves that we are just. People of Japan, wake up. You must not worship the Phantom Thieves.’”

Ryuji slammed his hand against the table, their empty dishes clattering noisily from the impact. “What?!” He growled. “That’s bullshit!”

Yusuke glanced at him. “Keep listening.”
Ann turned back to her phone, translating the message for them all. “‘We will discipline any who worship them. The punishment is the confiscation of possessions. We are Medjed. We are unseen. We will eliminate evil.’...That’s what it says.”

Airi grimaced. This was not good.

Ryuji clenched his fists as he tried to withhold his anger. “So they’ll hurt anyone who’s gonna side with us!? Bullshit! That ain’t just at all!”

Yusuke furrowed his brow. “Confiscation of possessions, hm…”

Makoto turned to him. “Perhaps bank accounts or personal information...Either way, it won’t be anything pleasant.”

Akira frowned deeply. “This isn’t good…”

“Why the hell are we being singled out?” Ryuji asked, irritated.

Airi crossed her arms and sat back in her chair. “Probably because we’ve been getting popular, and they don’t like it…”

Makoto nodded in agreement. “That all this wouldn’t have happened had the Phantom Thieves not existed.”

Ryuji scowled. “That’s complete bullshit. Medjed’s been targeting companies way longer than we’ve been a group.”

Morgana sighed from his seat between Yusuke and Akira within the booth. “Talk about a troublesome organization that we’ve been targeted by…”

Ann put her phone away and looked up at them with a worried frown. “Isn’t there anything we can do?”

Yusuke sighed and closed his eyes, a crease forming between his brows. “It’s certain we can’t do anything about this on our own…”

Airi sighed, her eyes catching the envelope that Sojiro had left earlier. She picked it up and examined it, noting that there was no stamp and was addressed to Akira by his name and not his address. “What is this anyway?”

Morgana leaned over and sniffed it curiously. “It’s rare for Akira to get something like this.”

The cellist handed it over to her boyfriend and he opened it, taking out a red card. He furrowed his brow at the strikingly familiar color scheme. “Is this a calling card..?” He placed it on the table for all of them to see.

Ann blinked at the card holding his name. “Who’s this from..?”

Makoto eyed the envelope. “There’s no stamp. Someone must’ve directly dropped it into the mailbox here…”

Yusuke inhaled sharply. “Could it have been Alibaba..?”

Morgana frowned as he observed the card. “That reminds me, he did mention something about preparing the “necessary tool”...Don’t tell me. Is this what he was talking about?!”
Airi gasped. “Then...he must’ve tracked Akira’s phone here! Is he still in the neighborhood?” Could he be that close?

Ryuji rubbed his head tiredly. “What the hell’s goin’ on here..?”

Akira sighed and leaned back in his seat. “I don’t think we’ll figure this out until Alibaba messages me again.”

Makoto crossed her arms. “Then all we can do is brace ourselves and stand by in case anything comes up.” She warned.

They all nodded in agreement. This was big. Bigger than anything they had faced so far. Their opponent could hurt thousands of people without ever showing a face, and if they couldn’t find a way to win, they’d have to concede defeat...

Checking the time on her phone, Makoto sighed and stood up from the booth, shouldering her bag. “I should be going home. We still have school tomorrow.”

Ann stood up as well, grabbing her bag. “I’m going to go as well.” Her jaw tightened for a moment and she looked away. “Shiho just left to her new house an hour ago…”

Airi looked up at her sympathetically. “I’m sure she’ll be fine. A new place will be good for her.”

The model nodded slightly. “Yeah…”

Yusuke glanced between them. “Shiho?”


His brows furrowed for a minute before he connected the dots in his head. “I see...One of his unfortunate victims then. We can all rejoice knowing he will never harm another young woman again.” He murmured. “I have the utmost certainty that she will be fine, considering she has you.”

Ann stared at him with wide eyes before a small tearful smile spread on her lips. “Yeah...I’m going to work hard for her.”

Ryuji swerved his head to glower at the artist, grumbling as he stood up from his chair. Wiping some of the moisture away from the corners of her eyes, Ann exhaled and turned to the other two non-Yongenjaya residents. “Let’s go then.” The three left the cafe, leaving Akira, Airi, Yusuke, and Morgana to clean up the mess that was left over.

Airi brought the dishes to the kitchen sink and turned on the faucet with the intent of washing them, but Akira gently pushed her out of the way, apron already on. “Let me do them.”

She raised a brow. “Can I trust you to clean these well?”

Akira gave her a flat look. “I always clean the dishes.” He retorted. “If I didn’t clean them well, we’d all have been poisoned by now.”

Airi grinned mischievously. “Maybe that’s why I’ve been having such vivid hallucinations of you.” She teased. “You’ve been secretly poisoning me, huh.”

He turned to give her a raised brow. “Should I turn them into reality?” He teased back.

“Yeah.” Yusuke interrupted them as he walked over to turn off the TV. “You should. Perhaps they
would make an interesting piece for me to paint.”

They turned to him and sweatdropped. “Maybe not…” Airi smiled awkwardly, not meeting his gaze. She would rather not do “that” in front of her little brother. “Are you guys going on your date soon?”

Akira rolled his eyes, turning off the sink and drying his hands on the towel. “We’re not going on a date. We’re just going to find inspiration for him.”

Yusuke slowly blinked. “Have I been mistaken? Is that not what dates comprise of?”

Airi snickered. “That is what a date is.” She patted her boyfriend’s shoulder. “You’ve been going out with my brother. My, Akira, just trying to amass your harem.”

Reddening at her words, Akira covered his face and groaned. “Why me…” His phone rang out and he took it out of his pocket.

M: I’ve really started turning the heat up on the forum! I put a special post up and everything!
M: “The showdown between the just Phantom Thieves and the global organization Medjed is here!”
M: Reactions have been great too. Everyone is really engaged.
M: So far, most of the comments have been pro-Phantom Thieves.
M: Most likely because of what happened in the Kaneshiro case.
M: Those on the other side say Medjed are “hackers of justice.”
M: But there’s nothing resembling justice in what they do.
M: I believe in you guys.
M: Someday, I want the whole site to be filled with pro-thieves comments.
Ak: Maybe one day.
M: I’m looking forward to it when that day arrives.

Morgana darted up onto the counter to read the texts. “He can look forward to whatever he wants, but we have no means of striking back against Medjed.” He muttered dejectedly. “We’re going to be in deep trouble if we don’t do something…”

Airi reached out and petted his ears. “We’ll find a way, Morgana.” She soothed. “We always do.”

Yusuke smiled. “That is true. Hopelessness gripped us when we opposed Kaneshiro. I suppose we will only have to see how this will end.”

----7/21, THURSDAY, MORNING, SHUJIN ACADEMY

While Inui-sensei lectured about the Heian era, Morgana subtly called for his leader’s attention from within his desk. “Hey, your phone’s buzzing!” He whispered, alarmed.

Tensing up, Akira glanced up at the teacher, noting that he wasn’t paying attention to his side of the room, before taking his phone out of his pocket and sliding it open.

R: Did Alibaba message you?

They both deflated. “It’s just Ryuji…” Morgana sighed.
Ak: No.
R: Damn.
R: Let us know ASAP if he tries to get in touch with you, mkay?

When lunchtime hit, Kawakami did her now routine talk with all of her homeroom students before walking up to them. “Hey, I heard about the news.” She murmured quietly, making sure none of the non-phantom thieves could hear. “Do you guys have a plan?”

Airi paused her lunch and shook her head. “We’re working on it, but right now, no…”

Ann sighed and turned around in her seat, sitting sideways on the chair. “Sensei, have you had your information stolen?”

Kawakami shook her head. “No, but I did receive a notice earlier today that my phone company was issued a warning from Medjed.” She scowled. “They are doing nothing to prove they are just.” Noting the time on the clock, she straightened up. “Well, no matter the outcome, you all know I support you.” She gave them a grin before walking up to the front of the class to begin next period.

The thieves looked at each other. It was...strange, to have an adult know their secret, but at least they knew their homeroom teacher was on their side.

Later during Ushimaru-sensei’s lesson, Akira’s phone buzzed again and Morgana sweatdropped. “Ryuji again? He just never shuts up, does he?”

Akira sighed but reached for his phone anyway.

???: Good day.

They both tensed at the unknown number as well as the grinning icon. It was Alibaba again.

Ak: What do you want?
???: Ah, you responded today.
???: Once again, I am Alibaba.
???: You are the leader of the Phantom Thieves, correct?
Ak: You got the wrong guy.
???: Don’t lie.
???: I take it you received the calling card?

Morgana bristled. “So it really was from this guy…”

???: Are you at school right now?
Ak: I’m in class.
???: Then I know to contact you during these times.
???: I have prepared the calling card for you.
???: When are you going to steal it?
Ak: Steal from who?
???: Aren’t you able to steal a heart as long as you have a calling card?
Ak: I need a name.
???: ...A name? Is your heart thievery truly impossible without such information?
Ak: It is.
???: ...I see.
???: Hm, I suppose past calling cards did have names on them.
One moment.

Akira’s eyes darted up from the screen, subtly signalling for Airi’s attention with a quick flick of his fingers in her peripheral. He also kicked Ann's chair to get her attention.

Airi’s eyes slid from the board to him and she gave him a questioning tilt of her head, while Ann turned around with a confused frown. He was going to mouth to them that he had news but his phone buzzed again and stole his attention.

Very well. I’ll tell you.

…

I believe their name was...Sakura Futaba.

If you fail in this mission, I will expose your identities to the world and to the police.

Well then, I’ll be counting on you. We shall speak again after the change of heart.

Akira tried to send another message but the screen buzzed, saying the receiving end didn’t exist. He furrowed his brow. Sakura Futaba? Who was that, and why did that name sound slightly familiar?..?

Morgana stared at the screen with wide eyes. “So he threatened you and then just took off?” He hissed. “And Sakura?” His ears flicked. “I feel like I’ve heard that name before…” He sighed. “In any case, let’s let everyone know about this.”

Once school ended, Akira let everyone on the team know to meet up at Shibuya station. Airi asked him what he wanted to say earlier during class but he shook his head, saying he should wait until everyone was together.

By the time 4PM rolled by, they were all stood in their signature corner on the Shibuya station walkway, and he shared his phone and the messages he received with everyone. Ryuji cursed as he handed the phone to Airi next. “We’re gonna get reported if we don’t do this? What the hell…”

Airi gasped when her eyes caught the name in the messages. “Sakura”? That’s Ojisan’s last name.”

Makoto looked over to her. “Does he have any relatives? A wife?”

The cellist shook her head. “No, he’s always been single as far as I know…” She furrowed her brow. “Unless…”

Yusuke tilted his head. “Unless?”

She bit her lip. “There was a woman who was his and my father’s co-worker...Isshiki Wakaba. The only thing I know of her was that she was in charge of whatever they were researching, and she…” She sighed heavily. “She committed suicide two years ago.”

Ann gasped at the news. “Suicide? So...Could she have been his wife?”

Airi shrugged helplessly. “I don’t know...Truth be told, I don’t know much about him, but he’s never mentioned a Futaba...Akira, do you know anything?”

Her boyfriend grasped his chin, trying to think. “...Not sure.”

Ryuji gaped at them. “Seriously?! You live at his place! Neither of you know? Ain’t he your uncle,
Airi shook her head. “Not by blood...Hold on.” She fished out her own phone and pulled up the news article she read about a month ago. “Here...at 1:43PM on May 21st 20XX, Isshiki Wakaba walked out into the street. A moment later, a car struck her at 40MPH, the driver pressing on the brakes only after the impact. She was pronounced dead on the scene, orphaning her daughter who witnessed the entire incident.”

Makoto inhaled sharply. “Daughter? Could that be Futaba?” She grasped her chin thoughtfully. “But then...Why would Alibaba be targeting her? The calling card was delivered to the cafe, so it would be natural to assume Alibaba may have some sort of relation to them. Alibaba never mentioned which Sakura Futaba either.” She pursed her lips. “Perhaps he thinks the name is suffice enough.”

Morgana hummed pensively from his spot within the bag. “That makes sense.”

Airi bit her lip. “Maybe Ojisan took Futaba-chan in after the funeral...” But why hadn’t he introduced them? She had moved back to Yongenjaya last year, so there were plenty of opportunities. He knew they both lost their parents. Was Futaba still grieving? Could she help her?

Some unknown hacker who was contacting them wanted to target her. A young girl who lost her mother only recently. Just thinking that this girl was going through what she herself had gone through... “No.”

The others turned to her quizzically. “No?” Ann repeated.

“No.” Airi confirmed firmly. “We’re not going to target Futaba-chan.”

Ryuji gaped at her. “But how’re we gonna get this guy to help us fight Medjed then?! We’re screwed...!”

She turned to him with a deep scowl. “If you lost your mother, would you want strangers trying to steal your heart?!” She snapped. “She’s innocent!”

Ryuji took a step back in fear and held out his hands in a placating manner. “OK...I get your point.”

Furrowing his brow, Akira wrapped an arm around her waist. “Airi...We don’t know if she’s really Isshiki-san’s daughter.” He soothed. “Sakura Futaba could just be one of Boss’ cousins or something.”

Closing her eyes, Airi took a deep breath before exhaling it all out. “...You’re right, sorry. This is just...hitting a little too close to home. I don’t like how Alibaba’s blackmailing us to do this.” Like how Hisoka’s boss had ordered him to hurt her. Why? Why did everyone have to hurt one another?

Yusuke frowned sympathetically. “Aneki...We haven’t decided on an objective just yet.”

Makoto nodded in agreement. “I can understand Alibaba threatening us to do this or else he would tell the police, but he’s not giving us a reason as to why we need to steal Futaba’s heart.”

Yusuke narrowed his eyes. “So he’s testing us?” He scowled.

Akira sighed. “Why don’t we just get to the source? Let’s ask Boss. He’s the only one who knows the most about this.”
Morgana nodded. “That’s probably for the best. There’s nothing else we can do at this moment, and Chief might have an idea on what this is about too.”

“And maybe introduce me to her…” Airi murmured. Sakura Futaba…who might be Isshiki Futaba.

“I’ll check the school’s roster just in case.” Makoto added, taking out her phone to make a memo. “Sakura is an uncommon last name, after all.”

Yusuke straightened up from leaning against the railing. “We must make sure Boss doesn’t figure out who we are. We’ll have to go about this cautiously.”

Airi murmured. “Yeah…We have Kawakami-sensei on our side, but Boss is a whole other story.” She fretted. “Akira, keep us updated, OK?” She checked the time on her phone. “I have a shoot soon, so I’m going to go now.”

Makoto tilted her head. “Do you really think it has a chance of happening? With how hot headed they both are, it’s easy to imagine their relationship might consist only of arguments.”

Yusuke crossed his arms and hummed. “A fiery romance that could either be as magnificent as a shooting comet that will last for years, or one that will sizzle into cinder…It will be fascinating to witness either way.”

Morgana stayed silent, blue eyes staring morosely in the direction the blonds left in. He looked down at his clearly inhuman paws and a dark scowl spread on his mouth, fangs poking out.

"This way, Ann-chan!" The photographer called to her excitedly, finger pressing the shutter button on his DSLR. Ann turned her head to give the camera a confident smile over her shoulder, one hand on her hip and the other held out toward the lens.

Ryuji observed from his seat on the stairs near the back of the photoshoot, legs bunched up and his eyes focused on her. When they arrived at Chuo in front of one of the funky glass buildings, the stylists rushed the model away into the makeshift changing rooms and had her dress up in a
different outfit. Once she was ready, the photographer and assistant had her stand in front of the entrance of the building where they were at now. Some of the staff said he had to wait further away, but Ann reassured them that he was her friend and so he was left to watch only a couple steps back.

Brushing a hand through her hair, Ann let the breeze lift her long bundles in the air, and the photographer squealed. "Yeah! That's it!"

The theme was "Summer in the City," so her natural blonde hair was held up in a high ponytail, letting the ends curl around her neck and shoulders. It brushed against her baby blue chiffon top that matched the intensity of her eyes, and the ends were tucked into a pair of white jean shorts that only emphasized her long and shapely legs.

Ann winked at the camera with a pair of sunglasses in her hand, and she placed them on top of her head to complete the look.

Crossing his arms over his knees and resting his chin on top, Ryuji found that he couldn't really tear his gaze from her. When Shiho had asked him to watch over Ann, he had accepted without a second thought because who else was gonna watch out for her if not him? Akira watched over all of them as their leader, Airi watched over all of them as their "mom," and even though he was still fishy about it, Morgana guided them around. With Yusuke, he was usually too artsy fartsy to pay attention to the people around them, and Makoto was still settling into their group and dealing with that bitchy senior.

He had known Ann the longest, barring Airi, and he knew she'd get into all sorts of trouble because of how hot she was. Even now, he could see some men staring at her with that damn sickening look in their eyes just a few meters away from the photoshoot. All of them only see her as a piece of meat, just like Kamoshida. They don't give a fuck about her except her body.

Every single damn time, it was always men being scumbags with her. Kamoshida, that guy at the TV station, hell, every time she walked around school, he'd notice guys just openly ogling her.

She'd get mad but then she would just roll her eyes and say she's used to it.

Ryuji clenched his fists, his fingers digging into the sides of his knees. He could feel his teeth grind together when he noticed some guy decided to walk closer, but a magazine staff member intercepted him. This was why Shiho asked him to watch over Ann. He wasn't afraid to throw a punch when it came down to it, but he'd get in big trouble.

Besides, it's not like he can't admire her either. He wasn't going to deny that Ann was hot, smoking hot even. With her long legs, her nice curves. How her eyes were Japanese but the color was all Finnish. How her hair was blonde, but a different blonde from his. More natural and feminine.

He let out a groan and smacked his forehead against his arms. Why the fuck did Airi have to say that shit a month ago?

“I just want to see you guys happy.” Airi softened. "You two have always been around each other ever since she moved here, and you dyed your hair for her, remember?"

So what if he started bleaching his hair around the same time when Ann transferred into their middle school? So what if he did it to take the negative attention off the "Gaijin" because he saw how sad she was?

Ann was a nag; she screeched, she only ever yelled at him, she couldn't act to save her life, she ate
too much sugar or used to at least before they started working out together, and her personality didn't match with her appearance at all.

Still...He may act like a pervert too, but he'd never date her. He couldn't, right? After what Kamoshida tried to do to her, he didn't want to be the same. He'd never be like that bastard.

Ann was off limits.

"-uji? Ryuji! Wake up!"

Snapping his head up from his arms, Ryuji looked up to see Ann frowning down at him, the rest of the crew packing up their gear. "The photoshoot's done so we can go now." She informed him. "I'm going to go change before going home, unless you have anything you want to do."

"Oh..." With a start, Ryuji jumped up from his seat and dusted off his cargo pants. "How'd it go?"

Ann beamed. "It was pretty good! I think I'm really starting to see what being a model's really like." Twirling a strand of hair, she looked up at him with a shy blush. "What did you think of me while I was out there?"

Rubbing the back of his head, Ryuji looked away and shrugged. "You looked like you were havin' fun." He muttered halfheartedly. He wasn't lying; he could see that she had more umph to her poses now, and even in the Metaverse she had a shit ton of a more confident strut in her catsuit.

Deadpanning, she crossed her arms. "Yeah I was, but did you think the style fit me?" She pressed. "How about my poses and my facial expressions? I want to hear your honest opinion!"

Reddening, Ryuji took a step back on the stairs. "Why?" He complained. "I already told you you looked good, so-"

"Hey, you're Ann-chan, right?"

They both turned around to see a man looking her up and down with an ecstatic smile on his face. "I'm a big fan! I collected all of your magazines and photobooks!"

Ann gave him a bright smile. "Oh, thanks! It means a lot to hear you support my work like that."

He nodded quickly. "Yeah yeah! I always liked you even when Mika started showing you up!"

Resisting the urge to scowl, Ann kept her smile on her face. "That's...nice..." She said through her teeth.

"So like," The guy continued excitedly, taking a step closer. "Can I get a photo with you? And your autograph? How about your phone number?" He held up his phone and shoved it toward her. "I'll treat you to some nice Japanese places!"

Ryuji frowned and stepped in between them, putting Ann behind him. "Yo man, back off a little." He warned. "You look like some yankee. What, did Ann-chan take pity on you or something?"

Ann frowned from behind Ryuji, feeling more safe behind him than in front of this guy. "Hey, he's my friend. I'll give you an autograph but that's it."

The fan perked up and pushed the ex-runner out of the way, ignoring his shout. "Thank you so
very, Ann-chan!" He grinned, not noticing her cringe at his broken English. "Here, please sign issue 15! It's my favorite of your looks." He babbled, taking out the magazine from his bag and holding it out to her with a sharpie.

Frowning, Ann reluctantly took the issue and marker. This was the photoshoot she considered her weakest. Her expressions didn't match her outfit, and her poses didn't bring out the clothes. Back then, her agency wasn't as big as it was now so they didn't care that she wasn't a good model, just that she was foreign which made her eye-catching.

She signed the magazine and handed it back to her fan. "Thank you for supporting me." She stated politely.

Taking it with shaking hands, the fan almost salivated at her signature. "Ann-chan's autograph..." He whimpered before putting it back inside his backpack and taking out his phone. Without warning, he stepped too close, held out his phone into the air and said, "Cheese!" And took a selfie without her consent.

Alarmed at how he invaded her personal space without permission, Ann made to step back but yelped when she only felt air underneath her foot. Her heart stopped at the feeling of falling back on the stairs and she clenched her eyes shut, waiting for the inevitable collision with the concrete steps.

Strong arms caught her a split second later though and held her away. "Dude, I told you to back off!" She heard Ryuji growl at the fan, his arms tightening around her waist. "That was totally not cool!"

"B-But I just wanted a selfie!" The fan argued. "She's hot for a foreigner and she can speak Japanese so well!"

Ryuji rolled his eyes and groaned. "Oh, fuck off." He looked down at her with a worried frown. "Hey, you OK? You didn't roll your ankle or somethin', right?"

Ann stared up at him, all words leaving her for a moment. "Ah..." She blinked before scowling. "Security!"

Once the photoshoot security came and escorted the fan away, Ann was finally able to go change back into her regular clothes. When she was done, Ryuji took her hand and led her toward the train station. "See? You get into so much trouble." He muttered. "That guy was a real creep."

Ann frowned at his back, not wanting to admit that in that one moment, she had felt safe. She was used to guys perving on her, and that fan was no different. They didn't usually get that crazy, though. She didn't think she was popular enough to garner rabid fans, but that guy... "It's because I'm a foreigner." She mumbled. "They always think I'm cool with it..."

Stopping in the middle of the street, Ryuji stopped and turned around to face her. "You're not a foreigner." He stated strongly. "You're Japanese, too."

She looked down at her shoes. "I don't look it, though, do I?" She murmured deprecatingly. "Look at me. I have blue eyes and blonde hair. No one would ever look at me and think I'm a native."

"Who cares?"

Surprised, she looked up at him. Ryuji crossed his arms and frowned at her. "Who gives a crap what they think? You know you're Japanese, so that's all there is to it." He rationalized. "Besides, what does it matter? The only thing that matters is that you're Ann." He shrugged. "Guys like those
just have weird fetishes or somethin'.'"

Touched, Ann gave him a watery smile. "Thank you, Ryuji." She whispered. "You're not always a knucklehead, huh."

Ryuji blushed and turned away with a scowl. "Sh-Shut up!" Shit, what could he use as a distraction? "So hey, when's the next time you're workin' with Mika? She's hot." He rambled out quickly, already turning away toward the train station. "Totally my type!"

Immediately, Ann glowered at him. "Ryuji!" She stomped after him, not wanting to admit that her heart had skipped a beat at his rare moment of thoughtfulness.

Was Airi right..?  

Chapter End Notes

Thoughts, likes, dislikes? Leave me a comment!
Chapter 165

Chapter Notes

P5D is out and I was super correct: the girls are made as sexual objects in their MV without being shown that they're confident and strong phantom thieves. Instead we get dancing in cages, dancing on stage in a strip joint, and lounging in bathing suits. Great.

On another note, a lot of people have joined the discord server! Thank you so much! I've had a lot of fun chatting with you guys in a more casual setting!

We've also gone over 2000 comments!!! A third of them is probably me replying but still, so many!! I feel the love guys <3

EDIT: OMG IM SO SORRY GUYS I FORGOT TO MENTION!!! I disabled guest commenting a few updates ago, since chapter 163 i believe? Because I've been receiving a lot of anonymous comments that have nothing to do with the story, so I'm thinking I'm being trolled or something. A lot of them consists of something like "I love___, it's my favorite digimon!" and "This is my favorite harry potter fic" (definitely sounds like a troll/trolls)

Unfortunately, that alienates a lot of readers who don't have accounts, and I'm really sorry for that! Honestly, I can just brave the troll comments if it means I still get genuine comments from you guys. I'm really sorry for not mentioning this sooner! (I had talked about this in the discord and somehow forgot that not all of you are in there with me lol)

So guest commenting will be turned back on!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Parting with Makoto at the station since it had gotten quite late, the four of them journeyed back to Yongenjaya together. Morgana stayed uncharacteristically quiet during the ride which made Akira glance at his bag, but he brushed it off. The feline never had much to say during train rides anyway.

Walking down the cramped back streets of Yongenjaya, they entered Leblanc to find Sojiro enjoying a cigarette break inside the empty cafe. Airi frowned disapprovingly. “Ji-san,” She purposely dropped the “O.” “Why aren’t you smoking outside?”

Sojiro sighed, exhaling a breath of smoke. “It’s just one cigarette…” He eyed the small group as well as their expressions. “Hm? What’s up?”

Glancing at one another, Akira stepped forward. “Who’s Sakura Futaba?” He asked hesitantly.

The barista immediately reacted; his eyes sharpened behind his round specs and he straightened up from his relaxed lean into a tense stance. “...Why do you know about that?” He asked sharply. “It’s got nothing to do with you kids.”

“But…” Airi began to argue but he brushed past them.
“Don’t, Airi. I’m going home.” He snapped. “Make sure you lock the place when your friends leave, Akira.” And without waiting for another word, slammed the cafe door closed after him.

Yusuke frowned at his violent departure. “It seems we have a hit.” Their phones buzzed.

An: **Just finished the shoot. Akira, were you able to ask Boss about Sakura Futaba?**
Ak: **I tried…**
Ai: **He was really defensive about it too.**
Y: **Could there really be a reason as to why that was?**
Ma: **Hm. Alibaba might be our only hope of defeating Medjed.**
Ma: **I wish we could get some info about Futaba out of Boss…**
An: **But trying to force it out would probably have the opposite effect.**
Y: **I owe a great deal to Boss, Akira, and Aneki.**
Y: **I don’t wish for this to be a source of discord between them.**
Ai: **I don’t want to upset him…**
Ai: **But if Futaba is really Isshiki Futaba, she may still be grieving.**
R: **Her mom, right? But her name’s really Sakura.**
Ma: **It’s probably best to wait for Boss to bring the subject up himself.**
Ma: **Airi, I know you want to help, but we don’t know all the facts yet.**
Ma: **We cannot rush into this.**

“I know…” Airi whispered as she put her phone away. “I just…” She couldn’t shake off the feeling that Sakura Futaba could be Isshiki Futaba. Why else would she have Sojiro’s last name? He never spoke about his family or relatives. Their next potential target could be someone who was going through what she had went through ten years ago. She knew the wound of losing parents never went away.

It would always hurt, even after a decade. A raw festering ache that persisted day in and day out, even if she ignored it. It may pustulate, it may bleed, and it may heal…but it won’t go away.

A hand landed on her shoulder and she looked up at Yusuke, tears threatening to fall from her eyes. “Don’t cry, Aneki.” He gently consoled, bringing up a long finger to brush them away. “As you had said yesterday, we will overcome this and emerge victorious.”

Arms wrapped around her and tugged her back into a familiar embrace. “Yusuke’s right.” Akira agreed, his hands gripping her waist securely. “Let’s just get the facts first before we do anything.” He planted a kiss on her temple. “And if she does turn out to be Isshiki Futaba, we’ll help her out.”

She nodded and laid her head against his chest, exhaling softly. “You’re right. You’re both right.” She gave them a small smile. “I guess even I need cheering up sometimes. Thanks.”

She listened in on the conversation, her large glasses reflecting off the harsh lights from her various monitors. “Airi…” She whispered to herself, the only noise to accompany her was the whirring fan inside her computer tower. “Help…”

But she didn’t want help. She wanted her condition to stop, but she didn’t want to go outside. Outside was scary. Outside meant uncertainty. Outside meant the unknown. Outside meant people. The same people who said those things to her. She couldn’t…

“You’re worthless…”
“You murderer!”

“What do you have to say for yourself?!”

“Get away from me!”

“No…” She whimpered as she clenched her eyes shut and covered her ears with her hands. She didn’t want to hear it anymore.

No more.

No more.

No more.

“You killed me…”

“Go away…” She choked out, feeling her shoulders tighten and her arms begin to numb. Her breathing became erratic, fast breathes going in and out of her. It felt hot in here, even though her room was always air conditioned to be cool.

The walls began to close in on her, trapping her in an inescapable hell, though she knew there was plenty of room amidst the trash bags and empty cardboard boxes. Her ears rang but there were no noises other than her own harsh breathing.

She knew she was only hearing things, that the person behind her wasn’t actually here, but it felt so real, everything always felt too much, it was too much, she couldn’t-

Hands shaking now, she quickly pressed a few keys on her keyboard. Within a moment, a recording played from the speakers, the cello helping to drown out her voice. It wasn’t what she would usually listen to, but lo-fi couldn’t help her anymore. Nothing helped.

She shouldn’t exist.

“I’m in a tomb…I deserve to die, Airi-nee…”

----7/22, FRIDAY, EARLY MORNING, AOYAMA-ITCHOME

“Yo.” Ryuji greeted them as he caught up to them on the way to school. “Tomorrow’s the end of the first semester, but we still got all this lame shit comin’ up…” He grumbled.

Morgana sneaked his head from the bag to glare at him. “If you don’t take care of this “lame shit,” you can kiss your summer vacation goodbye.” He snapped.

Taken aback by how aggressive he was, Airi gave him a worried glance. She hadn’t noticed yesterday, but the feline had been rather quiet, almost brooding in a way. Was he all right?

“Yeah yeah…” Ryuji answered glumly. “About this Sakura Futaba girl...If she’s related to Boss, think people livin’ nearby would know about her?”

Airi shook her head. “No, I’m certain I had never heard that name before until Alibaba told us. I
haven’t heard anyone in the neighborhood mention that name either…”

Akira sighed. “You’ve lived here longer than I have so I’ll defer to you on that.”

Morgana snorted. “That’s some keen intuition coming from you, Ryuji. You should have used more of that during your exams.”

Ryuji pulled a face. “Ugh, I never wanna think about exams again…” He rubbed the back of his head. “What can we do then?”

Airi tapped her chin. “...Well, we could still ask Ji-san’s neighbors. They might hear something since they live so close to him.”

Akira nodded. “I’ll ask the neighborhood anyway, just in case.”

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“Summer vacation starts the day after tomorrow, but don’t forget…” Ushimaru-sensei sneered. “There’s an urgent assembly on Monday. We’ll be taking attendance. There’s been an unusual number of strange incidents this year.” His glower deepened on his aged face. “Don’t do anything stupid over break. Got it? Don’t go someplace shady like the red-light district, and don’t go to the beach after dark.”

Airi blinked. What did people do at the beach after dark? Orgies? No, that would be stupid. Sand would go places…Unless they did it anyway. Huh. She had never been to the beach so she couldn’t really say.

“I want to go to the beach…” Morgana whispered. “I want to jump in some cold water…Seems like we won’t be having fun on our summer break for a while…”

Akira hummed quietly. He, or rather, they, bought swimsuits, so a trip to the beach would be nice. He hadn’t gone to a beach in a while and maybe the beaches here in Tokyo would be different. Plus...

His eyes slid to his right. He wanted to see her in her swimsuit. She hadn’t shown him the one she bought, and he could admit he was excited. This time, he had to get her to agree to a picture.

Just...after this Medjed business was finished with.

---

Once school ended, Akira, Airi, and Yusuke headed back to Yongenjaya. Since they were all residents and were vaguely familiar with the neighborhood, they figured it would be best that it was only them who did the questioning.

Ann asked Makoto for another aikido lesson since they were on stand by and Ryuji decided not to tag along, instead he’d be working on his stamina with his old track coach.

Makoto took Ann over to Protein Lovers where they changed in the lockers room before walking over to the mats. Ann had opted out of the Shujin gym uniform and wore a hot pink tank top and black leggings, her usual pigtails put up into a high ponytail tied tightly on top of her head.

“First, we stretch.” Makoto commanded, straightening one arm while pressing it down onto her collarbones with her other arm.
Ann nodded and did as she was told. Bending one knee, she stretched out her other leg before doing the same with the other one. Makoto held her back down when she tried to reach her toes, helping her even when she grunted in pain. They did this for another ten minutes, warming up every muscle, before getting back on their feet.

“All right.” Ann breathed out, a fine sheen of sweat coating her skin. “What next?”

Makoto spread her feet evenly and bent her knees, balling her hands into fists. “I’m going to attack you and I want you to do your best to defend yourself.”

Taken aback, Ann recoiled. “Huh?! But-But I haven’t learned enough!”

Narrowing her eyes, Makoto took three steps to punch her right in the face.

Clenching her eyes, Ann held up her arms and awaited for the pain. Nothing happened. Slowly cracking open her sight, she flinched when she realized the council president’s knuckles were a hair’s breadth away from the tip of her nose.

Makoto let her arm fall from pulling her punch and sighed. “Ann, you know in a real fight that the enemy won’t wait for you to get ready.” She lectured. “I realize we rely more on our magic than our physical attacks, but if a Shadow or god forbid a real person tries to hurt you, you need to react immediately.”

Ann bit her lip and nodded. “Yeah, you’re right. If I’m going to be Shiho’s light, I have to show her that I can take care of myself.” She held up a fist. “I feel it, you know...Like I know I can do this.”

Makoto smiled and nodded. “Good, and you know we’ll be right there with you. Suzui-san won’t have to worry at all.” She eyed the model’s toned arms and legs. “You have been exercising lately with Ryuji, right? How is that going for you?”

Reddening, Ann looked away. “…It’s a work in progress. I can tell my figure is now due to my hard work, not just my genes, and having him with me has been reassuring.”

Makoto raised her brows. “That’s good...You two have become closer these days.”

Steam rose off her face from the remark. “I guess so...” Ann muttered. ”He’s still an idiot, though.” She smiled shyly. “A well-meaning idiot.”

Smiling fondly, Makoto began a slow kata, her open palms moving in a back and forth rhythm. Ann made to follow her, her own kata being slower and less confident.

The more experienced martial arts user hummed as she broke through her student’s guard again. “Airi and I think you two may get together.”

Gaping, Ann stumbled forward for a second before righting herself. “What?! No way!...” She looked away glumly. “Not with how he is.” She muttered. “All he does is chase other girls…”

Makoto stared at her sympathetically. “Ann…”

The model sighed and let her arms fall limply at her sides. “I don’t know, I’d normally tell Airi about this stuff. Can you...Can you listen for a second?”

The upperclassman nodded and led her over to one of the benches. “Of course, Ann.”

Tugging her legs up, Ann wrapped her arms around them and rested her chin on her knees. “…I do
like Ryuji.” She confessed quietly. “I think he’s a nice guy who’s strong and caring…” Her cheeks reddened. “And...he dyes his hair for me.”

Makoto blinked. “He does?”

Ann bit her lip to stop herself from smiling. “Yeah...It was during our celebration for Madarame when I 'fell asleep' for a few minutes. Airi was telling us why Ryuji started bleaching his hair.” She beamed. “It was because back during middle school at Yoyogi, I transferred in late and a lot of people made fun of me for being half foreign, so...he bleached his hair to take the attention off of me.”

Makoto smiled. “That sounds really cute.”

Ann giggled and nodded. “Yeah...I didn’t even know his name back then but he did that for me. I think I might’ve liked him then too because of that.” She sighed, the expression on her face dimming. “But all we do is argue. He’s so pig headed and all he does is ogle girls.” She hid her face in her knees. “...Never me.” She whispered. “Am I not pretty enough? Is it because we’re friends so he feels awkward about it? Is it...because he doesn’t want to date a foreigner?”

Leaning back in her seat, Makoto sighed and placed a hand on her shoulder. “I’m not Ryuji so I can’t answer those with certainty, but...He’s always watched you.” She stated softly. “You never notice, but he always sits near you. He argues with you but I can tell he’s not doing it maliciously. I think he argues with you because he knows that’s the only way to get your full attention. When you yell at him, you’re staring directly at him.”

She smirked. “And you didn’t notice but in our last Mementos run together, he couldn’t keep his eyes off of you and your new confidence. Remember? I lectured him to focus.” She patted her shoulder. “Give him some time. Ryuji isn’t the brightest, but I think he does like you in a way that doesn’t count for the rest of us.”

Lifting her head from her knees, Ann stared at her for a moment before blushing. “I guess...If you’re saying that, then it must be true.”

Makoto narrowed her eyes. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“You know…” Ann shrugged awkwardly. “I haven’t heard you say you liked anyone, so I thought you weren’t the romantic type. Have you ever had a boyfriend?”

Makoto looked away and sighed. “Is it so wrong to stay single? My only goals are to help our group and to graduate high school. Anything after that will be up for consideration. There are just more important things right now than finding a...boyfriend.” Not to mention that she had caused enough strife between the couple she did know. She still felt guilty for asking Akira-kun to accompany her, even though nothing even remotely romantic had happened. He had been uncomfortable and stressed because of it, and no matter how much she wanted to help Eiko, she would not harm Akira-kun and Airi that way.

Ann tilted her head, stretching her legs back down to the floor. “That’s admirable. I was just wondering, you know.” Getting back on her feet, she turned to the council president with a confident smile. “Let’s keep going! I have to look good for my next shoot!”

Airi sighed as she walked away from Sojiro’s street. None of his neighbors reported to ever seeing
a girl, or even hearing about someone named “Futaba.” The mailman didn’t know anything either, but he did tell her he delivered to Sojiro’s house almost every day.

She frowned thoughtfully. The barista wasn’t one to shop much, only for groceries really, so why would he have so many packages delivered? Was Futaba in there?

Turning the corner at the small apartment complexes, she spied Yusuke walking out of the supermarket with a frown, a brand new calbee chip container in hand. Sweatdropping at his predictable purchase, Airi walked up to him. “Anything?”

Yusuke turned to her and nodded his head, ripping open the top of his chips. “There is a 20% discount on rice if purchases amount over ¥4000.”

She stared at him. “...Useful to know actually, but anything on Futaba-chan?”

He shook his head. “No. None of the employees within were familiar with the name.”

“Same.” They turned to see Akira walk up to them, Morgana on his shoulder. “I went and asked Dr. Takemi if she ever had a patient by that name, and she said no.” Akira informed them quietly. “No one else I asked knew it either.”

Looking at one another, they shared a collective sigh. Seemed like their search was fruitless.

“Let’s stop for today.” Morgana advised on his leader’s shoulder. “The sun is already setting and you guys still have school tomorrow.”

Nodding, they separated for the day, the artistic siblings going home while Akira headed to the cafe. The bell rang when he opened the door and he stopped in surprise when he saw Sae was here again, and judging by the look of annoyance occupying Sojiro’s face, she was an unwelcome customer.

Sae glanced over at him before turning her attention back to the owner of the establishment. “You read the letter, did you not?”

Sojiro scowled. “So you’re the one who tipped him off about Futaba.” He narrowed his eyes at her. “You really shouldn’t have done that. I have no intention of talking to you about Wakaba.”

She raised a brow. “Tipped off...? What are you talking about? Back to the matter at hand...Your parental authority will have to be suspended. I take it you’re OK with that outcome?”

He glared at her incredulously. “What?!?”

“Considering the state of your daughter and your family overall, there are no points in your favor.” Sae informed him coolly. “Would you like to take this to domestic court? Our chances of victory are roughly 99.9% though. With these suspicions of abuse, there’s no way you could avoid having your custody revoked.”

Lips pulled back in a snarl, Sojiro crossed his arms over his apron. “You’re going that far...?!?” He growled at her. “I told you, I don’t know a damn thing about it!”

She narrowed her eyes. “We’re extremely serious about this. As long as there’s a possibility that cognitive psience can be linked to psychotic breakdowns...” She closed her mouth, glancing over at the teenager who was still listening into their argument before sliding her gaze back to the subject of her interrogation. “...You’re not my only option, either. If you won’t talk, I’ll be forced to contact Kimisawa-san instead. Arihito-san was murdered years before Isshiki-san died, but he
must have some sort of data he left behind that could help our investigation. We’ve already interrogated Hisoka on what little he knew.”

Clenching his jaw at the mention of his deceased friend, Sojiro let out a long sigh. “…Fine, I yield.” He muttered, disheartened by her threats. “Just...Just leave Airi and Futaba alone.”

Her face smoothed out into a polite but pleased smile. “Thank you. I will contact you at a later date.” She took out a business card and placed it on the bar counter.

Sojiro glared tiredly at her. “I doubt you’ll find anything you want to hear, though.”

“That’s fine.” Sae countered smoothly. “It will be up to us to decide whether the information you give us is useful or not.” She smiled slightly. “Next time I come here, it will just be for a nice cup of coffee.” She turned to walk out the cafe, stopping just before exiting the premises.

“You’re...Kimisawa-san’s boyfriend, correct?”

Akira stared at her through cold eyes, face set into a blank mask. She just threatened his family.

“Rest assured, so long as Sakura-san gives me the information I need, I will not be contacting her.” Sae informed him coolly before exiting the cafe.

As the door slammed shut, Sojiro snapped. “And stay out!” He let out a groan of frustration. “That woman is real good at pissing people off...Who does she think she is, threatening their girls?!” He growled to himself. Taking a deep breath to try to calm down, he caught sight of Akira still idling near the doorway, a drawn look on his face. “What’s with that look?” He asked curtly. “Got something to say?”

Akira turned to him with a worried frown. “Custody?” Of Futaba?

His guardian glared at him. “This doesn’t involve you.”

“Is Futaba your daughter?” He pressed. He was the only way to get that information.

“That’s enough!” Sojiro snapped, his voice booming with anger inside the small cafe. “Just behave yourself and keep going to school if you don’t want me to throw you out of here.” He almost tore his apron off with how angry he was. “Lock up.” Without waiting another word, he walked past his ward and slammed the cafe door shut behind him, rattling “Sayuri” on the wall.

Panicking, Akira went to stabilize the priceless painting before sighing. He couldn’t deny that he was hurt his guardian would say that to him. He thought these past few months their relationship had been improving...

His bag rustled and Morgana jumped out onto one of the bar stools. “Hm, the existence of this Futaba is for certain.” He remarked pensively. “She may be in some kind of bad situation though… Moreso, our conjecture that Alibaba is connected to Leblanc seems to have a pretty solid foundation.” His ears twitched. “Oh, and didn’t they mention “cognitive” something? Could this be what Isshiki Wakaba and mom’s dad had been working on?”

Akira sighed and rubbed his forehead. “Maybe…” He didn’t want to think right now.

Morgana’s ears wilted. “We can’t really press Chief about this, especially after he mentioned throwing you out.” He murmured. “Let’s wait until we can meet up tomorrow to let the others know.”

Nodding quietly, Akira moved upstairs to change into his sleepwear before climbing onto the bed,
letting Morgana shut off the lights by jumping up to grasp the string. He stared up at the ceiling, not minding the feline curling up against his side like every night now.

He knew Sojiro had volunteered to take him in, why or how didn't really matter...Only that this man was the closest thing he had to a real father. His own father was a cold man who hadn't smiled at him in years, let alone cared for him in any way except financially. His mother...He wouldn't even go there right now. Sojiro for all his gruffness was a fair man, and being around each other constantly had him actually consider him as a father figure.

Yet he had snapped at him earlier, any sort of reluctant fondness for his charge disappearing under hot fury as soon as he mentioned this Sakura Futaba.

He thought...He hoped, that they were close enough that the older man would've at least said something, something other than "none of your business." He couldn't be patient either, not with Medjed threatening the whole of Japan because of them. Alibaba could help counter them, and it all centered around Sakura Futaba.

If only Boss trusted him enough...

Letting out a small exhale, Akira took off his glasses, placed them on the window ledge, and closed his eyes.

Thank you to Asher for this cute fanart of the little family! The couple and their furry kid lolol
likes, dislikes, thoughts? Leave me a comment!
Chapter 166

Meeting up at the hideout in Shibuya after school, Akira told the band of thieves what he walked into last night. “Sis was threatening Boss..?” Makoto gasped, eyes wide with shock.

Akira nodded. “She was going on about custody over Futaba and taking him to court if he didn’t comply…” He tightened his grip around Airi’s waist. “And that if he wasn’t going to say anything, she would ask Airi.”

Airi bit her lip. “Niijima-san said that..? Then during the court case…” That was what she meant when she said she wouldn’t stop her inquiries. It must be about the research her dad, Hisoka, and Wakaba did. “So she said Futaba is Ojisan’s daughter, and he’s abusing her?” She huffed incredulously. “There’s no way he would do that.”

Makoto grasped her chin thoughtfully. “You know him better than all of us...Still, could there be a kernel of truth?”

Akira shook his head. “There’s no way.” Even with how gruff and callous the barista was, he never once starved, hit, or yelled at him maliciously, even when he clearly didn’t like him. He knew his guardian was a good man.

Makoto pursed her lips. “I would like to believe you both, but we don’t have any conclusive evidence, do we..?”

His phone rang and Akira took it out, the others crowding around to see. “Is it Alibaba?!?” Morgana yelped.

???: I’ve given you a calling card and told you the target’s name. You should be ready for this.
???: Why aren’t you doing it?
???: I told you I’d help you if you stole her Heart. So what seems to be the hold up?
???: I also said I’d report your identities to the police if you didn’t help me.
???: Are you OK with that? I’m serious here.

“What a selfish person.” Yusuke remarked with a slight scowl.

“He *does* have information on us…” Makoto added grimly.

Ryuji huffed and crossed his arms. “This Futaba he’s talking about have a Palace? If so, we’ll need keywords to get in. Try messaging him about ‘em.”

Akira nodded, his thumbs already tapping the keyboard on the screen.
Ak: Tell me her keywords.
???: Keywords?
???: What are you talking about?
???: Are you just saying random stuff to dodge the issue?

Ann bit her lip as she read the incoming messages. “What’re we going to do about this?”

Airi furrowed her brow. “Can you ask him if we can meet him? It would be easier than just waiting for him to contact us like this…”

Ak: I want to meet you.
???: Meet? With me?
???: That will be difficult.
???: I have reasons for not being able to go out.
???: That’s why I’m contacting you like this.

Morgana frowned, disappointed. “He can’t go out?”

???: Wait, I get it.
???: You steal people’s hearts directly...That might make things difficult.
???: Extremely difficult.
???: Hold on.
???: Hm…

They all looked at each other, exasperated. “Can’t they make up their mind?” Ann grumbled.

Yusuke nodded in agreement. “This is akin to him yanking our chain…”

???: OK. It’s a shame, but I’m calling this deal off. Stop looking into Sakura Futaba.
???: Forget this ever happened. I won’t report you all to the police either, so don’t worry.
???: Sorry for taking your time. Now if you’ll excuse me…
Ak: Wait a second.
???: I said the deal’s off!
???: We’re never going to speak again. Don’t expect me to contact you anymore either.

They stared at the screen with wide eyes as it displayed an error message, saying the receiving end didn’t exist. Ann gasped. “Huh..? Did he just shut the whole operation down?”

Morgana shook his ears. “This doesn’t make any sense…Not only can Alibaba not go out, but he won’t let us meet Futaba either?”

Ryuji sighed but shrugged. “Well, it’s none of our business now. We can’t contact him anymore.”

Ann furrowed her brow at his nonchalant attitude. “But...what do we do about Medjed? We won’t be able to get Alibaba to help us with them now.”

He shrugged. “They were prolly just prankin’ us. Medjed made that huge declaration but they haven't done nothing since. I bet we got them freaked out.”

Morgana tilted his head. “You mean they backed out because they’re afraid we’ll change their Hearts?”

Ryuji grinned. “Yup! And now it’d just make ‘em look lame if they came out and apologized!”
Airi furrowed her brow, still staring at the messages. “...Why would he backtrack so quickly from meeting? And what is his connection with Futaba-chan..?” Why was he targeting her specifically?

Yusuke frowned thoughtfully. “...Perhaps this could be a reach, but-”

“Who cares.” Ryuji waved them away with a relaxed grin. “With Alibaba and Medjed outta the picture, can we just say this case is closed?”

They all looked at each other. Makoto slowly smiled. “You do have a point...I guess it is safe for us to relax a little.”

Airi shared a glance with her boyfriend. There was no way it would be this easy. Plus, they still hadn’t figured out anything about Futaba. At the very least, she wanted to do that. She wanted to meet her. Whether or not she was Wakaba’s daughter, she was clearly Sojiro’s, which made her family.

“Oh yeah!” Ryuji perked up. “Remember Kaneshiro’s Treasure? Prepare to have your minds blown!” He held up one finger on his right hand and five on his left. “We got...¥150,000 out of it!”

They stared at him in shock. “That’s awesome!” Ann gasped. “We can really go all out with that kinda money!”

He nodded energetically. “Yeah! Let’s make up for what happened at the Fireworks Festival! We gotta go eat something fittin’ for the Phantom Thieves’ worldwide debut!”

She giggled and swayed happily at the thought of expensive food. “Where would be good..?”

Akira put his phone away in his pocket. “Let’s do sushi?”

Ryuji gasped and brightened. “Yeah! I could really go for some unagi too!”

Yusuke crossed his hands in front of him and smiled. “The best method is to fill yourself on ginger before beginning to eat sushi.” He lectured. “That is my master technique.”

Airi sweatdropped. “Maybe not this time, especially if we’re going to a master.” She patted his shoulder. “Don’t waste the sushi.”

Makoto sighed. “Sushi is fine with me, but don’t go overboard with this.”

Morgana purred. “I’m all for sushi!” His eyes sparkled at the thought.

“All right!” Ryuji cheered. “We’ll go tomorrow night!”

Akira stayed for dinner again at the artists’ residence, enjoying a nice spaghetti with tonkatsu slices. He hadn’t wanted to admit that he didn’t really want to see his guardian so he avoided the cafe for the time being. He wanted to give the older man a chance to calm down. He didn’t want to set him off again and be shipped off elsewhere for his probation.

Laying down on one of the chaises with a full stomach, he glanced over sleepily as Yusuke and Airi quietly conversed about something in the hallway, but he couldn’t really hear clearly.

“...visit...the date...Madarame…”

Nodding, Yusuke went up to the Study while Airi walked over to the living room and plopped
down on the other chaise with a sigh. “What’s up?” Akira inquired lazily.

She turned to him with a small smile. “It’s nothing, don’t worry.” Their phones rang out.

Ma: I wonder if all that Medjed business was really a prank.
Ma: Now that I think about it calmly, it’s strange that they haven’t actually done anything yet.
Ma: If their goal is to target the Phantom Thieves, they should be wanting to act now, given our fame.
An: Huh. When you put it that way, it makes me wonder, too.
An: Especially after they taunted us theatrically like that.
Ai: Maybe they’re waiting for us to act?
Ai: They don’t know how we really operate, after all.
Y: True. It would be best to come up with a countermeasure regardless.
Y: For now, we should cautiously enjoy the sushi. That is all we can do.
Ak: Something’s not right…
R: I was thinking that too! I can’t really put it into words though.
Ai: This feels like an escalation to something, but what..?
Ma: Hm, Yusuke is right though.
Ma: I’m sorry for bringing this up. On the day before our celebration, too…
An: Cheer up, Makoto! We’ll be eating like kings tomorrow!
Ai: Hopefully no one throws up this time.
Ma: Someone threw up?
An: They better have two restroom stalls then.
Y: I hope one person in particular is on their best behavior. I’ll refrain from saying who though.
R: ...You better not be talking about me!
Ai: Yusuke…

They put their phones away with a sigh. Morgana darted off to take a nap on top of Yusuke’s futon in the tatami room, curling up into a ball. Airi eyed her boyfriend for a moment, noting just how slack he was, a total 180 from how he usually presented himself. “...When was the last time you relaxed?”

Akira slowly blinked. “Relaxed? Uh…” A sly grin spread across his face. “Does that time you gave me a-”

“OK, other than that.” She backtracked, a hint of red decorating her cheeks.

He pursed his lips. “...The hot springs?” He shrugged even though he was laying down. “I don’t really have much time for myself…”

Airi frowned and after a moment of debating with herself, stood up and walked over to his couch. “Roll over for me?”

Akira looked at her questioningly but did as told, turning so he would lay on his stomach instead. His legs were long enough that his feet hung off the edge, but otherwise he was comfortable. He was about to ask why when a weight pressed down on the back of his thighs.

Airi straddled him and began kneading his shoulders. He let out an appreciative moan as she worked out his tense muscles. “Oh yes…”
She smiled with amusement at his reaction. “My, you’re so stiff...Have I not been taking care of my leader like a good girlfriend?”

Akira hummed, resting his head against his arms and closing his eyes. “You have...but a little more is always nice…”

She smiled at his answer and continued to massage his back, working down from his shoulders all the way to just above his rear. This was another way she could help him. He always did so much for them, for her.

He let out quiet noises as she did so, letting her know where was worse and needed more attention. After a good thirty minutes, he was as relaxed as goo, melting into the sofa. “...I love you…” He murmured sleepily.

Smiling fondly, Airi leaned down to plant a kiss on his cheek. “I love you too.”

She leaned against the wall. “I didn’t tell you,” She began quietly. “But I recently got my request approved.”

He furrowed his brow. “Request? For what?”

“...To meet Madarame-san in prison.”

“What?!”

“You know that no one had come forth to replace him as your guardian, and unfortunately, Kawakami-nee can only have one person under her name. That means Madarame-san is still listed as your guardian even in prison.”

He looked away, his gray eyes dim at the news. “...And what significance does this pose for me?” He asked bitterly.

She sighed. “…I want to give you the chance to talk to him, but that wasn’t my main reason. I wanted to ask him to put my address as your home.” She smiled softly. “You wouldn’t have to stay over at Leblanc to avoid the child support agents. You would have this as your real home…” She hesitated. “If that’s what you want, at least. The option is open for you.”

He stared at her with wide eyes. “Home..?” He whispered, a hand coming to grasp the are above his heart. “…I would like that.” His smile was small, but she could see just how much it meant to him.

She smiled as well. “You’re always welcome here, Yusuke. This is your home, too. Will you come with me? To see him?”

“...Yes. When is the date?”

“The visit is scheduled for August 23rd. Madarame-san is at Fuchuu.”

“Very well. I will prepare myself for the day.” He hesitated for a moment. “I’m not sure whether to thank you, considering I had told myself to sever all connections with him.”

“That’s fine...So long as you’re happy.”

He smiled. “I will thank you for that, Aneki.”
Finally having a free day all to themselves, they met up at the Ginza train station dressed in their normal clothes and walked to the sushi restaurant they reserved. Akira noted it was the same one Yoshida took him to over a week ago, so he knew this was going to be good.

Placing most their belongings in the complimentary lockers upon entering the small establishment, they stepped into the restaurant proper and took their seats at the counter, bowing their heads to the sushi master who greeted them with a smile.

Paper doors greeted them when they walked in, their shoes stepping onto dark lacquered wooden floors. The chairs were a dark wood, complimenting the dim and intimate wooden interiors. The only light came from behind the bar, allowing the chef to see with precision. This sort of establishment didn’t have a menu to choose from, rather they gave their customers a predetermined set.

There were two other diners sat here as well, both adults, and within a few minutes, wooden boards decorated with some of the finest sashimi slices they’d ever seen were placed in front of them, the chef bowing afterward.

They looked down at the spread in awe. Fatty tuna, salmon, scallop, salmon roe sushi, mackerel, flounder, and sweet shrimp, all placed perfectly in a slanted line with a sprig of ginger and wasabi on the side.

They looked at each other before promptly digging in. Airi almost cried when the scallop practically melted on her tongue. She could never have afforded this before. “Oh my days…”

“Yeah…” Ryuji moaned appreciatively. “The flounder is outta this world! That texture…” He dug into another piece.

Yusuke grimaced when he realized he hadn’t been handed a menu. “I-I don’t see any prices listed here…” He looked down at his meal with a conflicted frown.

Ryuji turned to him with a smirk. “It’s called market price. Don’t worry ‘bout it; we got the cash!”

“So ooood…” Ann sang as she munched on a piece of fatty tuna.

Akira hummed as he chewed on his sweet shrimp. Just as good as last time.

“Hey…”

They looked down at his bag that he snuck in, Morgana peeking through the zipper. “Is the fatty tuna ready yet?” He whispered hopefully, eyes sparkling for top quality food.

“Hold your horses!” Ryuji hissed down at him, glancing over at the chef who didn’t seem like he noticed any meowing. “And don’t talk!”

Taking pity, Airi inconspicuously took one of her slices and held it out with her chopsticks below the counter. “Here.” She whispered.

Gasping in delight, Morgana quickly nommed it down in one mouthful. “Meow-”

She quickly covered his mouth before he could get any louder, but every eye in the restaurant turned to her and she sweatdropped. “…M-Meow…So delicious…” She smiled nervously. “Meow…”
Giving her weird looks, the other customers turned back to what they were doing and the thieves let out a collective sigh of relief.

“You know, it’s still bothering me…” Makoto began quietly, her chopsticks stilling in her hand. “Is Boss really the kind of person to abuse someone?”

Akira shook his head. “He’s not abusive. He’s gruff yeah, but he’s not hurtful.”

She pursed her lips, chopsticks pausing over her half finished plate. “I can’t get it off my mind. Especially if it means he could be taken to court by Sis of all people…”

Airi tilted her head. “Has she mentioned anything like that at home?”

Makoto shook her head. “No, nothing. She usually doesn’t speak about her cases unless she’s on her phone.”

Ryuji huffed. “If it’s really true about the abuse, he’d be a no-good jerk pretendin’ to be a guardian.”

“Maybe the chief is the one who needs change of heart…” Morgana whispered to them.

Airi tensed. “What? No way! That’s not possible…” Doubt gripped her heart for a moment. But she wouldn’t know, would she. She’d really only known him for a year and before that were just short moments as a kid. “…Right?”

Reaching over Ryuji, Ann patted her shoulder. “He’s not! I checked after our conversation. The Nav doesn’t register his name.” Her expression turned awkward. “Anything beyond this is his family’s problem. We,” She gestured to the other thieves. “Probably shouldn’t get any more involved…”

Airi looked down at her lap. “Yeah…” Maybe she was just deluding herself. She couldn’t say why she wanted to meet Futaba so much except for their shared experience in losing their families right in front of them. Maybe this was her "motherly instinct”…

“Wait…” Ryuji started, all of them turning to look at him. “You think Alibaba could be Boss’s ex-wife?!” They gave him weird looks, not understanding where this was coming from. “He musta cheated on her,” He continued with a grin. “And that’s where Futaba came from.”

Makoto shook her head at his theory. “Your imagination has run rampant.”

“How foolish.” Yusuke added with a shake of his head.

Akira sweatdropped. “…Nah.”

Ryuji pouted as he was shot down immediately.

Taking another bite of salmon roe, Yusuke smiled, satisfied. “This is delicious. I’ve never experienced anything quite like it before.”

Airi gave him a small smile. “Right?” They shared a bittersweet smile. They couldn’t help but be grateful, having had nothing before.

Ryuji grinned. “And it’s all thanks to us bein’ the Phantom Thieves-”

Ann slapped her hand over his mouth, silencing him. “Ryuji!” She hissed, but it was too late. The chef and even the other customers turned to look at them at his mention of Phantom Thieves.
“U-Umm…” Makoto tried to come up with an excuse, eyes wide with panic. “Phan...Fantastic! This sushi is delicious!”

Ann nodded in agreement. “Y-Yeah! The fish is sooo fresh!”

Giving them a derisive glare, an arrogant woman cleared her throat. “Hmph. Everywhere we go, we hear about these Phantom Thieves.”

Her date snorted. “What rubbish.” They ignored the teenagers after that, turning back to their own meal and conversation with the sushi master.

Ann sighed and turned to scowl at her fellow blond. “Think about where we are, Ryuji.” She whispered sharply.

He deflated. “Sorry,” He apologized gumly as he was subjected to all of their disappointed frowns. “It just kinda slipped…”

Noting how quiet the Yongenjaya residents were, Makoto smiled apologetically from her seat. “My apologies for bringing up Boss again. We should just enjoy the food.”

They all nodded and went back to their sushi, enjoying each piece.

After packaging up the leftovers to go, they took the train back to Shibuya where they were about to head their separate ways.

“Nijima-san! What are you doing here?”

Makoto turned around and tensed, realizing it was a certain student detective walking up to them, dressed in a blue and gray diamond patterned sweater vest over a button up white shirt. His beige slacks covered his long legs, and he held his signature “A” briefcase in hand. “Akechi-kun…”

Ryuji narrowed his eyes and turned around. “Akechi..?” He whispered, glowering at the student detective himself.

Akechi turned to all of them. “Kurusu-kun, Kitagawa-kun, Kimisawa-san…and the other two from the TV station. Could it be that you’re friends of Nijima-san? I wasn't aware she kept any company.” He smiled genially. "My, what an interesting change in you, Nijima-san."

Furrowing her brow, Ann leaned over to Akira. “He knows your names?” She whispered.

Overhearing her whisper, Akechi smiled. “Of course, I’m a psychic.” He laughed slightly. “I’m only joking. In truth, I’m a rookie detective, so of course I know that Kitagawa-kun is a former pupil of Madarame…” His eyes slid to the rest of them. “And you’re all Shujin Academy students where the Phantom Thieves’ first target taught at. I have actually just recently joined the investigation team looking into the Phantom Thieves. Did you see that Medjed has declared war on them?”

They tensed at the news. He was part of an investigation team that were looking into them specifically? Wait, Medjed?

“War?” Airi covered her mouth. “What do you mean?”

Akechi sighed, smile falling. “Their website was updated just a moment ago.”
Ryuji immediately reacted and reached for his phone, pulling up the website. “For real?!” He soon let out a groan. “English again…Uh… We are…Japan…Phantom Thieves…no…dammit, I can’t think right now!”

Taking out her phone, Ann waited for the site to load. As soon as she read the message, she shrieked. “Wait, what…?!”

Akechi watched this with an observant eye. “Why do you seem so agitated..?”

“Oh, no reason…” She quickly lied, giving him a nervous smile as she put her phone away.

“She’s, uh…” Ryuji stammered for an excuse, sweating slightly. “A huge fan of the Phantom Thieves. A total nutjob for ‘em.”

The student detective hummed with amusement. “I don’t know how wise it is to be a fan of groups like them.”

Incensed by his constant derisive remarks, Makoto narrowed her eyes. “What is with these comments?” She asked faux-casually.

He chuckled. “My apologies. I didn’t mean to butt into your conversation, but…” He surveyed them with a keen eye. “I must say, this is an interesting group. Prosecutor Niijima’s sister, an ex-pupil of Madarame, and a few Shujin Academy students…” His eyes lingered on Airi for a moment. “It seems you’re all connected to the Phantom Thieves. Perhaps you have better intel than I do.”

Airi furrowed her brow. Why was he looking at her like that? Did he know something else and just wasn’t saying it?

Giving her a mysterious smile, Akechi finally turned to the one person he paid the most attention to. “Regarding this whole Medjed commotion…” His eyes hooded slightly. “If you were one of the Phantom Thieves, what would you do?”

Akira stared at him for a moment, his expression almost akin to a blank slate. “I don’t care.” That was the best answer he could give without giving himself away. It was clear that the student detective was onto them. Was that why he always stopped to talk to him in the mornings?

Akechi tilted his head. “How disappointing…You should care, since this “war” will affect everyone.”

Ryuji crossed his legs, exposed arms tense as he clenched his hands inside his pockets. “Sorry to disappoint,” He bit out. “But we’re just normal high school kids. If anything, we wanna hear what you gotta say, Mr. Detective.”

Akechi observed them for a moment. “…My profiling of the Phantom Thieves has led me to believe they are a group of juveniles.” He disclosed. “They have a relative amount of free time after school, and a hideout to slip away to. Furthermore, considering Kamoshida was their first target, it seems they began activity around April.” His eyes narrowed, locking on with gray ones hidden behind glasses. “In a way, all I’ve just said about the Phantom Thieves coincides with the group you have here.”

Airi bit her lip, apprehension clawing up her back like a cornered animal. “Are you…reporting us? We haven’t done anything…”

His expression smoothed out. “I didn’t say I was being suspicious of you.”
Akira raised a brow. “That’s good to hear.”

Akechi laughed at his response, covering his mouth with a closed fist. “Hahaha, It seems you’re not perturbed in the slightest.” He smiled. “You really are an intriguing one. I lack your calm mannerisms...but don’t you think my deduction is an interesting one?” He winked. “I bet we’d make a great team if we worked together.”

Airi stared blankly. Was he flirting with her boyfriend? First he asked her on what seemed to have been a date, and now he was insinuating a tag team with Akira...Even if he wasn’t Go-kun, she might just start disliking him again if he kept this up. This and his implications of them being his targets.

“What?!” Ryuji scrunched up his face in disgust at the thought of having Akechi on the team. “The hell’re you sayin’!?”

Stepping closer, Akechi stood face to face with the Phantom Thieves leader. “I’m curious to hear what you have to say.” He smiled. “You seem to have a wealth of information. In return, I’ll teach you how to make deductions. I believe that is a fair trade-off for you.”

Akira gave him a raised brow. “Really now...Sure, why not.”

Akechi chuckled at his answer. “Well, this has been a valuable point of reference for me. I hope to see you all again.” He turned to Airi and gave her a playful wink. “Another time, girlfriend.” He turned around and walked toward the Hanzomon Line, disappearing in the crowd of pedestrians.

They watched him leave until they couldn’t see him anymore and turned to each other. “What was that about..?” Ann whispered apprehensively.

Yusuke scowled darkly. “I knew his intentions were deeper. To think his conversations with us in the mornings would lead to this…” He crossed his hands in front of him. “Do you think he’s ascertained our true identities?”

Ryuji grimaced. “Nah, couldn’t be...Right?”

Makoto frowned. “I’d like to say that it’s simply us overthinking this, but...It may be best to be cautious from now on.” She whispered, conscious of each passing person in the station. “We shouldn’t forget that Alibaba was able to discover who we are.”

Yusuke pursed his lips. “True, but it’s not as though he had tangible evidence to prove that discovery. Just keep acting normally.”

Airi nodded in agreement. “He can’t do anything to us, but we really do have to be more careful.” She turned to the ex-runner. “Ryuji, I told you before, but please don’t blurt out our secret like that, especially in public.”

Ryuji winced and nodded. “Right...Prolly not helpin’, huh…”

“More importantly,” Ann interrupted, getting her phone out again. “Things are getting serious with Medjed! I’ll read it now...” She scrolled the message and translated it into Japanese for all of them. “‘We are disappointed in the people of Japan and their belief in the Phantom Thieves’ false justice. Hence, we shall proceed with our plan to cleanse Japan. This process will commence on August 21st. As a result, the Japanese economy shall suffer devastating damages.’”

They stared at her in shock and horror. “For real..?” Ryuji whispered, shoulders slumping at the news.
“Keep reading, Ann.” Akira commanded quietly, brows furrowed at the news.

Ann nodded and looked back down at the screen. “However, we are magnanimous. We will give the Phantom Thieves one final opportunity to repent. As proof of this repentance, we demand that they reveal their identities to the public. We will attack if these demands remain unmet. The future of Japan rests with the Phantom Thieves. We are Medjed. We are unseen. We will eliminate evil.’...That’s what it says.”

Ryuji furrowed his brow. “Sounds bad…”

“Not just bad,” Airi refuted, eyes wide with panic. “If they attack Japan digitally, everyone with a bank account, social security, anything that has been put into data, will be screwed, us included…” The scenario was already running through her head because she knew what it was. She wouldn’t be able to keep her house if Medjed took her property information. She wouldn’t be able to eat if they hack her bank account. No one would be safe.

Yusuke scowled at the reality of the situation. “They are quite the attention seekers…”

Ann bit her lip. “What are we gonna do about this..? Makoto?”

Makoto sighed helplessly. “If only we could get in contact with Alibaba.”

Akira furrowed his brow. “...We may have to fight with Boss about Futaba then. He’s our only link left.” Even if it meant he would get thrown out. At the very least, Japan won’t be targeted.

Ryuji looked up at him sullenly. “Why don’t we go to Leblanc to talk ‘bout this? It’s too damn hot and crowded here…”

Nodding, the group of thieves traveled to Yongenjaya. On the train ride there, they tried to think up other options, but nothing worked. Akira even messaged Ohya about this, and she said she had no information either. It wasn't something the Japanese underground focused on.

Getting back to Leblanc after closing times with Sojiro nowhere to be found, they took seats around the booths and bar with a sigh. “We went through all sortsa options on our way here, but…” Ryuji mumbled. “Looks like we got no choice but to ask for Alibaba’s help.”

“Question is,” Ann crossed her legs. “How do we get in touch with him?”

Yusuke crossed his arms thoughtfully. “He cut off all contact with us after that misunderstanding. Then again, if we manage to steal Futaba’s heart, he may attempt to reach out to us once more.”

Airi wilted at the thought. “But we don’t have any clues on what her keywords are, so even if she registered in the Nav, we wouldn’t be able to get in…” Did she want to do this, though? Futaba could still be grieving. Stealing her heart could hurt her in ways they wouldn’t be able to account for.

Morgana leaned over on Akira’s shoulder. “So we have no way?”

Ryuji cursed, slamming his fist against the counter top. “Dammit, Alibaba! Where the hell are you?!”

“Actually…” They all turned to Makoto who had stayed quiet until now. “He may be closer than we think.” She theorized slowly.

They stared at her quizzically. “Huh?” Akira blinked.
“Hypothetically speaking,” Makoto began. “Even if we stole Futaba’s heart...How would Alibaba know that the deed has been done? Would he truly be able to discern that just from cell phone messages?”

Airi looked up at her in surprise. “That’s true...So they would have to know each other personally...” She sat up in her seat. “And the calling card didn’t have an address, so it was dropped off in person in the neighborhood.”

Makoto nodded approvingly. “Exactly. On top of that, he can check on Futaba’s condition. However, according to the circumstances he put forth, he’s unable to meet with us. This leads me to believe that it would be bad or impossible for him if we were to see the two of them together. It seems to me...Alibaba may in fact be Futaba herself.”

They stared at her in surprise. “For real?!?” Ryuji jumped off his chair, eyes wide.

“So...” Yusuke grasped his chin. “She’s asking that we steal her own heart..?”

Ann grasped her chin pensively. “Maybe she wants us to save her from the scars of her abuse or from her mother’s death..? That would be hard to ask directly.”

Airi winced. “That’s...insensitive, to say the least. Maybe...” She bit her lip to stop herself.

Akira looked over at her. “Maybe what?”

She fought with herself before sighing. “Maybe...she blames herself for Isshiki-san’s death.” She theorized quietly. “According to the news articles, she was right there when her mother walked out into traffic...” She hunched her shoulders over. “...It will always hurt, and it could’ve warped her perception.”

Makoto frowned sympathetically. “Airi...We don’t know for sure yet. Boss lives nearby, right? I think it’s time we finally confront him about this.”

Airi nodded reluctantly. “...Yeah.” She took a deep breath and squared her shoulders. “I want to meet Futaba-chan.”

Everyone nodded in agreement. Ryuji glanced out the cafe window, noting the darkness that blanketed the area. “It’s real late though. What’re we gonna tell Boss when we get there?”

Akira held up the leftover sushi from before. “We can say we’re giving this to him.”

“But my fatty tuna..!” Morgana protested. ”I only had one piece earlier!”

“I’ll make it up to you, OK?” Airi replied distractedly, already antsy about going. She didn’t notice the feline wilt at her response. “Let’s go as a group so he doesn’t yell at us...”

Been redesigning Airi’s school uniforms (and all her outfits tbh) to better fit her version of rebellion. A lot of people have mentioned that having her wear the standard uniform was a little
strange, so here's what I came up with! It's "elegant," but all of it was bought during sales/bargains. The gem is actually a kohinoor gem (which boosts bless skills), but it may or may not be a thing with her
Chapter 167

Chapter Notes

Thank you for 1224 kudos and 47.9k hits!!

Announcement: This story will be going on hiatus for a week or two. I'm in a bad spot right now with my depression and it doesn't help that I can feel my yearly cold coming, so I don't really feel like working on this story. Sorry. I'm honestly surprised I haven't put this story on hiatus earlier because if I'm honest, it's been a constant grind to write and post and write and post, and I don't really feel like I get much out of it. Your comments do help motivate and encourage me, especially when they're in-depth analysis', and I promise this story will be finished. Not anytime soon, and probably not this year either, but it will be finished. Airi has become such a big part of me, this story has become such a big part of me, that I can't imagine stopping for long.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Leaving the cafe together, Akira and Airi took the lead and guided them to the small street that housed Sojiro's house, stopping at the very end of the block.

It was a little larger than Airi’s, having a traditional sliding front door instead of a solid one. It was situated among several small apartment complexes, standing alone as the only one family unit on the street.

Ringing the doorbell on the gate, they waited. And waited. “Nobody is answering.” Makoto frowned, pressing the button again for the tenth time.

Ann looked up at the second floor where light peeked from behind the curtains. “But the lights are on, so someone should be home...Could it be Futaba-chan?”

Ryuji laced his hands behind his head. “Could he be nappin’?”

Akira rolled his eyes. “With how many times we rang the doorbell? He’s pretty sharp for his age.”

Morgana frowned from his spot on his shoulder. “I would think Futaba would have answered by now if she were here too.”

Airi frowned and pushed the gate open, ignoring how the others gaped at her audacity. Walking up to the front door, she was about to knock on that instead when she noticed it was inched open, as if he had forgotten to lock it. “The door’s open….”

Sliding the front door open, they stared into the darkness that was Sojiro’s house. It had the same layout as Airi’s home but the stairs were on the right rather than the left, and it clearly belonged to an older man due to the more rustic furniture and accoutrements. Men’s shoes were shelved next to the entryway, where the floors changed from concrete to wooden boards.

“Is it all right to just walk in..?” Makoto asked hesitantly.

Thunder rumbled above them in the heavens and they looked up at the clouds that covered the
night sky. “It smells like it will rain soon, so we have no choice!” Morgana yelped.

Makoto winced. “...Sorry, Boss!”

Stepping into the entryway, the only light they could see emanated from the living room, TV murmurs echoing down the hallway. “He’s not out, is he?” Makoto whispered. “The door ahead is open, and I can hear the TV.”

Ryuji grimaced. “I hope he didn’t pass out or something...I mean, Boss is kinda old, ain’t he?”

“He’s not that old. He’s like fifty-one or something.” Airi murmured as she took off her heels. “Only one way to find out if he’s here.”

Taking off their shoes, they warily trekked inside, knowing that they were technically trespassing. “Please excuse us...” Makoto weakly apologized as she walked in too, uncomfortable with breaking the rules.

Just as they were about to make it to the living room, thunder boomed loudly outside and with a zap, the power went out, leaving them in darkness.

“Ah-h-h-h-!!!”

Ann immediately latched onto Ryuji’s arm, trying to find where the noise came from. Startled by the noise, Makoto looked around wildly. “A scream?!” She panicked. “What was that?!”

Airi looked around warily. “It wasn’t any of us...right, Ryuji?”

Offended, he gaped at her. “You sayin’ that girly scream was me?!”

A thump echoed above them and they all looked up at the ceiling. Makoto immediately latched onto Airi, gripping her hands in a steel hold. “Did you hear that?!” She hissed, eyes wide with fear.

“Let’s get out of here, please?” Ann whispered to them desperately, gripping Ryuji’s bicep like a lifeline. “Can we just go?”

Ryuji looked down at her. “What’re you freakin’ out for? I’m here, aren’t I?”

She pouted, blushing when he implied he was going to protect her. “I-I-I’m not freaking out!”

Morgana looked up at the ceiling. “Could it be Alibaba..? I mean, Futaba?”

Unable to stand it any further, Ann tugged Ryuji toward the entrance and Yusuke and Akira made to follow.

Airi was going to head toward the stairs but the grip on her hand stopped her in place. “U-Umm...” Makoto whimpered, big red eyes staring up at her tearfully. “Can I hold your hand until we get out? I'm not scared, just...cautious.”

Softening, Airi nodded and tugged her closer. She herself wasn’t scared; it was hard to be scared when there were much more frightening things out there, but what was more important was to comfort her sister. “It'll be OK, Makoto. It’s nothing scarier than what we’ve already faced.” She soothed, slowly leading her to the entrance.

The council president forced her legs to move, even though she was shaking with each step. Just as they passed the stairs, another rumble from the heavens petrified her in place. “Eek!” She hugged all of Airi’s arm now, the cellist wincing at the bruising grip.
Yusuke looked back and narrowed his eyes in the darkness of the house. “I can sense someone’s presence…”

Makoto looked up, almost in tears. “Who is it..? Who’s there..?!” She shook her head and clenched her eyes. “I can’t take this anymore! I can’t fight ghosts with aikido! I’m leaving!”

Airi nodded. “OK OK, let’s go then.” She yelped when the council president’s full weight caused her to tilt sideways, and she tried counter it with her own weight.

“N-No…” Makoto whimpered, fear gripping her heart and mind, paralyzing her limbs. “My legs won’t move…”

Airi was about to say something when she tensed, feeling someone behind her. They both slowly turned to see large white circles staring back at them, the lightning from outside flashing for one second to illuminate the alien-like figure.

Makoto shrieked and threw herself back, scaring the figure who screamed and rushed back up the stairs. Airi let out a pained groan as she was catapulted to the floor, Makoto constricting her arms and legs around her for dear life. “Aaaaaaaah!” Makoto cried into her chest. “Mommy mommy mommy mommy mommy! Sissss!”

“Airi! Makoto!” Akira knelt down to try to detach the council president away, but her grasp was just too strong in the midst of her fear.

“Wait, Futaba-chan!” Airi cried out toward the dark stairs, ignoring the fact that she was being strangled by a boa constrictor. “Please, I just want to talk to you!”

“You’re a hacker, right?” Ann yelled out as well. “Just show yourself!”

“Are you OK, Futaba?!”

Tensing, all but one looked toward the entrance where Sojiro’s voice called out urgently from outside the door. Ryuji took a step back from the doors. “Crap, he’s home!”

They ran to hide behind the wall between the entryway and the stairs, using the darkness as camouflage. Airi tried to get up after them but Makoto’s weight held her down like an anchor and she was forced to stay in place. “Ah, fuck…” She groaned, already waiting for the lecture she’d inevitably get.

The door slammed open and Sojiro looked around wildly, noting their shadowy figures on the floor. “Who the hell are you?!” He roared at his intruders. “Don’t move!” Reaching over to the shoe cabinet, he pulled out a flashlight and turned it on, illuminating them. He stilled when he realized he was staring at his goddaughter on the floor, and he could only blink in a stupor.

“I’m sorryI’m sorryI’m sorryI’m sorrymommy…” Makoto whimpered into Airi’s chest, burrowing into her bosom for safety. “MommySisssomebodypleasesavemeIcan'tfightghostswithaikido…”

Airi stared up at her uncle from the floor with a blank face, not minding that even Makoto has ended up calling her mom. “...This isn’t what it looks like.” Hoo boy. How to even explain this.

Sojiro blinked again. “Airi..?” He called out in disbelief. "What’re you doing in my house?”

At the sound of his voice, Makoto stilled and slowly looked up from where she was trying to hide herself in. “Oh...G-Good...evening, sir…” She greeted dazedly, trying to calm herself. “We...didn’t mean...to intrude…”
Sojiro blinked again. “Niijima-san! Wait, why are you...shoving your face in Airi’s chest? Are you two dating?”

She shook her head. “We’re just friends! Sisters even!”

He raised a brow and crossed his arms. “Girls nowadays get that close to each other..? Airi, what happened to dating Akira?”

Reddening from embarrassment, Makoto looked down and quickly moved back, finally realizing what she had been doing. “Airi, I’m so sorry! I-I-I uh...”

Slowly getting up, Airi rubbed her head that ached from the impact. “It’s all right.” She looked down at the wet spot that darkened the front of her dress. “But only Akira’s allowed with the twins.”

Akira snorted and walked out from behind the corner, followed by Ann, Ryuji, and Yusuke. Sojiro stared at all of them. “Akira?! You kids are here too..?!”

“Um...” Ann began nervously. “We brought you some sushi, but nobody answered when we rang the bell...The door was unlocked too.” She fidgeted with one of her ponytails. “We could hear the TV though, so we got worried you might have passed out or something…”

Sojiro blinked. “The door was unlocked?”

Akira nodded. “Yeah...We wanted to make sure you were OK.” He rubbed the back of his head apologetically. “Sorry for trespassing…”

Staring at him for a moment, the barista heaved a sigh and turned off the flashlight. “...I do that sometimes. Guess I’m getting old.”

Getting up from the floor with Akira’s help, Airi dusted off her skirt and turned to him with a deep frown. “Ojisan...Futaba is living with you, isn’t she?”

He sighed deeply. “Yeah...She’s my daughter.”

“Can I...meet her?” She asked hopefully, taking a step forward. “I think we scared her earlier, or well, Makoto did…”

Makoto flinched and bowed her head in embarrassment. “I...screamed, and she ran up the stairs. We’d like to apologize if at all possible…”

He huffed, conflicted. “Well...That’s…”

Akira furrowed his brow. “Is she...sick? Does she need any medicine or treatment?” He’d use that favor he got from Takemi if so.

“No,” Sojiro shook his head. “It’s not like that.” He stared at them, gaze sliding from Ryuji to Ann on the other end, and held a hand to his forehead, sighing heavily. “I don’t want you all getting the wrong idea...I’m sorry, Airi. You too, Akira. I shouldn’t have kept this a secret from you two.” He gestured toward the front door. “Let’s talk at my shop. She’ll hear us if we stay here.”

Looking at each other, they put on their shoes and followed him back to the cafe where he locked the door.

Taking a seat on one of the bar stools, he sighed deeply and crossed his arms. “Where do I even
begin...?” He muttered. “Futaba’s mother and I knew each other long before Futaba was born. Her mother was a bit of a weird one, but we got along well for some reason…” He smiled nostalgically. “She was sharp-witted, somewhat stern, a little socially inept, but always carefree...She truly was a great woman.”

“She’s...Isshiki Wakaba, right?” Airi asked quietly, gripping her knees from her seat in the booth.

He nodded. “Your father Arihito was the one to introduce us when he was dropping off her coffee. He was smart but he didn’t hold a candle to Wakaba, so he was only her assistant. When something piqued her interest, that’d be all she focused on. She always worked deep into the night. I thought that’d change after her kid was born, but having Futaba didn’t do much.” He huffed. “Unlike Arihito who turned into a mush. Even with that, she always took good care of her.”

Ann frowned sympathetically across from Airi’s seat. “Working and watching over a child at the same time sounds rough...”

Sojiro sighed deeply, the small smile he had on falling away. “I guess raising Futaba alone turned out to be tough on her in more ways than one...”

Akira furrowed his brow, taking a seat. “What about her father?”

Sojiro shook his head. “There wasn’t a father.”

Yusuke blinked, leaning against the counter. “Do you mean...”

The barista sighed, crossing his legs. “Well, there probably was one. I didn’t know him though. She never said a word about him, either. She was single when she gave birth to Futaba, and single when she raised her. They were an ordinary, loving family. You could really tell how much she cared for Futaba. Even Hisoka had seen it, back when their research team was still new.”

The lines on his face deepened, aging him beyond his years. “Hito and Akami’s deaths hit her hard, and she threw herself into her research. One day, she left...leaving Futaba behind. She...She committed suicide.”

They covered their mouths in horror. “So it was true...” Makoto murmured morosely, standing close by. “By...car, right?”

Sojiro nodded dispiritedly. “Threw herself into the street, right in front of Futaba’s eyes...”

Ryuji winced, slumping over his pulled up chair at the confirmation. “That’s gotta be devastating for a kid.”

Airi bit her lip, hard enough that she could taste the familiar metallic tang of blood. “Futaba-chan...” A hand landed on top of hers and she looked up at Akira who frowned at her worriedly. With his palm holding her, she finally realized she had been trembling all this time.

Taking a deep breath, she tried to contain herself. “I’m OK...” She mumbled. That confirmed it. Futaba was Wakaba’s daughter. A woman who worked with her father. They both lost their parent. Witnessed their deaths. Their bodies cooling in front of them...Even though she didn’t know her yet, she already felt a deep connection with her. It was horrible that they had this in common.

Sojiro gave her a guilty frown. “I ended up taking custody of Futaba, but I couldn’t find you in the system no matter how hard I tried...I’m sorry, Airi.”

She shook her head and gave him a watery smile. “It’s all right...I don’t regret what I went through,
even though it would’ve been easier with you. I’m glad Futaba-chan has you.” Unlike her, who
didn’t have any adult to help her until recently. If she learned anything, it was that most adults
couldn’t be trusted. Only a few deserved it, like him.

Sojiro sighed deeply. “I don’t know if it’s a good thing...She was so depressed when I took custody
she...she wouldn’t even talk to me.”

Ann looked at him timidly. “Was that because she couldn’t get over her mother’s suicide..?”

He nodded. “I kept talking to her though, and she started opening up to me little by little. That’s
when I found out...Futaba blames herself for her mother’s death.”

Airi bit her lip. “But...you clearly saw how much Isshiki-san loved her, so why does she believe
that..?”

He shook his head with a sigh. “That part she’s never told me. I wanted to know what led her to
believing that, but I decided not to rub salt in the wound.” He crossed his arms. “Then, a few
months ago...She started getting real scared, even when nothing was happening.” He frowned
morosely. “She’d say things like, ‘I hear voices…’ and, ‘Mom is looking at me…’”

Yusuke grimaced. “Visual and auditory hallucinations…Have you taken Futaba to a doctor?”

Sojiro shook his head slowly, exhaustion taking a hold of him. “I wanted to, but she refused. Even
when I had a doctor come, she locked herself away in her room. Since then, she’s become what
you’d call a hikikomori.” His eyes were dim behind his glasses. “She won’t take a single step
outside the house, or even try to see other people.”

Yusuke tilted his head. “What about you?”

The barista slumped in his seat. “She doesn’t even let me come in her room. I wanted Airi to see
her, but...” He turned to the cellist with a guilty look. “I could barely look at you when you came
back to Yongen all by yourself. You look so much like your parents...I told myself that you had a
guardian already so I had to focus on Futaba, but...” He sighed deeply. “None of this is working
out. Hisoka’s in prison. Arihito, Akami, and Wakaba are dead and I can’t help either of their kids.”
He held a hand to his forehead. “What a mess...” He muttered deprecatingly.

“Ojisan...” Airi whispered, staring at him with misty eyes. So that was why she never knew about
Futaba. He was so busy trying to help the daughter of his friend, his love it sounded like, and then
seeing the daughter of his other dead friends again after she disappeared must’ve hurt so much...It
just never worked out.

An arm wrapped around her shoulders and tugged her into a familiar chest. She rested her head
against Akira and let one tear fall. For everything she had to endure. For everything Futaba had to
endure. For all that Sojiro had lost in just ten years.

Ryuji glanced between them with a glum frown. “This sucks...”

“That wasn’t the only reason, though.” Sojiro continued, rubbing his neck tiredly. “Futaba is,
well...a unique girl. She’s so quick-minded that conversations with her tend to jump from one topic
to the next...It seems like she’s always coming to conclusions in her head. There’s a lot I don’t get
about her...”

Makoto hummed thoughtfully at his explanation.

“So yeah...” Sojiro turned to his ward. “Her situation is why I couldn’t let you in my house.”
Akira shook his head from his seat in the booth. “I understand, Boss. I’m glad it was you who signed up to be my guardian.” He smiled slightly.

Relieved, Sojiro turned to all of them. “What Futaba needs is a safe place where nobody will threaten her. Somewhere she can be at ease. That’s why I won’t do anything she doesn’t want. I don’t make her do anything she’s unwilling to either.” He sighed and got up on his feet, resting his hands in his pockets. “Then again, I know that’s no way for her to live.” He looked down in defeat. “It’s all I can do, though…”

Airi bit her lip and looked up. “What if...What if I tried then?” She asked, voice wavering slightly. “I couldn’t meet her before, but now..!”

He crossed his arms. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea right now…” He muttered reluctantly. “I know you want to help her, but with how fragile she is, I don’t want to risk it. All she does is just ask me for things that she wants, like food or these complicated books...So can you just...leave her be?”

Airi would’ve argued but Akira gripped her hand for a second, stopping her. Akira nodded to his guardian. “Right.” So all those times he thought the barista was talking on the phone with a woman was actually his daughter. They were definitely not going to let this be.

Sojiro sighed in relief. “Good...I’m going to head back then. You kids should get home soon too…” He walked out and left the cafe, the bell ringing at his departure.

Makoto sighed now that he was gone. “I feel awful for prying into his personal affairs…”

Ryuji shook his head, sitting backwards in his chair and leaning over the back support. “No way in hell he’s abusin’ her.”

Ann crossed her legs. “So that’s why Futaba wants her Heart stolen...”

Yusuke furrowed his brow. “So she’d like to discard her feelings of pain, but can’t do anything about it herself.”

Airi looked away, eyes glazed over. Her mother’s death affected her so badly that she became distorted...? If she refused to meet anyone, then it must be some form of social anxiety born from PTSD. How could they help though? How could she help?

“Will changing her heart really help her though?” Ann asked, looking between them uncertainly.

Yusuke straightened up from leaning against the counter. “If we can help her, we may be able to stand up to Medjed.”

Akira looked up at him. “We do need a way to fight them…” He admitted reluctantly, but it felt scummy to say that they only wanted to change her Heart just to fight Medjed.

“Hold on a sec.” Ryuji interrupted. “Do we even know if she has a Palace? Let’s check.”

Nodding, Akira took out his phone and opened the MetaNav, turning on the microphone setting. “‘The Sakura Futaba that lives at Sakura Sojiro’s house.’ Is that gonna be enough?” The ex-runner spoke out.

The phone chimed. “Candidate found.”

They looked at it in shock. “What the…” Yusuke narrowed his eyes.
“She’s got one…” Ryuji whispered.

“So someone can have a Palace even if they’re not evil?” Ann asked in surprise. “Hey, Morgana-”

They all stopped, realizing that they hadn’t seen the feline in a while. Airi sat up in her seat and looked around the small cafe. “Where’s Morgana?”

Akira furrowed his brow, trying to remember where he was. “…He wasn’t in my bag when we left the house.”

Makoto blinked. “Could he still be there?”

Ryuji shrugged. “…Somewhere ‘round there, at least. He’ll be fine though. He’s a cat, after all.” He glanced over at the old clock on the wall, noting how late it was. “The trains’re gonna be shuttin’ down for the night soon, so we should prolly be headin’ home.”

Makoto crossed her hands in front of her. “We have to go to school in the morning, after all.”

Yusuke looked at them quizzically. “For what?”

Airi groaned. “Right, the assembly. The staff wants us to keep quiet this summer, especially since there’s been so many incidents at school and its connection to the Phantom Thieves.”

Ann slumped in her seat. “Too late, since Medjed is declaring war on us.”

Ryuji scowled, getting up from his chair. “We’ve gotta meet up for every goddamn little thing. Talk about a pain in the ass.”

The model shrugged helplessly. “I mean, it is our fault.”

Makoto sighed. “Anyway, let’s contact each other afterward.” They all nodded and four of them left the cafe, leaving the couple alone inside the establishment.

Airi felt no need to get up, just staring blankly at the dark wooden table. She didn’t even notice Yusuke stopping to murmur something to Akira before walking out. She was so close to her earlier. If she had reached over, she could’ve…No. Now that she knew Futaba had social anxiety bad enough that she refused to go out, she wouldn’t dare try to touch her in fear she could trigger a panic attack. No matter how much she just wanted to gather the other girl into the most loving and comforting embrace she could.

The pain was older for her so she knew how to deal with it. She knew it was never her fault her parents died. It was always Hisoka’s, him and the man who ordered him. They seemed to have different ways to cope too. She distracted herself with work and taking care of others before herself, while Futaba locked herself in and stayed on the net, trying to distract herself from reality. But it wasn’t working for her anymore if she was desperate enough to ask for a change of heart.

Airi closed her eyes and breathed out. What could she do to help her..? Something tugged her to the side of the booth and her eyes flew open, squeaking when Akira rested his chin atop of her head. “Wha-?”

“Stop it.” He interrupted her. “Stop trying to take care of this on your own. I see the cogs in your head, working to find a way to get to Futaba by yourself.”

She pouted and hid her face in his neck, letting the scent of coffee lull her into a calm. “I know, I
just...Now that we know she’s really Isshiki-san’s daughter, I have so much in common with her. I just want to help her realize there’s things this world has to offer...That it doesn’t have to hurt so much.” She sighed. “Sorry, I’m being a downer.”

Akira shook his head. “No, I get it. This is important to you, too.” Tugging her onto his lap, he kissed the side of her head. “But don’t forget you’re not the only one who wants to help, OK? Even if we do need her to help us fight Medjed, we’re still helping Futaba.”

Airi felt her lips quirk and nodded. “Right...” She gasped when she felt one of his hands wander dangerously close to her chest. “Huh-?”

He silenced her with his lips, his tongue worming into her mouth. She whimpered into the kiss, her hand clutching his shirt when she felt his other hand caress up her leg.

Parting with a gasp, he leaned his forehead against hers and smirked. “Yusuke told me you’ve been pretty tense lately, so why don’t I help you relax?” He purred.

She stared up at him with dazed eyes, lips red from his kiss. “Now..?”

Hooking his arm beneath her knees and back, he lifted her up bridal style. “No better time than the present.” He replied cheekily, taking her upstairs to his room. “You did say only I get to hang out with the “twins.””

He quickly had her in a relaxed state on his bed, turning her body to goo. Airi panted softly as she slowly calmed down from her high, the ends of her dress bunched up around her legs. “...You’re getting so good at that.” She whispered, feeling her eyes begin to close.

Changing into his sleepwear after he cleaned them off with a wet towel, he smirked at her state and sat back on the bed. “I’ve had plenty of practice.” He teased. “Every time you insinuate I’m going on a date with Yusuke, I’ll just have to convince you I’m not.”

She hummed and turned over, snuggling into his thin blanket. “I’ll keep insinuating it then...and with Ryuji, too...” She mumbled sleepily. “I’ll dream of you guys having a threesome...”

He deadpanned. “That’s not...” He sighed and hung his head. Never mind.

He stretched his arms out, about to head to bed as well when a familiar feline padded up the stairs. “Were you just going to sleep without even wondering where I was?” Morgana accused lightheartedly. “I take it the chief told you about Futaba, and then you guys disbanded in relief for now.” He wrinkled his nose. “Ugh, it stinks like sweat in here...”

Akira shifted his eyes, not answering as to why it stunk. “Wait, how do you know we talked about all that?”

Morgana grinned, showing off his fang. “You can’t underestimate my intel-gathering skills, you know.” He stretched out his paws. “I was checking out the chief’s house. I didn’t think our Alibaba would be so young...”

Airi rolled over and looked at him with half-lidded eyes. “What was she like?” She asked hopefully.

Morgana looked at her in surprise, finally realizing she was laying down behind Akira. “Mom? You’re staying the night with us?”

She pursed her lips and snuggled deeper into the pillow. “If you two don’t mind...I’m too tired to
He padded up to them and sat down on the edge of the bed. “She had long hair and a pretty young-sounding voice.” He paused. “Well...I say young, but she’s probably the same age as you guys. At the very least, she’s no amateur.” He informed gravely. “She completely overheard your conversation with the chief in the cafe, and she can hack into our chats too. Even if she can’t take Medjed down directly, she might have some kind of lead on them.”

Akira furrowed his brow. “A hacker at our age...?”

Airi sighed slowly. “We have no other options to fight Medjed...” Even if it felt wrong to use Futaba like that.

“Why don’t we meet back here tomorrow?” Morgana suggested. “It’s too hot elsewhere. Let’s let everyone know.”

Akira nodded and took out his phone, sending a message to everyone in the group chat. Morgana jumped up to catch the light string, switching the light bulb off and leaving the room in darkness.

Laying down on his now shared pillow, Akira wrapped an arm around his already slumbering girlfriend and closed his eyes. Morgana padded up to sleep on one corner, curling up into a ball.

It was a tight fit since the bed was too small to really hold two persons and one cat, but they made it work.

Chapter End Notes

hikikomori- reclusive adolescents or adults who withdraw from social life, often seeking extreme degrees of isolation and confinement.
Chapter 168

---7/25, MONDAY, EARLY MORNING, YONGENJAYA

Birds chirped outside on a nearby phone line, the sun shining bright in the summer sky. The air felt thick as it was supposed to rain yesterday, but the storm failed to bring any sort of relief from the heat and only added to it. The summer wind chime tinkled halfheartedly from the dead breeze, and it was the first thing Airi noted as she slowly woke up.

She scrunched up her face, eyes still closed, when she realized she was hot, sweaty, and uncomfortable. It was so hot...Why wasn’t the AC on? Did Yusuke turn it off?

Cracking her eyes open, she winced at the strong sunlight streaming through the uncovered windows. She tried to turn around but the arms around her tightened and tugged her back into a warm body. “Mmm…” Airi protested sleepily as the added heat made it even worse. She felt really gross. Did she even shower yesterday? Ugh. Wait, who was spooning her?

Without moving the rest of her body, she turned her head, softening when she saw his sleeping face.

Akira slept silently, barely making any noises or movements in his sleep. His face was relaxed and missing his signature glasses, showing his long dark lashes that fanned the tops of his cheeks. His ebony hair was messier than normal, curling around in all directions and covering his eyes like a sheepdog’s. His brows were slim and angled even in slumber, and little breaths escaped past his perfect cupid’s bow.

What a beauty. “Akira…” She whispered, now more awake. “Wake up. We have school.”

He showed no signs of waking up but he pressed closer to her, hiding his face in her loose curls.

She was about to call out to him again when she felt something hard poke her. Well then. Smiling in amusement, she shuffled herself around inside his embrace and lightly tapped his cheek. “Wake up…”

His cheeks twitched and a low groan left him. “Hmm…”

A black blur popped up from behind his back and Morgana looked down at his leader with a sly grin. Without saying anything, he held up a paw, claws extended.

Realizing what he intended to do, Airi gave him a warning look. “Morgana, no…”

He pouted but acquiesced, jumping to the floor and down the stairs.

Turning her attention back to her slumbering boyfriend, Airi pinched his cheeks. Not painfully, but just enough to stretch his cheeks out. “Akira, wake up.”

Mouth stretched open, Akira groaned in protest and finally cracked his eyes open. “Waa…” He shook off her hands and sat up on the bed, ruffling his already messy curls while yawning. “What time is it..?”

Airi took her phone from the window ledge and checked. “...6:40AM. I should go home to wash up.” She grimaced when she realized she was still wearing her dress from yesterday.
He sighed. “Do we really have to go to the assembly?”

She gave him an exasperated look. “They’re checking attendance, so yes. We better get going now…” Her eyes trailed down. “Unless you’d like some help with that.”

He blinked and stared at her quizzically before following her gaze. His face reddened slightly and he looked away, embarrassed by his own body’s reaction. “If you don’t mind…” He mumbled shyly.

She only giggled at his reaction. He was so cute, a complete opposite to how he was last night. “Make sure to stay quiet.”

After an eventful morning, they finally made their way to school. Yusuke hadn’t joined since Kosei had no such assembly, and with every other school on break, it was a strange sight to see only Shujin students making their way to school. Most of them grumbled at their break being interrupted, the complaints becoming louder the closer they got to the school building.

“They’re seriously holding an emergency meeting right when summer break is starting?” A bag-eyed student grumbled. “I guess they need to set some rules when the world’s eyes are on us because of the Phantom Thieves. Stuff like, ‘Don’t do anything that will hurt the school’s reputation; spend your summer break quietly.’”

His friend shook his head. “I can’t stay quiet with all this excitement going on. Medjed’s statement was insane! ‘People of Japan, you must not worship the Phantom Thieves,’ they said…It could just be a joke. There’s talk that this could lead to the biggest leak of private data to date. I wonder if they’re gonna target another site…I’m curious to see how the Phantom Thieves react.”

The bag-eyed student nodded in agreement. “It’s what I’m looking forward to most this summer. It’ll be the perfect escape from exam studies. But the Phantom Thieves need to take action. They’re the ones Medjed is after.”

The thieves grimaced to each other. The pressure was on and the whole world was watching.

Entering the school building, they walked past several students. Everyone seemed to be gossiping and on their phones. “An assembly during summer vacation? Are they crazy?”

“Our school’s done for…”

“I don’t care what the principal has to say. He hasn’t done anything.”

“They’re so stupid! I wish I could change their hearts.”

“Why not make a post? Our request might be taken…”

All eyes were on the Phantom Thieves, especially their fellow students, but there was a certain tone to it that Airi didn’t like. It didn’t seem like people wanted to support the Phantom Thieves because they helped people, but more because it was interesting, as if they were just entertainment.

The entire assembly was about two hours long within the gymnasium/auditorium, starting with a staff member reciting all the school rules before Principal Kobayakawa took the stage. As members of the student council, Makoto and Airi lined the sides of the student body along with every other class representative.
Eyeing the staff on stage, Airi could see Kawakami had on a deep frown with every word the principal spoke. The portly man advised every student to keep quiet this summer and to control their posts on the internet. Though he mentioned the Phantom Thieves were dangerous, he also wanted students to report anything they thought was especially important. His excuse was that the staff would then be able to report this to the police, but he sweated slightly as he spoke.

The two thieves on the council grimaced at his obvious digging but stayed silent.

Soon enough, the assembly was over and summer vacation for Shujin students began. Making sure the school building was emptying out, Airi reached the rooftop and paused when she noticed a student tending to the few shoots of bamboo left around in one of the corners from the gardening club, a somber look on her fair features.

She stood out among the gray rooftop with her sleeveless lavender dress that almost covered her uniform skirt. Her hair was a lovely shade of light brown, almost beige, and curled to her shoulders. It was parted at the middle of her forehead, showing a clear view of her doll-like eyes and her small mouth. She was definitely a third year since Airi didn’t recognize her.

She was about to call out to her when the 3rd year turned and saw her. Giving her a small smile, she walked up to the cellist. “Hello.” Her voice was high and light. “You’re...Kimisawa-chan, correct? A 2nd year?”

Airi bowed her head. “Hello Senpai. School is emptying out for the summer.” She gestured toward the door. “Are you ready to go?”

The 3rd year smiled a sweet smile and followed her down the stairs, keeping two steps between them at all times. “I’m not one to make conversation, so this is new...I hear there is a lot of talk lately about a scam? I hope everyone is all right.”

Taken aback, Airi smiled as well. Seemed like she wasn’t one for gossip if she wasn’t kept up to date. “I hope so as well. The students who were being scammed in Shibuya have reported that they’re finally free and can continue their normal lives again.”

The older girl sighed in relief just as they reached the first floor, heading toward the entrance. “That is good to hear. I hope nothing else will happen-”

“Haru.”

Airi noticed the 3rd year tense up and peeked behind her to see an impeccably dressed brown haired man, looking far too rich to be caught in this school. The slimy smirk on his admittedly handsome features helped add to his aura of wealth, and the fact that he had the audacity to wear what seemed to be an expensive white suit as if it was casual wear said enough about him. “It’s time to go.” He ordered. "Don’t make me wait for you.”

The 3rd year- Haru it seemed her name was- bowed her head submissively and gave the cellist one last small smile, now more subdued than ever. “Have a good summer, Kimisawa-chan.” She walked away without waiting for a response, stepping behind the man who came to pick her up.

Frowning slightly, Airi quietly followed them to the entrance of the school building, peeking out of the doors to see a black limo at the bottom of the steps. A chauffeur opened the car door and the man and "Haru" stepped inside. Soon enough, the limo pulled out of view down the small street and into the main roads, disappearing at the corner.

Airi watched them leave before reluctantly turning back inside. That limo looked familiar. Wasn’t
The thieves met up in front of the school building and decided to grab lunch before heading back to Yongenjaya to meet up with Yusuke. Stopping at a Big Bang Burger, they purchased several burgers, fries, and drinks, with Makoto grabbing a salad. It took a while since it was swamped with other Shujin students trying to grab a bite to eat, and the employees looked like they were run ragged.

Grabbing the bags, they traveled back to Leblanc where Yusuke was already waiting for them. Sojiro greeted them all with a slight smile before shooing them upstairs. Dragging the table over, they took some chairs and sat down with a sigh.

Ryuji groaned into his burger. “Man, that assembly bored me to tears.” He complained in between bites.

Airi eyed her pseudo-brother who was dressed in his school uniform. “Why are you in your school uniform, Yusuke?”

He grimaced and picked at his shirt. “Unfortunately, I hadn’t realized I forgot to do laundry when I spilled paint on myself. These were all I had left…” He gestured to his blue Kosei button up. “The rest are being washed right now.”

Ann sweatdropped. “You really should buy a couple more outfits. Maybe I can take some stuff from the agency for you. They always throw out clothes once the shoots are done. What’s your size?”

Taking another bite of her admittedly not-as-healthy-as-it-should-be salad, Makoto grimaced. “Come now, we didn’t gather here to make small talk, now did we? Let’s get to Alibaba’s case.”

Morgana purred from his spot on Airi’s lap. “Well then, I’ll start.” He quickly became serious, wiping any humor from his face. “It looks like Futaba was listening in on Leblanc.”

Akira blinked. “So this place is bugged? Why?”

The feline shook his head. “I have no idea how or why.”

Ryuji rested his ankle on his other leg. “It’s just like Boss said…She’s a tough nut to crack.”

Airi bit her lip. “Could she be listening right now? Is it just downstairs that’s bugged?”

Pushing her salad to the side, Makoto crossed her arms. “Perhaps. In any case, her hacking skills will be absolutely necessary if we wish to stand up to Medjed. Going by what she has told us, we
Yusuke leaned forward in his seat. “We’ll have to trust in her skills for now then.”

Ann crossed her legs. “Anyway, we found out that Futaba has a Palace...but can someone who isn’t evil have one?”

Morgana nodded. “That doesn’t matter. A Palace is the materialization of distorted cognitions brought about by strong desires. That’s all. It just so happens that a lot of warped people turn out evil.”

Makoto sighed heavily. “She’s so young, though...The pain she’s gone through must be the cause of her distortion.”

Airi looked down, idly petting the feline in her lap. It must still hurt now, but to be distorted from it? ...Why hadn’t she been distorted when her own parents died? She witnessed it, and yet she had never manifested a Palace. Xihe- Jeanne at the time, was her only indication of having a Shadow. Then again, she had grieved differently. She poured it into her music after their deaths, and then after the matron smashed her cello, distracted herself by taking care of the San’ya group. Futaba kept to herself all this time with her own despair. It must’ve been so lonely...

“Ai, maybe that has something to do with why she calls herself Alibaba.” Ann theorized quietly.

Morgana’s ears pressed against his scalp. “According to the chief’s story, Futaba has auditory and visual hallucinations, right? There’s a chance those are related to some important memories she’s holding. It’s hard to explain, but those memories may have been warped by the distortions.”

Akira furrowed his brow. “Do you mean what she remembers might not be true?”

Morgana nodded. “Something like that. I can’t be sure yet until we go into her Palace.”

Ryuji frowned. “So we still gotta steal her Treasure, yeah?”

Morgana gave him a flat look. “Well, yeah.” He replied in a “duh” tone.

Biting her lip, Airi looked up at her team. “We all agree about going to Futaba’s Palace, right?” She pleaded.

Makoto dusted off her skirt. “She’s asked us to do so. I don’t think that part is an issue. If we steal Futaba’s heart, it will not only help Boss, but she can then assist us with Medjed.”

Yusuke smiled. “I agree then.”

Ryuji pursed his lips. “I’ve been wonderin’ about how Boss said ‘a lot happened’ after Futaba’s mom died too.”

Airi sighed. “It could be he had to fight for custody. We don’t know if Isshiki-san had any siblings or relatives and Ojisan isn’t Futaba’s biological father or even Isshiki-san’s husband.”

“Hold on.” Morgana interrupted. “Our investigation of her Palace may not go like anything we’ve done up to this point.” He advised gravely.

Akira blinked. “Why? Is it because she’s asking?”

He nodded. “Having an individual ask you to steal their heart is an extremely irregular case. There’s no telling what the Palace ruler’s disposition will be like, or the distortion that’ll be there.
We may run into some unforeseen situations. Do you still want to go in?"

Akira looked at his team, gaze sliding from Ryuji at his right to Airi all the way to his left, her eyes pleading silently. He nodded resolutely. “We have to.”

Morgana nodded. “All right. Let’s just make sure we’re cautious.”

Uncrossing his legs, Ryuji leaned forward to steal some fries. “Well, let’s get crackin’ on those keywords, huh?”

Makoto sat up in her seat. “The ones we have at the moment are “Sakura Futaba” and “Sakura Sojiro’s house.””

Airi furrowed her brow. “So all we’re missing is what the house represents to her.”

Yusuke stood up from his chair. “Let us try going to their house first.” He suggested calmly.

Ann nodded in agreement. “Boss is busy running the cafe, isn’t he? We should make sure he doesn’t suspect anything.”

Ryuji got up with a groan, stretching his arms in the air. “Let’s say we’re movin’ to Airi’s for our first day of vacation. That works, right?”

Nodding in agreement, they quickly finished their food. Most of the group took their things and began walking down the stairs, but Akira stopped when he realized Morgana was still sitting glumly.

“Important memories, huh…” The feline mumbled. “I’ll be able to remember everything if I turn back into a human, right?”

Akira rested his hands in his pockets. “I hope so.” He answered truthfully.

Morgana looked up at him desperately. “That has to be the case. I…” He struggled for a moment. “I definitely want this mission to succeed. If we can retrieve Futaba’s memories, then I’d bet we can get mine back too…” Shaking his ears, he smiled. “In any case, it’s not every day you stumble upon a hacker like her around.” He purred. “You really do have a gift, don’t you?”

Akira shrugged. “I’m just lucky.” Or being pushed into this. One thing happening right after another and a certain long nosed man always knew about it. Still, all he could do was just do what he thought was right.

Purring, Morgana jumped up on his shoulder and slid into his bag. “You sure live up to my expectations. Let’s get going with the others!”

Giving the barista the same excuse that they were heading to Airi and Yusuke’s house, they walked down the back roads to Sojiro’s abode. Airi had bought a water bottle from the vending machine as well, and was pressing the cool plastic against her neck. It was blisteringly hot, and the sound of cicadas buzzing surrounded them on all sides, a clear indication that summer was here and it will suck.

“Now, the last keyword…” Makoto grasped her chin, trying to think.

Ryuji slouched in place. “She’s a hikikomori, so we just gotta figure out what she thinks her house is.” He frowned morosely. “If she can’t get out, maybe a prison?”
“Conditions have not been met.” Akira’s phone chimed in his hand.

Makoto looked up at the house. “Perhaps a labyrinth with an unknown exit?”

“Conditions have not been met.”

Ann pouted. “Hmm...Maybe an oasis?”

“Conditions have not been met.”

Yusuke hummed. “Nothing so far. In that case, how about hell?”

“Conditions have not been met.”

Airi glanced up toward the second floor window, wondering if behind those thick curtains was Futaba. “She’s a hacker, so...The virtual world?”

“Conditions have not been met.”

They all let out a collective sigh. Akira grimaced and put his phone away. “We don’t know enough...”

“If only we could ask her directly...” Yusuke murmured.

“We can.” Ryuji scowled, frustrated by the heat and their lack of progress. “C’mon, let’s go see Futaba.”

Makoto looked uncertain. “But what will we say to get in?”

He crossed his arms. “Whaddya mean? We’re sneakin’ in. We even got a real life thief with us.”

He pointed his thumb in the direction of the cellist. “C’mon, it's our way.”

Airi looked surprised, putting her water bottle into her bag. “Me? Uh...” She did have some lockpicks on her. “I guess I could pick the locks.”

Morgana jumped up on the cement fence. “I figured out where Futaba’s room was when I snuck in last night, so I’ll guide you once we’re inside.”

Makoto opened her mouth, closed it, then opened it again. “What if we run into Boss, though? There’s no way we’ll be able to avoid his questions this time.”

Akira shook his head. “He’s at work and he usually stays there until closing time.” He checked the time on his phone. “We have about four hours, so we’re fine. Airi.”

Nodding, Airi walked up to the gate and shimmied it open with a lock pick.

Noticing the council president’s hesitation, Ryuji bumped shoulders with her. “Gettin’ cold feet, Makoto?” He teased. “Don’t worry, it’ll be nothing. We’ve gone through loads of shit like this already.”

She still looked reluctant but made no move to stop them. “...This is our only choice, right? I suppose Futaba did get in contact with Akira...Perhaps she’ll at least be willing to speak with him, and if not, maybe Airi’s similar background will help convince her.”

Metal creaked as the gate swung open. “Door one is done.” Airi announced as she walked in to begin working on the front door. Looking out for any bystanders, they quickly snuck inside and
took their shoes off, closing the door behind them. The lights were turned off, but unlike last time, sunlight peeked in behind the covered windows so it wasn’t as ominous.

Morgana took the lead, guiding them up the stairs and down the hallway to a beige wooden door. It had caution tape tacked on like a crime scene, with a big sign saying “DO NOT ENTER” in English. “This is Futaba’s room.” He announced quietly.

Biting her lip, Airi knocked on the door. “Futaba-chan?” She called out, her voice echoing down the hallway. “Are you in there?” She looked down at the bottom of the door, noticing there was a blue glow emanating from the crack between the door and the floorboards. She could even feel cool air wafting out against her socks, indicating the AC was on. “I want to speak with you, if that’s OK…”

“I’m sorry for being startled and screaming yesterday.” Makoto called out apologetically from behind her. “It was so dark that I got scared.”

There was no response at all from the door, nor any indication that she would be awake.

Yusuke frowned. “No response…”

Ryuji sighed and hung his head. “This is gonna be hard…”

Frustrated that she was so close yet so far, Airi knocked again. “Futaba-chan! Please, are you listening?”

Makoto stepped up with narrowed eyes. “You’re there, right, Alibaba?”

A phone buzzed in the hallway and Akira took his out.

???: Why are you all here?

Morgana frowned from his shoulder. “Why’s she only reacting to that name..?”

Airi furrowed her brow, trying to remember what she read in her psychology book. “Disassociation? Maybe being called Futaba brings back bad memories…” Biting her lip, she turned back to the door. “Your real name is Sakura Futaba, right?”

There was no answer again.

Ann winced. “This could take a while…”

Morgana glared at the door that remained shut. “We don’t have time to dally around. We need her keyword before dealing with Alibaba’s identity.”

Airi nodded and turned back to the door. “Please, at least respond to us through text.” She pleaded gently. “You don’t have to come out. We just want to learn more about you. We can’t steal your heart if we don’t have the information we need to enter your Palace.”

The phone buzzed again.

???: OK.

???: What do you want to hear?

Airi sighed in relief. They were getting through to her. “Thank you...Please answer this as Sakura Futaba, and not Alibaba. Akira, our leader who lives at Leblanc, would like to speak with you.”
She nodded to Akira and he typed in the question, angling the phone so everyone could read.

**Ak**: *How is living in this house?*

**???:** *It’s painful…*

**Ak**: *Why don’t you go out?*

**???:** *I can’t leave this place…*

**???:** *I’m going to die here.*

Ann gasped. “Wha- Die..?”

Airi stared at the messages with wide eyes. No, please don’t believe that. She wasn’t going to let anyone die if she could help it.

Grimacing at the dark messages, Akira continued his question.

**Ak**: *Why do you believe that?*

**???:** *Why?*

**???:** *This place is my tomb.*

Makoto blinked in surprise. “Tomb..?”

Ryuji straightened up from the wall. “You think that’s it?” He asked hopefully.

“Try entering "tomb."” Morgana advised.

Nodding, Akira opened the Nav and put in the keyword for Futaba’s Palace. The air wavered for a moment and the phone chimed. “Input accepted. Searching for route to destination.”

**???: Was that enough?**

Smiling in relief, Airi turned back to the door. “Yes, thank you, Futaba-chan.”

Makoto crossed her arms. “You haven’t forgotten your promise of helping us if we complete your request, right?”

**???: I haven’t. We made a deal.**

Grinning, Ryuji walked up and snatched Akira’s phone from his hand. “Well then, let’s hurry up and go.” His thumb tapped the navigation button. “Aaaand clicky.”

They stared at him in shock. “You idiot!” Morgana gasped. “Don’t activate it here!”

Too late.
Chapter 169

Chapter Notes

Whoa 49.4k hits and 1253 kudos, thanks so much!

I'm still feeling weird with writing, but I'm starting to get the itches again so I hope this fic is off hiatus now? I think? I hope? I don't really know :w;

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The air wavered around them and reality bended; stretching, thinning, and a sense of weightlessness claimed them as they transitioned from reality to the Metaverse.

Sand was the first thing to greet their feet, and the next was the stifling heat. The sun glared down at them from a cloudless sky and they were surrounded by miles and miles of sand. The air was dry enough that just by being here, it felt like all the moisture was being sucked out of them.

“It’s a desert…” Yusuke observed wondrously, crouching down to sift the coarse grains through his fingers.

Ryuji rolled his eyes. “Yeah, we see that.” His eyes caught their school uniforms and he blinked. “Wait, what the- Our clothes are still the same?”

Mona looked up at him with an exasperated look, now in his bipedal form. “Futaba herself is asking us to steal her heart. It’d be odd if she saw us as a threat.” He explained slowly. “If she doesn’t see us as an enemy, then your clothes don’t change. That’s how it works.” His gaze turned harsh. “But more importantly, I told you to be cautious!” He jumped in the air angrily. “Why’d you activate it like that?!”

Ryuji slumped. “Is that why we ended up in a desert? Where’s the tomb?” He yanked the collar of his shirt, trying to cool himself. “It’s so damn hot here.”

Ann looked around the desert in awe. “Even though we entered right in front of her room, we didn’t end up inside it.”

Makoto turned to her with a frown. “She must really want to keep people away from her.” She looked around, wincing as her bare feet was scorched by the hot sand. “What a bleak feeling this place has...It’s the complete opposite of Kaneshiro’s bank.”

Airi furrowed her brow, already feeling a bead of sweat rolling down from her hairline. “Then we’ll just have to bring some life to this dead land.”

Akira glanced around, shielding his eyes from the harsh sun above them. “Any signs of a Palace?”

Turning around, Mona pointed a paw toward the distance. “Is it that way?”

The group turned to look, blinking in surprise when they noticed a shining light far away in the distance.

“Oh yeah…” Ryuji breathed. “It’s something shiny.”
Yusuke tilted his head. “A tomb in the desert...Perhaps her Palace will be akin to the old pyramids in Egypt.”

Airi grimaced. A pyramid meant a burial. “We should get going.”

Ann tried to measure the distance between them and what seemed to be their destination. “Uh, isn’t it kinda far?”

Ryuji gaped. “Are we gonna walk?!”

Mona glowered, tail sticking straight up. “Of course not! My paws would get burned!”

Running forward a couple meters, he jumped into the air and after curling into a ball, transformed into his bus form with a puff of smoke. Landing noisily on his tires, Mona shook his exterior. “I’ll make sure to put the AC on blast!”

Yusuke pumped a fist. “I’ve been waiting for this.” He smiled satisfactorily.

Ann grinned and clapped her hands together. “You’re so considerate!”

The bus blushed, if that was possible. “Hehe, r-right…”

Climbing into the bus as a group, Makoto took the wheel. The ladies sat up front while the men sat behind them and with a rumble, the engine started and they began their journey toward the Palace.

Though they started out excited at the prospect of a smooth ride to the Treasure, the heat quickly became unbearable as time went on. Even though the AC was on, it was barely able to cool them down. The harsh sun shone through the windows, heating up the inside and trapping it.

Akira was so sweaty he had to take off his glasses because they kept slipping off. The air was warm even in here, and it was quickly becoming a nightmare.

“It’s stuffy…” Ann groaned and rested against the dashboard, unable to keep herself up.

Makoto sighed, leaning on the wheel. “Yes, I know, but it still beats opening the windows to the hot desert air… Airi, do you still have that water?”

Airi was barely able to answer her, feeling as if she was about to die even though she leaned as far away from the windshield as possible to avoid the heat. “You drank it all already…” All of their shirts were soaked through from their sweat to the point where their bras were visible and if they didn’t have any water soon, they were going to dehydrate and faint.

Scrunching up her face, Airi lifted her legs. “I can’t take it anymore…”

“Huh..?” Makoto slowly opened her eyes to look at her, widening when she saw she was stripping. “Airi!”

The cellist rolled her thigh highs off, letting them fall to the floor of the bus before curling up against the backrest. “It’s just socks…” Though she would’ve stripped way more if she had the energy to. This was the worst. She hated how hot she was and how they had to endure this.

Sighing, Ann tugged at the collar of her polo, trying to cool herself off. “How’re the guys doing? …” Feeling eyes on her, she turned her head to see Ryuji behind her gawking at her cleavage, a bit of blood trickling from his nostrils.

Already exhausted and outraged that she had to endure the heat and now this breach of privacy
without any concern for her person, she reached down and yanked the control, launching their front backrest into his face. “Take this!”

Ryuji yelled out in pain as he was propelled back, falling over into the rear of the bus.

Airi yelped as her support suddenly disappeared and she rolled onto the rear seats, knocking Akira’s head against the rear glass window. “Ow…” He groaned sluggishly, rubbing his sore head. “Airi…”

“Hey!” Mona protested, the bus shaking just a bit. “Knock it off!”

Airi whined as she had to touch their sweaty skins with her own sweaty skin, but blinked when she realized a certain person was cool to the touch and an idea came to her mind. Straightening up to sit in Akira’s lap, she looked over to her brother. “Hey Yusuke...Can you use a Bufula on me?”

Yusuke slowly turned from gazing out the window and gave her a flat look. “Why would you ask me to hurt you?”

“So I can cool off?”

Ann gasped and turned to them. “That’s a great idea! Anything to escape this heat!” She clapped her hands together. “Please, Yusuke?”

He scowled but with a wave of his hand, he threw a very weak Bufu into the air where it shattered into cool mist.

Everyone in the bus sighed in relief when the snow sparkles touched their overheated skins. “Ooh, that feels good…” Makoto moaned appreciatively, tilting her head up so some of the snowflakes landed on her face.

Latching onto the idea, Akira changed his Persona to Jack Frost again before tugging his girlfriend into his arms. “Here.” The heat was more bearable now that his actual soul was cool. He should’ve done this earlier.

Airi leaned her cheek into the crook of his elbow and closed her eyes in bliss at how refreshing he felt. “Ahhh...I love you.”

He deadpanned. “Because I’m chilled?”

“Yes.”

Climbing back over the seat, Ryuji plopped down with a sigh. “We there yet?”

Looking up through the windshield, Akira inhaled sharply. “Yeah.”

All their eyes turned toward the front where they could see the pyramid was much closer now, and they could even make out some sort of middle eastern town surrounding the outskirts of it. Driving past the town, they finally stopped in front of the Palace. They stumbled out of the car, Mona turning back into her regular bipedal form.

Ann fanned herself with her hand as the sun now glared down at them with no roof to block it. “It’s so hot…”

Ryuji panted, the hot air drying the moisture in his mouth. “That AC ain’t workin’ at all!” He turned to glower at the feline. “The hell was that lukewarm air about!?”
Mona bristled at his harsh words. “That was the best I could do, so quit your yapping!”

Scowling, he stomped his foot. “For real, you are so half-assed!”

Glaring harder, Mona raised his paws up. “What was that?! You wanna fight, punk?!”

“Both of you, enough!” Airi frowned disapprovingly at them. “It’s hot enough without you two losing your heads! Keep this up and I’ll ground both of you!”

They cowered away from her form and pouted, turning their backs to each other.

Akira sighed and copying Yusuke’s earlier action, sent a small Bufu in their direction. “Cool off guys.”

They yelped as ice crystals pricked their skin and they shivered. “Cold, cold, cold!” Ryuji’s teeth chattered, shaking his arms out to get rid of the snow.

“Nyaarrh!” Mona yowled and jumped up into the air in shock, the hotter atmosphere melting the ice on his fur.

“Concentrate.” Makoto advised, fanning herself as she looked up toward the large infrastructure in front of them. “I can’t believe her Palace is a pyramid…”

Yellow and orange stones made up the large pyramid in front of them, a large staircase leading up to the double doors that led inside. Pillars lined the path there but instead of hieroglyphics, they were decorated with computer codes and symbols carved onto the sides. Large server terminals acted as monuments, lining up the stairs, giving off a futuristic style to an otherwise ancient construct.

“Hey…” Ryuji began hesitantly once the ice evaporated. “A pyramid’s a tomb, right?”

Yusuke nodded, crossing his arms as he observed the pyramid. “Yes. It’s a pharaoh's tomb.”

“That’s how it’s mostly known.” Makoto added. “There are a variety of theories on it. For instance, it’s even said to be a device for reviving the dead.”

Airi looked up at the structure with a blank face. She must wish to revive her mother, but...that wasn’t possible. That was the reality of living as humans.

Holding his hands up in a frame, Yusuke smiled. “It’s beautiful nonetheless...It’s perfectly conformed to the golden ratio…”

Ryuji sweatdropped. “Hey, guys...Can we go in already?” Whatever chill he experienced had quickly melted away into a sheen of sweat. “I’m gonna melt soon…”

It was strange to be entering a Palace in their normal school uniforms, but they climbed up the steps toward the large doors that sealed the entrance. Turning around at the top of the stairs, Airi covered the tops of her eyes as she observed the view. “I wonder if that town is supposed to be anything…”

Mona shook his head. “We probably don’t need to concern ourselves with it. I can sense the Treasure inside the pyramid.”

Turning back to the pyramid, they looked up at the large stone doors that were carved with more computer codes, old pottery lining the sides. “Futaba’s Palace…” Makoto furrowed her brow. “So
this is how she thinks of that house.”

Yusuke caressed one of the markings thoughtfully. “Who knows what may await us within...What is your call, Joker? Shall we head inside?”

Akira nodded. “Yeah, let’s do this.” He pushed open the doors, and with a groan, the large blocks of stone parted for them.

As soon as they walked in, they were greeted with a staircase leading down into a small hall. Sarcophagi lined the entrance block, with staircases leading past it deeper and higher into the Palace. Green numbers and symbols occasionally appeared on the walls as if everything was a virtual simulation, and the air was cool and dry, a blessing compared to the outside.

“Whoa…” Ryuji sighed in relief. “It’s so nice inside! Is this place air conditioned or something?!”

Airi looked up toward the far away ceiling, sunlight peeking in through the cracks. “I felt the air conditioning escaping her room, so it’s probably one of the aspects that influence this place.” She sighed, skin cooling pleasantly from the chilled air. “This is so much better than being out in the heat.”

Ann looked down at themselves. “Huh, our clothes still haven’t changed even now. This has never happened to us before.”

Yusuke tilted his head, eyeing the stone prison that encased them within. “It is refreshing that she doesn’t see us as a threat...but we are completely surrounded by walls.”

Mona flicked an ear. “I guess this is a tomb...It’s probably not made to be easy to get into. Anyway, let’s explore.”

Seeing that the sarcophagi were just ordinary decorations, they went up the small stairs on the side to be greeted with a pit of quicksand, thin pillars being their only way across to the other side. Jumping dexterously as they had kept their thief skills, they landed on the other side.

In front of them was a staircase that stretched all the way to what seemed to be the middle of the pyramid. Ann squinted, trying to see the end. “These stairs go pretty far.”

Ryuji groaned. “There’re way too goddamn many…”

Makoto gave him a warning look. “We should be grateful we don’t have to fight our way in...Yet.”

Wiggling happily, Mona began skipping toward the stairs, his little paws barely touching the ground. “More importantly, I can definitely sense the Treasure ahead.” His large blue eyes sparkled. “We’re getting pretty close now!”

Akira grimaced. This was too easy... “Guess we’re headed to the center.”

Without delay, they began trekking their way up the multitude of stairs. It seemed to stretch on forever, but occasionally they would see doors barred with gates to their left and right as if there was more to explore.

“No enemies or shit?” Ryuji grinned as they ran further up. “This is how I like it!”

Ann hummed as they passed more sarcophagi. “Do you think it’s because she’s not a criminal?”

Airi pursed her lips. “I don’t think it works like that...Maybe it’s because she doesn’t want to harm
us? Shadows in Palaces usually defer to the ruler.”

Makoto gave them a look. “Don’t let your guard down, guys. This is a pyramid so there may still be traps.”

Running past a second set of doors, Yusuke turned in a circle, admiring the ancient architecture. “So this is the mystique of a bygone era... The real thing surpasses any picture.”

Akira sweatdropped. “But there’s computer stuff flashing here. I don’t think this is really accurate…”

They were close to what they assumed to be the Treasure room now, but walking up another flight of stairs, they stopped when they realized there was someone standing just a few feet away.

“Hey, is that..?” Ryuji began but Airi didn’t listen, her eyes were trained on the new figure.

She was small for her age, and pale, as if she hadn’t seen the sun in a long time. Her long orange hair covered her small back, cut in a classic hime style, covering her somewhat modest egyptian robes that showed her flat stomach and bare shoulders. Bands made of gold encircled her wrists and arms. Her slim neck was wrapped in bandages like a mummy’s, and her royal collar highlighted just how tiny she was. Her golden and gem encrusted headdress encompassed her head, signalling she was of the highest status. Her dark circles only served to enhance the unnatural yellow glow of her eyes, hidden behind a pair of large specs which were similar to Akira’s.

So this was what Futaba looked like. What color were her real eyes? What did she really dress like? Airi couldn’t help these questions that ran through her mind...

Mona stopped and frowned. “That’s Futaba’s Shadow.”

Akira inclined his head to the Shadow. “Sakura Futaba.”

She only stared at them, not speaking a word.

“Hey,” Ryuji walked up to her, dwarfing her figure with his much taller self. “Where’s the Treasure?”

Airi snapped out of her trance and glared disapprovingly. “Ryuji, don’t be so rude.” Stepping forward, she gave the Shadow a soft smile. “Futaba-chan, would it be all right if you show us where the Treasure is?…”

Her acidic yellow eyes honed in on her. “...Those who plunder my tomb. Why have you come?” She asked. Her voice was young and light like Mona described, but with the added dual tone that was native to the Metaverse, it became almost haunting.

Ann blinked. “Uh...because you asked us to steal your heart.”

Akira narrowed his eyes. He knew this wasn’t going to be easy. “So you’re not going to show us the way to your Treasure.” He stated.

Futaba stared at them, never blinking. “If you believe you can steal it, then try as you might.”

Mona frowned. “That sound rather defiant.” He remarked warily, placing his paws on his hips.

Yusuke grasped his chin thoughtfully. “Perhaps this is that “tsundere” thing where someone is harsh or sweet depending on the mood.”
Airi sweatdropped. “No...Maybe? Either way…” She turned back to the Palace ruler. “You asked us to do this. Will you still shut us out?” She asked quietly.

“Considering the state that my Palace is in…” Futaba began monotonously. “…There is no way that you can steal it. Not even you could make it.”

Airi blinked. Even her? What did that mean? She was about to ask when the air felt heavy and several malicious presences echoed around them.

“Worthless child!”

“You are a plague!”

“Just drop dead!”

Yusuke furrowed his brow. “What are these voices?” He asked, alarmed at the sheer hate and anger.

Airi flinched, her hands coming up to cover her ears. They sounded exactly like the institution…

Furrowing his brow, Akira placed a hand on her shoulder, silently letting her know he was here while he tried to look for the source of the voices.

“Murderer!”

“Why don’t you say something?!”

“You killed her!”

Makoto frowned. “Murderer..?”

Ann looked around, horrified. “This is terrible…”

Akira felt himself wince at just how harsh the words were. Was this her reality? Did these people really tell a little girl these things after she lost her mother?

The voices continued without stopping, an endless barrage of hate and resentment that battered against a wall long broken. Ryuji looked up with wide eyes. “Hey, the hell is this?”

Biting her lip, Airi forced herself to listen. This wasn’t directed to her. This was directed to Futaba. Futaba, who had crouched down and covered her own ears, eyes clenched shut with tears threatening to fall.

Airi took a step forward, arms stretched out. “Futaba-chan…”

Just as she was about to reach the Shadow, Futaba straightened up and floated in the air and out of her reach. “...That’s right.” She murmured. “I did it. I am the one who killed my mother.”

Ryuji recoiled. “What?–” He was cut off by a loud screech, the entire building shaking and rumbling right after. Dust and sand fell to the floor as something shook the pyramid. Something inhuman.

Ann looked up in a panic. “What was that?!”

Futaba floated higher into the air. “My mother exists here. I will remain here. I will do so until I
die.”

“No!” Airi cried out desperately, trying to reach up for her. “That’s not true!”

But it was too late. Futaba had already disappeared.

With a flash of blue fire, their clothes changed into their thief outfits. Queen widened her eyes and held up an arm, seeing dark blue leathers instead of her shujin shirt. “Our clothes..?!”

Narrowing his eyes, Fox summoned his katana. “She sees us as a threat now...What’s going on?!”

The Palace shook once more and they braced themselves, holding up their arms to shield them from the dust and sand that fell from the ceiling. “Dammit!” Skull cursed. “What the hell..?”

Typing into the keyboard, her fingers paused when she thought she heard a noise. “Huh..?” Futaba looked away from her main screen, trying to figure out what that was. Was it those strangers again? The ones who were the Phantom Thieves.

Hearing her voice again, now so much more grown up and mature, was so shocking that she couldn’t speak.

The only way she could talk to her was through text, and even then, it was to Sojiro’s new guy. That weird megane with the frizzy hair who was her boyfriend.

Futaba wanted so badly to reach out to her chat ID, but at the same time, she had abandoned her. Did she even remember her?

She heard another noise again, even through her noise canceling headphones, and she realized with soul-wrenching dread it was it again. Her heart dropped to her stomach and her breaths began to quicken out of her control. “No…” Lifting her legs, she crouched in her computer chair and covered her ears.

“You deserve to die!”

“You killed her, you monster!”

“What do you have to say for yourself?!”

“Stay away from me!”

“No…” She choked out, pressing her headphones closer to her ears, hoping it would help. She even played the recording again, the cello’s deep notes singing through her headphones, but the voices were still there. That presence behind her computer chair was still there.

“Someone save me...Airi-nee…” She cried, little droplets falling onto her knees. “I’m going to die here…”

But she didn’t come.
No one came.

Chapter End Notes

Please leave a comment with your thoughts, likes, dislikes, etc! Would greatly appreciate em!
Queen looked around the trembling Palace with a frustrated frown. “This is bad—there are just too many unknown variables and I’m having a hard time getting a grasp of our situation. We should regroup and—”

The building shook again as if something had hit it. Panther looked up with wide eyes. “What now?!?”

A large and heavy object fell right in front of them on the stairs and to their horror, they realized it was a boulder, rolling down the steps with increasing speed.

“Oh crap..!” Mona yelped, already turning tail. “Bad, bad, bad! Ruuuuuuun!”

They panicked and dashed down the stairs, their own paranoia making it seem as if the ball was right on their backs. The decorative sarcophagi they passed were crushed by the boulder, the loud cracking sounds making them run even faster. Landing near the quicksand pit, they hugged the sides of the hall as the boulder crashed into the pillars and fell into the pit.

Queen let out a long breath. “We’re safe...That was too close.”

Metal slammed with a clang and they looked up to see the way they came from was now blocked by a blue metal door, almost as if they needed a passcode to a computer.

Hands on her knees, Panther panted from the adrenaline rush. “Now what?!?”

Fox straightened up with a sigh and glanced toward the sealed path, “It seems the door is shut. What should we do?”

Elegant looked down, dusting off her coat. “…I think we should go back for now. We don’t know how much time has passed. Plus, hearing what she said…” That it was her fault her mother died. That she killed her even. There was no way that was true. Why did she think that? Who were those people who shouted at her?

She clenched a gloved hand. How dare they…

Mona nodded in agreement. “I agree. Why don’t we prepare a little more, then come back?”

Joker nodded. “My thoughts exactly. Let’s get out of here and back to the cafe.”
By the time they left Sojiro’s house, the sky was already dark. As soon as they came into the cafe, Sojiro gave them a small smile before leaving the shop to them, going home for the day. Hopefully he’d find no reason to suspect they had snuck into his house again.

Akira served them all leftover curry and turned the TV on to the news. “The date that Medjed has set for the alleged cleanse is 8/21. That day is fast approaching. The Phantom Thieves, whom they singled out, have not made any notable actions at this time. Will Medjed carry out their cyberterrorism?”

Makoto tightened her grip around her spoon. “In order to stop them, we need to help Sakura Futaba before the 21st.” She stated grimly. “Our deadline is about two days prior, so the 19th.”

Ryuji swallowed his mouthful before speaking. “Meetin’ up in Shibuya then comin’ here’s a pain, right? Plus, half the team’s already in the neighborhood, so let’s make this place our hideout for a while.”

Airi nodded in agreement. “That sounds good, plus Ojisan could hint if Futaba-chan is getting worse or something.” She placed her spoon down on her half-finished plate. “We should finish this as soon as possible.”

Ann nodded. “Yeah. Not just because of Medjed, but for Futaba herself…”

Akira looked around the table. “Is everyone fine with this place being our hideout then?”

Everyone nodded. “We must take care not to be discovered by Boss.” Yusuke advised evenly. “Since we are working so close now, he no doubt suspects our presence.”

Morgana rumbled on Airi’s lap. “There’s no telling what may happen inside that pyramid.” He warned, licking his muzzle of any leftover curry. “We all need to be cautious so that place doesn’t become our graveyard.”

Finishing his curry in one go, Ryuji slammed his empty plate on the table. “Man,” He grinned. “This is gonna be one crazy summer vacation. We’re dealin’ with international hackers and lookin’ for a Treasure in a pyramid.”

Ann looked at him in disbelief. “How can you be enjoying this? This is a crisis! Everything depends on us right now!”

He pouted and crossed his arms. “I know that!”

Airi frowned disapprovingly, not in the mood to be so lighthearted. “Do you? Because if we fail, not only do we fail to help Futaba-chan, the whole country will suffer. There’s no doubt that Medjed will be targeting the banks first, which means we’re all in danger of losing everything we have.”

Ryuji deflated. “Yes, mom…” He mumbled.

Ann glared at him. “Which reminds me; While we were in the bus, you were staring at me like a pervert.” She crossed her arms. “Don’t you have any shame?”

He looked away with a blush. “…It was a great view.” He muttered petulantly. "...M'sorry."

Morgana glanced over at him and preened. “I wasn’t peeking, Lady Ann.” He chirped angelic-like. “I’m a gentleman, after all.”
Ann turned her glare to him. “It’s not that you ‘wouldn’t,’ but rather you ‘couldn’t,’ since you were transformed, am I right?”

The feline sweatdropped and looked away, a blush underneath his whiskers.

Ann groaned and hid her face in her arms. "I'm surrounded by perverts..."

Akira rolled his eyes. Sometimes he wondered how they even made it this far. This weird love triangle was going to have to go somewhere soon...

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Airi sighed as she towel dried her hair. She had taken a shower this morning but considering how much she sweated today, she felt like she could foot a little more on the water bill. Yusuke felt no need to. She wondered if he could even sweat. Had she ever seen him disheveled? He woke up earlier than her in the mornings so she didn’t even know if he had bed hair. One of these days she’d have to find out.

Plopping down on the couch in the living room, she enjoyed some cold tea. Taking a long sip from her cup, she sighed and stared up at the light fixture.

Futaba...Why had her Shadow said “not even she could make it”? Did she know her? Maybe she looked her up; tracked her bank’s information from the notice they sent her. Was that enough to hack into her information?

She sighed. How long had Futaba been alone..? Since two years ago? Maybe even longer since her mother had been a busy scientist? Those voices though...They were similar enough to her matrons that it brought back bad memories.

“Straighten your back and point your toes, you devil spawn!”

“How dare you embarrass our Lord?!”

“No one wants you. He will never forgive your sins.”

The matron brought the hammer down on her precious cello, her last gift from her parents. “This was your own fault. Stupid children like you deserve your punishments.”

The usually buried memories came back with a vengeance but she stuffed them back into the deepest part of her mind. Did Futaba’s cognition torture herself with them? How horrible...

”Aneki?”

Startled out of her thoughts, Airi looked up and smiled slightly to her brother. “Oh, hey. What's up?”

Yusuke slowly blinked, regarding her for a moment before taking a seat on the other chaise. “You have been quiet since the Palace...Had it impacted you?”

She smiled, bittersweet. “Of course you’d notice. Yeah, it feels all too familiar, you know…” She ran a hand through her damp loose curls. “Futaba-chan reminds me so much of what other kids at the institution went through. They all blamed themselves somehow for their parents’ passings, even Go-kun for all he exploded at others...”
He tilted his head. “...Did you ever?”

She blinked. “Did I...blame myself as well? No. I always knew it was Hisoka’s fault. It wasn’t me who pulled the trigger.” Even though that specific sound still haunted her sometimes. Their dead bodies cooling right in front of her before the police arrived. Before she was shipped away without a word to any of her parents’ friends.

“I was told I was trash, that I was unwanted, but I was never blamed for my parents. I had no one to blame me.” She shrugged despondently. “Ojisan was the only other person who knew my parents, and he’s hated Hisoka since.” Her gaze slid to him. “...Did you?” She asked softly.

Yusuke looked down at his loosely clasped hands, fingers calloused from years of handling paintbrushes. “...No.” He uttered quietly. “Just like you, no one knew my mother other than Madarame, and he had never cursed me for my mother’s passing. Knowing now what he knew, perhaps he had blamed himself in a way.” He let out a quiet exhale. “I suppose I would not know until the date comes upon us...”

Their phones rang out.

R: Well that sucked.
An: Is doing this really going to help us do something about Medjed?
Y: Do they truly intend to follow through on their threat? It’d be a shame if our efforts were a waste.
???: Medjed will definitely make a move.
Ai: Alibaba!
???: I’m checking in on your progress. How much longer will it take?
Ma: Your heart is more problematic than we had anticipated.
R: Hey Alibaba!
R: Can you really do something about Medjed?
???: Of course.
Y: Unfortunately, we have next to no evidence to support that.
???: Your work will be rewarded. I promise.
???: Besides...You have no other option, do you?
Ma: I suppose that’s true...
Ai: Is...there any way you could demonstrate to us what you can do?
R: Yeah, like can you take down a server?
Ma: Hey! Don’t start any trouble.
???: That’s all it would take to convince you?
???: All right.
???: I ask that you take care of this quickly.
???: Until then.
An: Wait! Are you ditching us again?
Ma: This is troubling, but...we need to do what we can at the moment.
Ai: I hope we’re not troubling Futaba-chan too much...
R: Man, why’d this have to be during summer vacation?
An: We don’t have any choice...
Ma: Akira, as always we’ll leave it to you to call us together.
Ak: Got it.

They put their phones away. “Futaba-chan...” Airi whispered, looking down at her half finished
“I can’t believe her Palace is a tomb…”

Yusuke hummed thoughtfully from his seat. “To think someone our age would desire to die...It is disheartening.” He murmured. “Yet there was such beauty within that pyramid. They do say suffering tends to enrich the arts…”

Airi smiled slightly at his point of focus. “It was pretty cool to be within a pyramid.” She conceded. “We’d never be able to go to Egypt to do that.”

Finishing her tea, she flicked on the TV. The news was running, showing a green logo for Medjed. “The Medjed homepage has posted a declaration of victory and an announcement of their next crime. This is thought to be yet another provocation against the Phantom Thieves, who have yet to respond.”

They both frowned at the news. “They’re getting rather carried away…” Yusuke narrowed his eyes at the TV.

“Seems we just need to nip this in the bud before they do anything against us.” Airi murmured grimly.

---7/26, TUESDAY, DAYTIME, YONGENJAYA

It was swelteringly hot. It had yet to actually rain, and all the humidity within the air made it feel like wading through a ball of hot water. Akira tugged at the collar of his shirt. At least he had Jack Frost to keep him somewhat cool.

Heading down for breakfast, he enjoyed a plate of curry as well as a cup of coffee, courtesy of his guardian. Sojiro looked up from his own cup. “You had tests before the summer break started, right? How were they?”

Akira smiled. “They were good. I actually beat Airi and got first place for the 2nd years.”

Sojiro raised his brows in surprise. “Really now? Huh. You have a good look on your face when you talk about your achievement.” He took something out of his pocket and placed it on the counter. It was a pocket mirror, round and impeccably clean as if brand new. “You can have this. Look at your face with it.”

Akira did as he was told and picked up the small reflection. As always, gray eyes surrounded by a forest of dark lashes stared back at him through blocky glasses, but after a moment, he realized his eyes were almost shining. There was a light present that he had never seen before.

He was happy.

Sure, he was on probation for a crime he never committed, and they had deadlines to meet where Japan would suffer if they failed, but he had a home here in Leblanc, he had friends, he had a family that accepted him like he accepted them, and a girlfriend who loved him and he loved in return.

He smiled to himself. It was a good look on him.

“You actually are pretty smart, huh.” Sojiro remarked. “You showed me. Studying is good and all, but men need to keep up their looks too, especially since you have a girlfriend to impress. Keeping clean is important.”

Akira ducked his head and smiled. It was almost like a father teaching his son how to be a man.
"Yes, sir."

His phone rang and he noticed it was a text from Ann saying she had a photoshoot and she’d like him to be there since it’s a double feature with Mika. He replied with yes before getting up to wash his dishes. Mika again, huh. With Ann’s new confidence at being the best for Shiho, there was no way she’d be shown up again.

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They met up at Shibuya before taking the train to Odaiba’s Seaside Park. Walking from the station to the coastline, they stopped in surprise when they saw Mika was being yelled at by an agency manager. “...And don’t pull a stunt like that again, OK?”

Mika nodded timidly, eyes brimming with tears. “OK...I won’t...”

Ann blinked. “What’s going on here?”

The agency manager turned to her with a scowl. “Well...Oh right, you fell victim to it too. Is it OK if I tell her, Mika-chan?”

The older model nodded. “Yeah...”

“Do you remember a while back when a bunch of models weren’t showing up to our shoots?” The manager asked Ann. “Apparently Mika-chan was posing as our agency and telling them the shoot locations changed.”

Ann and Akira stared at him in shock. What?

“We had heard rumors that she might have been doing it...but we thought people were just jealous of her. I mean, those shoots she filled in for really boosted her popularity. Anyway,” He rolled his eyes. “I asked her about it today, and all she had to say was ‘I’m sorry.’”

Mika kept her head down. “What I did was really terrible.” She confessed demurely. “I caused so much trouble for everyone...But I’m gonna start working even harder from now on, I promise...”

The manager only sighed and shook his head. “…You’re ready to go, right? I’ll tell the photographer to begin soon.” He walked away, leaving the two models alone.

Ann rested her hands on her hips and gave her rival a raised brow. “…You really did something that lame?”

Akira sweatdropped. Something nasty. But it was kind of admirable she was going so far to reach her dream.

Mika tch’ed. “It’s your own fault for getting the boot.” She accused callously. “If you can’t crawl your way back up, you may as well go home.” She smirked. “And either way, it’s not like I’m not
talented. I just needed my shot and now I’m selling like crazy.” She preened like a peacock.

Ann shook her head. “...You talk big, but they still found out about your fake emails.”

Mika stayed smug. “Sure, but all I had to do was offer a teensy apology. It would’ve been dumb to try and hide it from them. Anyway,” She flipped her hair. “They can’t sack me now. I’m gonna get even more popular, even if it means being detested for my actions.”

Sweatdropping at how tenacious she was, Ann began to giggle, lips pulled back in a grin. “You’re just like the villains I used to admire when I was a kid. Beautiful, strong...and wicked.” She laughed, holding her stomach. “Honestly, I just can’t bring myself to hate you.”

Mika frowned at being laughed at. “Well I don’t have any trouble hating you.” She retorted.

Wiping a tear away, Ann straightened up. “Sorry Mika, but your hard work is only gonna get you to second place.” She announced determinedly. “I’m going to be the number one model.” She grinned. “You might be more popular right now, but I’ll take that spot from you fair and square.”

Mika observed her for a moment. “Hm...All right then,” She smirked. “I won’t pull any more tricks. I’ll beat you with beauty...fair and square.”

Akira sweatdropped. Girls were scary.

One of the crew called Ann over for her costume and after changing into a leather jacket with a sleek blue dress underneath, her hair put up into a curly bun, the shoot started. The photographer snapped pictures of both Mika and Ann this time as they posed next to the Rainbow Bridge.

Akira stood back and admired just how much Ann had changed in just a month. Last time they were doing this, she had no idea how to pose for the theme and ended up losing to Mika, but this time...

Ann crossed her legs in front of her and held her hands behind her rear, creating a sleek image of her body and her outfit in one go. Her smile was confident but not in a sassy way, it was more of a “I know this looks good.”

“Yeah, that’s it!” The photographer called out enthusiastically, the shutter going off every half second. “This way! Look this way!”

People stopped and stared at the photoshoot, whispering to themselves. “Hey, isn’t that Mika? Wow, she’s even prettier in person.”

“It’s Mika! Oh, and Ann too! They’re both so cute..!”

“What must they eat to have bodies like that? The world is so unfair...”

“They might have some natural beauty, but they’ve gotta be exercising to have those bods!”

Akira even overheard some of the magazine crew talking to each other a few steps away. “Something’s changed in Ann-chan, huh?”

“Yeah, she’s really amped up the sexiness. Maybe she’s gained some confidence?”

The photographer stopped and began looking over the photos he took. “All right, that’s it for now! Let’s take five. Mika, go change into your next outfit.”

The models relaxed with Mika heading for the changing area. Ann walked up to Akira with a grin.
“Man, this is so fun!” She cheered. “Today has been really great so far! I know we have Medjed and Futaba to worry about, so thanks for coming out here with me! So…” She swayed shyly in place. “How was I?”

Akira gave her an encouraging smile. “You really gave it your all. You were a real model out there, Ann.”

She beamed. “Well, yeah! I had to work extra hard with you watching, Akira!” Exhaling, she looked out over the ocean, Tokyo looming in the distance. “I know I said I want to be the number one model, but I’m OK with that not happening just yet.” She murmured. “For now, I just want to keep improving, one step at a time. Then someday down the line, I’ll be able to look at myself with pride. Hopefully people will see that confidence, and draw strength from it. Like Shiho…”

She held a hand to her chest. “I’m gonna be a ray of light for the people of this planet…” She turned to him, eyes serious. “Just like you, Airi, Ryuji, Yusuke, Makoto, Morgana…and Shiho, are for me…”

Akira smiled and nodded. “You can do it, Ann. I want to see you all over the billboards and newsstands in the future, OK?”

She giggled. “Yeah! You guys are my light.”

“All right, break time’s over!” The photographer called out over the milling crew. “Ann-chan, you’re gonna be the main focus for this session!”

She turned back to the shoot area and nodded. “Got it!” She gave Akira a smile. “Hey, let’s hang out a little more once the shoot ends, OK?”

He nodded and watched as the photoshoot continued for another hour before the photographer called it quits. It was clear to everyone watching that Ann shone more than Mika this time, and though the older model was unhappy about it, there was grudging respect mixed in.

After changing back to her regular clothes, the two of them rode the train back to Shibuya where they got a booth at the Diner. Yukimi greeted them and got their orders for them, and they sat with their meals in front of them.

Ann bit her lip as she stared down at her sandwich. “…Back when I met Shiho,” She began quietly, a 180 from her earlier mood. “When she saved me from my loneliness…I realized that personal relationships are something to be treasured. That’s why I’m not going to run away anymore.” She clenched her fists on her lap. “When Shiho almost died…and then Airi…I felt something inside myself, like Carmen wanted to tell me ‘we’ll be stronger next time.’”

She took a deep breath and looked him in the eye. “I’ll face myself head on. This time, it’s my turn to help someone. I’m still kinda worried because everyone always saves me, but…I’ll always have you guys to help me, right Akira?”

Akira softened and nodded. “Of course. We’ve got each other’s backs.” Because no one else would support them.

Ann brightened and grinned. “You can lean on me too, if you need it. We’re here for each other.” Her chest pulsed and she held a hand to her heart. In her soul, Carmen’s ruffled dress and the scent of her cigar began to disappear. In a ray of light, a dark and sleek figure appeared, a horned six eyed mask covering her face. Her bat-like cape stayed in place, even as she held back her dog headed chains.
Hecate laughed haughtily as she realized her full power.

Opening her eyes, Ann grinned. “So that’s an Ultimate’s power!”

Akira blinked. “Did you just..?”

She nodded happily. “I’ll have to show you when we go to Futaba’s Palace! But hey,” She pointed a finger in his face. “That doesn’t mean I’m gonna stop counting on you. After all,” She smirked. “You’re an eternal member of my fan club!”

He sweatdropped. “Eternal?”

“It means forever, got it!” She picked up her knife and fork. “Anyway, let’s dig in before our food gets cold!”

Parting ways with Ann since she wanted to go home to video chat Shiho, his phone rang in his pocket.

R: Yo. So apparently Alibaba wiped the Phansite for a few minutes.
R: Mishima was in a real tizzle about it too.
R: Wonder if that’ll be enough to fight against Medjed.
Ai: What would they do first? Stocks are already falling…
Y: It is hard for me to even fathom what it could be.
An: People have really been up in arms about the whole cleanse thing…
Ma: To think a global hacker group would be targeting us…
R: Should we just ignore ‘em?
Ak: We have to act.
R: Yeah…
Y: No matter how you look at it, we need a countermeasure.
An: Our best bet would be Alibaba…
Ma: But she may not be capable of it in her current state.
An: I guess we should think of some other ways too then.
Y: Yes. It would be best to have as many solutions as possible.
R: Well we still got time, so let’s come up with something good, K?

He put his phone away with a sigh. They should go into the Palace tomorrow then. Until then, he had to go let a certain someone know her fortune was false.

Chapter End Notes

Ann rank 10!
Chihaya rank 1
Chapter 171

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for 1300+ kudos! Wow!

---7/27, WEDNESDAY, DAY TIME, YONGENJAYA.

Airi opened the window in the Study, airing out all the paint fumes. The sky had split open today, and rain poured down like an endless waterfall.

She took a deep breath and sighed. The rain really helped cool how hot it was yesterday. She had ended up taking a shift at work during yesterday’s heatwave and almost fainted from how warm it was in the underground mall. At least it was way nicer today.

Her phone buzzed on the desk.

Ak: We’re going in today. Meet up at my place.
Ai: Got it.
Y: Understood.
Ma: On my way.
An: OK!
R: Roger that!

Putting on a pair of jeans and a breezy blouse, she headed downstairs to put on knee-high boots and grabbed her umbrella. Yusuke walked up behind her dressed in a blue long sleeve shirt as well as black slacks. Opening their umbrellas, they traveled to Leblanc together. Rain drummed against their umbrellas in a constant downfall, filling their ears with the sound of chaotic peace.

Turning the corner in the alley, they reached Leblanc and put their umbrellas away with a sigh. Opening the front door, the bell ringing at their arrival, they looked around the empty cafe. Seemed like they were the first to arrive as usual.

Sojiro looked up at them. “Oh hey.” He greeted. “You here for Akira? He’s still upstairs with the cat.”

Airi smiled and waved. “Got it. Thanks, Ojisan.”

Going up the stairs, they greeted Akira who sat ready on his couch, the big table already pulled out for the group. She gave him a peck on the lips before sitting down. Morgana jumped up on her lap and rubbed his ears against her arm.

They talked for a while until they heard the bell on the cafe door ring again, and a cacophony of footsteps headed up to the attic. Ann, Ryuji, and Makoto showed up, Ryuji shaking his wet locks. Once everyone took a seat around the table, their meeting began. “I’m honestly surprised at the Palace this time…” Morgana confessed. “Everywhere we looked was just desert.”

Ann perked up, though there was a hint of something sad within her body language. “Oh yeah, all
the other ones until now have just been normal cities outside of the distortion itself.”

Ryuji scoffed and leaned back in his chair. “Thanks to that, we didn’t even know we were in a Palace our first time goin’ into Kamoshida’s.”

Morgana shook his head. “That’s still part of the Palace, though. The city may not have been distorted, but it was cognition. The Palace rulers may have been criminals, but they were social enough to know the city layout. Futaba probably doesn’t…” He paused. “In fact, I’d bet she isn’t even interested in the outside world.”

Airi nodded. “Right. You mentioned that in the Metaverse, there’s an exact copy of the city depending on the distorted people. With Kamoshida, Madarame, and even Kaneshiro, everywhere looked the same except for their Palaces.”

Yusuke hummed. “Futaba’s Palace is a bleak desert because she has no cognitive interest in the outside world...Understandable, considering her lifestyle.”

Ann pursed her lips. “I doubt many famous criminals are shut-ins like her, though. Hopefully that means we won’t have to go through all this desert business in the future.”

Makoto shook her head. “That might not necessarily be the case. Many upper-class citizens travel by limo or plane, so they don’t know or care about city life…”

Ryuji perked up, his chair skidding forward. “A plane..?! Damn, that sounds pretty good!” He turned to grin at Akira. “I mean, wouldn’t you wanna go to a Palace wayyy up above the clouds if you could?”

Akira hummed. “That would be cool, but it’d be a hassle to reach.”

Makoto sweatdropped. “I think a flying bank is quite enough, thanks…”

Yusuke crossed his arms and leaned forward in his seat. “Depending on the criminal, there may be an exact replica of Tokyo within their Palace.” He smiled. “I would love to examine the aesthetics of such a strange place at least once.”

Airi quirked her lips. “An empty Tokyo...That would be cool and unsettling to see. The only life around would be in the Palace.”

Morgana sat down and waved his tail. “It wouldn’t be empty, per say. You would see shades walking around, and depending on the ruler of the Palace, their cognitions of people would be seen in certain locations if they associate them with it. But it’s true that an observant criminal could have an exact copy of the city in their Palace...Although even if such a place did exist, it’s not like we’d have any use for it.”

Akira raised a brow. “Don’t jinx it.” He sighed and sat up in his chair. “All right, let’s start this.”

Yusuke hummed. “Sakura Futaba...She is truly an odd girl for actually requesting that we steal her heart.”

Ryuji checked his phone. “The day Medjed said was August 21st...We still got time to spare.”

“To deal with them, yes, but I’d rather we take her Treasure as soon as possible.” Airi refuted quietly. “If her distortions are causing hallucinations, I don’t want her to have to suffer for any longer than necessary.”
Ann nodded. "Agreed. I've had time to think it over, but those voices in her Palace were so hurtful..." She clenched her hands. "We've got to help her!"

Akira stood up and took out his phone, opening the Nav. "We ready?" Everyone nodded and he pressed the navigation. His room contorted and stretched, reality bending to allow them into the metaphysical.

Appearing in front of the pyramid again, they looked down at themselves in surprise. "Hey," Panther voiced out, looking down at her skin tight catsuit. "We've changed into our thief costumes!"

Elegant looked up at the structure with a morose frown. "So she see us as a threat…" She sighed and dusted off some stray sand off her sleeveless coat. "Let’s be careful."

Mona jumped in the air, paw raised high. "Begin infiltration! Keep your head in the game."

Joker nodded and eyed their surroundings. They were serious this time. "...Fox, Panther, Elegant, with me. Mona, Skull, Queen, stay as backup."

Everyone nodded to his orders. Running up the stairs to the entrance, they pushed the large stone doors open, allowing the cool air from within to seep out. Once they walked in, the doors sealed themselves behind them, leaving them in the cool and dry interior of the pyramid.

Heading to the quicksand pit, they jumped over the few pillars still left standing after last time’s boulder and made it to the grand staircase. The way forward was still shut, wires running up and down to the large circle in the center of the blockade.

Mona scrutinized the door. "So it still won’t open. We might just have to give up on it."

Skull rubbed the back of his head. "No point sittin’ around though. Whaddya wanna do, Joker?"

Joker eyed the stone walls that surrounded them. Any vents? Camouflaged doors? Nothing. "...There was a stairwell we passed on the way here outside. It looked like it could’ve been a basement door."

Queen nodded in agreement. "It could be another way in. We’d have more success trying that than this one."

Fox crossed his arms. "We will have to investigate every suspicious place we see, both inside the pyramid and out."

Skull groaned. "Ugh, outside..?! You mean we gotta deal with that heat?!"

Panther lightly pushed him. "Stop complaining! We gotta do this for Futaba-chan!"

They turned around and headed back where they came from. Just as they reached the large doors of the entrance again, a haunting voice called out to them. "Are you leaving?" They turned around and saw Shadow Futaba standing in the foyer. "Come back here. Let’s talk for a moment."
Descending the stairs, they stopped in front of the short Palace ruler. “Welcome back.” She greeted them monotonously. “I had thought I would never see you again.”

Skull glared at her. “We’re only here ‘cause we gotta be! I can’t believe you tried to drop a boulder on us! You want us to steal your goddamn Treasure or not?”

“Skull!” Elegant snapped, giving him a warning look.

Futaba looked at them through her large specs. “Hm. why don’t we make a deal? You wish to proceed further, yes?”

Fox narrowed his eyes at her, a foot in difference in their heights. “A deal, you say?”

She nodded. “There is a town nearby. I would like you to take back that which the bandit there stole from me.”

Panther perked up. “Oh yeah, the town that’s a little away from here.”

“If you bring what was stolen back to me, I will give you a reward.” Futaba announced. “I’ll even tell you how to proceed.”

Queen furrowed her brow. “Can’t you tell us any more details? Anything about this bandit, or what was stolen?”

“You’ll learn all the information you need to know once you arrive.” The pharaoh answered blandly.

Pursing her lips, the team’s adviser turned to her leader. “...We’ll need to head outside if we want to go to the town. We can go when you’re ready, Joker.”

Joker nodded and and jerked his head toward the front door. “Let’s go now and get this over with.”

Exiting out of the pyramid, they grimaced when the intense heat hit them immediately. Skull immediately hung his head, his leather jacket sticking to him uncomfortably. Making their way over to the edge of the pyramid’s perimeter, they looked out toward the town in the distance.

Mona puffed his chest and walked forward. “It’s pretty far away, so this is my chance to shine!”

Jumping into the air and curling into a ball, he transformed into the bus with a puff of smoke. Landing on the ground, sending a gust of sand with his tires, he opened his doors for them.

Climbing into the vehicle with Queen at the wheel, they drove their way over to the town. It wasn’t too far away, only a couple minutes at their top speed, but the fact that they only had lukewarm AC on inside made it an uncomfortable ride.

Fox was kind enough to occasionally send a weak Bufu into the air until they made it to the town.

Elegant eyed the old sun baked bricks that made up the buildings. It really was like a real ancient Egyptian town, but she also noted these buildings had modern signs and air conditioning units attached to their walls. It was a strange mix of the past and the present.

Hitting the center of the town, they climbed out of the bus and looked around. It looked like modern stores set in ancient buildings. Even though they were all Japanese in design, they were all written in sanskrit. None of them could read a single thing in this abandoned village.

“This has to be the city Futaba’s Shadow mentioned.” Mona concluded once he turned back to his
regular bipedal form.

Fox eyed their surroundings and the notable lack of people. “It looks quite desolate…” He murmured. “She said only bandits reside here, but still.”

Joker furrowed his brow, using his third eye to scan the vicinity. “...There’re some Shadows. Let’s do this carefully.”

Everyone nodded and the first response team headed deeper into the narrow alleys of the town. Hiding behind a corner, they peeked out at what they assumed to be their standard enemy. It was a tall and lanky figure wrapped in bandages, yellow eyes gleaming underneath its bandaged mask.

Dashing from behind the building, Joker flipped up and ripped its mask off. “Show me your true form!”

The mummy contorted and black blood spilled out into two Sandmans, silver grinning moons holding a sack on their shoulders.

Panther stepped up with a confident sashay, her corded tail waving behind her. “I’m so ready to show off my new girl!” She grinned, holding a hand to her mask. “Hecate!”

In a burst of blue fire, the dark witch appeared behind her, her breast armor-spikes shining in the strong sun. “Maragi!” Hecate raised her arms, the dog heads on the end of her chains barking wildly. In a burst of flames, the Sandmans cried out in pain as they were left with burns.

The rest of the thieves gaped at her new Persona. “What?!?” Mona yelped, eyes wide. “Another Ultimate?!”

Joker smirked at her stronger self and accepted her high-five. Rushing in, his dagger flashed in the sun as he jerked his wrist, lines of black appearing on a Sandman once he jumped back.

He high-fived Elegant as she hurdled over him. Gripping her waist, Joker pivoted on his heel and threw her into the air in the direction of their enemies. Spinning down with her scythe held out, she laid back and pirouetted on the tips of her boots, slashing both Sandmans with the razor sharp edge of her blade. They disappeared into black dust, leaving the coast clear.

Elegant let her weapon disappear before turning to her leader with a confused smile. “That was the first time you’ve ever thrown me. It was almost like pair ice skating.”

Joker shrugged and looked away. “We work well together.” Maybe they could all work on tag-team coordination.

Skull stared at Panther with his mouth slightly open, awe filling him as he saw just how different she was now.

The dominatrix turned to him and gave him a sly smirk, the strong sunlight making her hair shimmer like gold and her eyes as clear as the blue sky. “Well?” She winked. “How was that for an Ultimate Persona?”

His face reddened under his metal mask and he looked away. “Not bad.” He mumbled. “Guess you’re pretty strong too.”

She blushed slightly and grinned. “Now I’ll be able to help out even more! I'll be the savior next time!”
Mona watched this with a dejected frown before he tore his eyes away, toddling farther from the rest of the group.

Not noticing their feline teammate’s bitterness, Elegant looked between the two blonds and smiled to herself, bumping shoulders with her leader. Joker looked down at her with a raised brow. “Don’t be a matchmaker when we’re on the job.” He murmured quietly before raising his voice. “Let’s find those bandits and get back to the pyramid.”

Regrouping together, they searched the rest of the town for any suspicious figures. Walking into the town square, sand wafting around their feet, Mona rested his paws on his hips. “I have to say, the mood of this town is definitely strange.” He remarked. “I can’t sense anyone around.”

“Hey, guys. You lookin’ for something?”

Tensing at the unexpected voice, they turned around to see a bandit. He was clearly some sort of Shadow, but he had white cloth covering his head and body with dark brown pants and a metal mask, while waving around a scimitar. “Heh.” He chuckled. “I thought I heard someone rustlin’ around out here… and here y’all are. Welcome to the desert, fellow trader.”

Queen raised a brow. “‘Fellow trader’? Don’t lump us in the same group.”

Skull stepped forward with an intimidating scowl. “We don’t care about your welcomes. You’re a bandit, right? Just cough up the thing you stole.”

The Shadow bandit laughed at them. “Ha! Well ain’t this interestin’. A group of criminals comin’ after a fellow trader…” He bent his knees. “…Well, you’re gonna have to catch me if you want it.” He dashed off down an alley, quickly disappearing from their view.

“Wait!” Panther called out, groaning when the bandit disappeared. “Ughhh, you just had to scare him off, Skull!”

Affronted, Skull pointed to himself. “Me?!?”

Fox narrowed his eyes. “We should give chase before he vanishes.”

Queen nodded in agreement, cracking her knuckles. “We’ll beat him if necessary. We need whatever he stole to get into Futaba’s Palace.”

Running out of the town square, they headed down the same alley the bandit went to. Turning the corner, they saw him on the deserted road. “Hey!” Skull called out, taking an intimidating step forward. “I said wait! We’re-”

“You’re too slow, morons.” He remarked lazily. “You’ll never catch me at this rate.” Without listening any further, the bandit turned down another alley, leaving them in his dust.

Mona jumped up with wide eyes. “He ran off again! We better catch him, fast!”

With annoyed frowns, they followed him through another series of alleyways throughout the town before they caught up with him again.

The bandit turned and laughed at them, idly playing with his scimitar. “You tired already? What a bunch of losers… Grave-robbing is a game of stamina, y’know?” Again, he ran away back in the direction of the town square.

Panther stomped her heel into the dust covered ground. “Urghhh, he got away again!” She
scowled. “This is really pissing me off!”

Elegant frowned and dusted off her sleeveless coat. “This is going nowhere. He’ll only make us chase him forever unless we do something else.”

Queen nodded in agreement. “What we need to do is corner him in a place where he won’t be able to escape again.” She grasped her chin. “Perhaps the town square? We can sneak around him and trap him in there!” She looked up at her teammates. “We should have one person at one side of the town square entrance and the rest of us on the other side. That way, he’d have no choice but to run into the square.”

Joker nodded. “Fox, run around to meet up at the entrance.”

Fox inclined his head to his leader. “Understood.” He turned tail and dashed off to occupy the other end.

The rest of them went after the bandit’s trail through the alleys until they finally saw him near the square. Eyeing both them and Fox who blocked off the other end, the bandit ran into the town square to escape them.

Joker smirked. “Perfect.”

Regrouping back with Fox, they spread out and surrounded the renegade who looked at them with angry yellow eyes. “Hand us what you stole.” Joker commanded, pointing his dagger at him.

The bandit tch’ed. “C’mon, you gotta let me go. I mean, you guys came to raid that tomb too, right? Why don’t we work together and share the plunder?”

Elegant narrowed her eyes at him and summoned her scythe. “How about no? We’re here to help Futaba-chan, not to harm her.” She pointed the sharp edge at him, letting the sun catch the black metal to shine gold. “Now hand over what you stole or else.”

Taking a step back, the bandit held up his scimitar. “I guess I don’t have a choice!”

With a rumble, black blood spilled around him and transformed him into Garuda, the golden flying bird god. Without prompt, it flapped its wings, sending a strong Garudyne at Panther.

She yelped as the sharp winds ripped into her catsuit but stood strong, flicking her whip out in retaliation. The corded leather caught its wings and ripped one off in a spew of black blood.

It screeched while it tumbled down onto the ground, and Fox ran to high-five Panther and unsheathed his katana with a flick of his thumb, unleashing a flurry of slashes onto the bird-like Shadow.

Now that it was down, they launched an all-out attack, their weapons leaving their marks on it until it disappeared with a spew of black. Swaying in place, Fox held a hand to his chin and stared impassively at its disappearing corpse. “And the villain has been vanquished.”

Once the Shadow was gone, it left ¥6300 and some sort of papyrus paper in its place. Skull clapped at their performance. “We won! Oh, he dropped something.” He walked up and reached down to pick up the money and piece of paper.

Mona peered at it. “Is this...some kind of papyrus parchment? It looks like there’s something written inside.”
Panther crossed her arms. “Hey, no peeking at a girl’s belongings without her permission!”

“Y’know…” Skull frowned. “Just what the hell’s happenin’ in her heart? There’s this bandit, those weird voices sayin’ ’you killed her’ and who knows what else…”

Elegant idly grasped her arm. “Can she not control the Shadows in her Palace?” She frowned worriedly. “I hope they’re not hurting her…”

Mona looked up morosely. “I don’t know…I’ve never seen a case like this…”

Fox sighed and rolled his neck. “Regardless, we have no more business in this city. Shall we head back, Joker?”

Joker nodded, taking the papyrus and pocketing it. They had to give it back in pristine condition.

Walking out to the outskirts of the town, Mona transformed into the bus again and drove them back to the pyramid where they met up with Futaba’s Shadow.

“This is what they stole, correct?” Joker held up the papyrus paper in a red gloved hand.

Futaba’s yellow eyes honed in on it and nodded. “Well done. It is yours now.”

Panther blinked. “Wait, what..? Didn’t you want us to get it back because it’s important?”

Furrowing his brow, Joker unfurled the paper to see it was actually a map. “That is a map of the tomb,” Futaba explained blandly. “Stolen by the bandit to aid in his ransacking of this place.”

Elegant bit her lip. “...Why is a Shadow trying to harm you? Isn’t this your domain?”

Futaba slowly turned her gaze to her. “...There is no point in explaining. All that matters is that the map is now yours. Just come further in and…” She stopped. “Oh.”

The floor underneath them rumbled slightly and they looked around, on guard for whatever would happen. “What is going on?” Fox questioned tensely.

Futaba floated into the air and disappeared as if she was never here.

Queen gasped. “Futaba-chan just disappeared-” With a crack, the floor underneath them gave way and with dread, they realized they had walked right into a trap.

“GODDAMMIIIIIIIT!” Skull screamed as they fell down into the abyss of the pyramid.
Chapter Notes

PQ2 finally got a trailer! I really like Nagi and Hikari just from their designs, but other than that I'm not really excited for it? I never played PQ and with PQ2 including P3 which I've never played or watched, it's not really up there in my list.

By the by, since I'm having so much trouble writing this fic, I started a small side fic of "what if" scenarios for Airi and Akira. It's titled "A World That Could've Been" (im so original hohoho) and you can find it in the "Breaking the Chains" collection! There's only 3 scenarios up right now, but I rather like how chill it is writing it. Please give it a read!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Panther screamed and clenched her eyes, awaiting for what seemed to be their doom. Gritting his teeth, Skull reached out for her and tugged her to him before turning on his back, ensuring that he would absorb most of the impact.

Elegant summoned her scythe and tried to pierce the walls in a desperate attempt to slow her descent, but the stone was too strong and all her effort managed to produce was some sparks before she fell again. “Shit!”

Joker opened his arms and grabbed a flapping Mona while Queen managed to grab a hold of the back of Fox’s jumpsuit, ensuring they would all land together.

Instead of a hard landing like they expected, they fell into soft sand...

Too soft.

Mona’s eyes widened when he felt himself get sucked toward the middle of the pit. “It’s quicksand! Hurry, we have to swim out!”

Panicking, they all put in their strength to move their arms, swimming against the constant current. Joker grabbed onto a ledge and was able to pull himself up before reaching back down. “Elegant!”

Looking up, the noblewoman took a hold of her leader’s hand, gasping in relief as soon as she was free. Now with two of them out of the sand, they both reached in and helped the others escape their doom.

Skull panted as he was the last to get out, pushing Panther before him, and rested his hands on his knees. “...Hey, you guys still alive?”

“Owww…” Panther winced as she brushed some sand out of her cleavage. “First a boulder, then this...Did we piss her off somehow? I’m really sorry if we did because, ugh.”

Elegant sighed as she let her bun fall to get rid of all the sand in her hair. “I don’t think so. She was asking us to go straight to the Treasure…” She bit her lip. “I think she’s doing this instinctively. I mean, Ojisan is the closest person to her and she doesn’t let him in her room.” She sighed. “I guess she wouldn’t let some strangers into her heart.”
Queen slowly exhaled from their recent scare. “A simple defense mechanism…Considering what she’s been through, I don’t blame her for mistrusting others.”

Panther looked at them and held up a fist. “Guys, let’s save her!” She stated determinedly. “We’ve gotta help Futaba-chan open the door to her heart! No one should have to fear other people like this!”

Elegant nodded in agreement, determination renewed. “Yeah. No matter what.”

Fox stood up and dusted the sand out of his furry tail. “That was a given since we began this endeavor.”

Joker nodded, resting his hands in his pockets. “For Boss, too.”

Mona looked up at them and frowned. “I have no objections, but we should worry about ourselves first and foremost.” He turned tail and began surveying their surroundings. “Come on, let’s look for a way back above ground. Otherwise this place is going to end up our tomb too.”

They looked around the area where they landed. According to the map that Joker had, this was the deepest level within the pyramid, acting as a death pit as sand waterfalls sped down into the center where they had almost lost their lives. The air was cool but dead, having been sealed for who knew how long. Walkways lined the sides of this square chamber, and the only way to go was up. Very little light filtered down here from the hole in the ceiling, but the green glowing symbols that sped past on the walls sufficed as enough light for them to see.

Fox walked up to one of the sand waterfalls and held up his hand, feeling the force of the coarse grains beat against his gloved fingers. “We should take care not to fall into these.” He advised. “Or we will be swept away by the sands of time.”

Joker nodded and took the lead, jumping across the sand gaps to make it to another balcony. Using a sarcophagus as a foothold, he jumped up onto the next level. There were a few mummies patrolling these halls, which they carefully ambushed as they ascended upward.

Smashing a few of the urns to grab the treasures within, Joker jumped back when a large red jewel burst forth from the data cubed remains of an urn. “Joker! That’s a rare one; don’t let it escape!” Mona yelled out. Brandishing his dagger, Joker caught up to the wandering gem and whacked it. With a groan, an alien-like being sprung forth, its luminescent form attached to a slab of rock.

Holding a hand to his mask, Joker called out. “Arsene!” The gentleman thief appeared behind him with a flurry of his black wings. “Eiha!” Unfurling his claws, Arsene sent a curse at the Shadow, sending it to the ground in pain.

It chuckled. “To think you would coerce me into giving in…How brilliant. My name is Regent…My existence shall become a new part of you.” Turning into a replica of Joker’s mask, it flew onto his face and merged with his soul.

He experimentally clenched a hand, feeling the potential this Persona could bring.

Jumping onto the highest terrace, they had to crawl through a small tunnel in the wall to make it through to the other side. Ambushing the lone Shadow that roamed the walkway, they finally made it to a door.

Joker grasped the ankh shaped door handle and pushed down on the mechanism. The computer coded doors swung open for them, showing a hallway that led up via a staircase. Turning the corner, they perked up when in the distance through an unfinished wall, they saw light shining in
through a gate on the other side of the hall.

“Hey…” Skull squinted his eyes through his metal mask. “Ain’t that light the exit?! I’m kinda surprised how close it ended up bein’!”

Mona sighed in relief, his large bobble head almost toppling over. “Thankfully we can finally get out of here. This was all around a horrible experience.”

Elegant sweatdropped and smiled. “Well...You can’t say you’re not getting an authentic ancient Egyptian experience. If only I could put this into a book report for Inui-sensei.”

Queen chuckled at that. “I doubt he would accept it.”

Getting back to business, they hid behind a corner when they noticed a new Shadow. The hound patrolled back and forth, making Mona tremble in his spot. Elegant patted his head comfortingy and let their leader take care of this. The feline pouted and crossed his paws, trying to seem bigger than he was even though they could easily see that the hound was much bigger than him.

Once the coast was clear, they turned the next corner and paused when they noticed an unusual Shadow standing around in a barred off part of the hall. “Hold on,” Queen held out a hand, stopping them behind a pillar. “There’s something ahead.”

The Shadow stood in place, a large hulking figure compared to its malnourished brethren. Black mist surrounded it, signalling it was quite a deal more powerful.

Fox pursed his lips as he observed its stature. “Look how tranquil it is. It appears to be different from the Shadows we’ve encountered prior.” Queen nodded. “It’s probably not a good idea to go up against such an opponent without a clear escape route.”

Joker nodded and took a step back. Luckily the Shadow didn’t seem to notice their movements so they were able to dodge back into their original route. They had to zigzag around the large pillars to get to the gate, but they finally made it and walked up the steps into the scorching sunlight.

Skull covered his eyes as they made it aboveground. “We made it out!” He sighed and fanned himself. “Damn it’s hot, though. My ass is all sweaty…”

Panther pulled a disgusted face and took a step away from him. “Gross, Skull. You didn’t need to share that.”

Fox rolled his neck. “At least we have secured our escape route. We can finally go about exploring this place now.”

Queen glanced back at the basement door. “Let’s use this as our entrance from here forward. It should be more stable than the front.”

Elegant idly grasped her arm. “Or else we’d just be dropped into the sand pit again.”

Joker turned to his teammates and searched for any injuries. “We all good to continue?”

Everyone nodded and they headed back down the way they came from to face the large Shadow. “Welp, we got our way out.” Skull laced his hands behind his head. “Now can we kick that thing’s ass?!”

Mona bounced around on his paws. “Brace yourselves.” He warned. “This is no normal enemy!”
The Shadow finally noticed their presence in front of it and roared. “...FOOLISH GRAVE ROBBERS, YOU HAVE ENRAGED THE GUARDIAN OF THIS PLACE. HENCE, THERE SHALL BE NO PATH FORWARD FOR YOU.” It growled. "IT IS TIME YOU PERISH!"

Its flesh contorted and black blood consumed its form, leaving a sarcophagus in its place. Joker furrowed his brow and took out his 9mm, firing two shots at it. It didn’t even leave a scratch on its surface.

In retaliation, Mot reach out from within its casing and cast Trapped Rat at him, turning him into a small mouse.

Joker squeaked in surprise and looked down at his tiny paws. What?!

Elegant gasped and stared down at him with wide eyes, a red hue overtaking her cheeks, before she refocused. “Xihe!” The goddess of ten suns appeared behind her within a ray of light. “Kouga!” She snapped her fingers and sent luminous spears into the Shadow, damaging it slightly. She then took that time to scoop her mousy leader into her arms, high fiving Mona and Queen as she ran to the back. “Take our places!”

Mona stepped up with a serious pout. “I’ve been out of the action for too long! Zorro!” The bandit appeared behind him, his moustache as impeccable as always. “Garula!” With a flick of his rapier, he sent a gust of wind at their enemy, knocking it down.

They took the opportunity to perform an all-out attack, clearly able to take care of the Shadow without their leader and arbiter. Mona took the spotlight since he was the wind specialist, the others backing him up if need be.

Far back from the ensuing battle, Elegant turned her gaze to Joker in her arms and a giggle left her. “...You’re really cute like this.” He was just a chubby light gray rat with a miniature version of his mask on his face and standing at about seven inches, easily fitting in her hands.

“Chu!” Joker squeaked in protest, his little paws reaching up to pat her uncovered cheek. He’s not cute; he’s handsome!

She held in a squeal and rubbed her cheek against him, completely infatuated. This was a nice break in between feeling blue for several days about Futaba’s situation. She could always count on her boyfriend to cheer her up, even accidentally. Her heart was so weak for cute things like this.

She didn’t even notice the others finishing off the Shadow, too busy showering her leader with love.

“Elegant, we’re done!” Panther called out to her. “Did Joker turn back yet?”

The noblewoman walked over to the rest of her team. “No...” She held out their leader for them to see him in all his mousy magnificence.

Skull snickered and poked Joker in the tummy. “Man, you’re so not cool lookin’ like this.”

Joker hissed at him and turned his tail to him, ignoring his best friend. This was humiliating...

Fox gasped, eyes wide with realization. “I have heard of a story like this before..! The man, transformed into a hideous beast, will have his curse broken if the purest maiden bestows a kiss.”

Queen sweatdropped. “I don’t think that applies here...” She eyed their still mousy leader. “Then again, we can’t have Joker indisposed like this any longer. Elegant, why don’t you give it a try?”
Elegant held her boyfriend up in her hands to eye level. He stared back at her, a hint of red on his chubby cheeks, and it made her giggle. “Aww, I wish I could take a photo...”

She leaned forward to give him true love’s kiss. In a puff of smoke, hands wrapped around her waist, human lips replacing the tiny muzzle. Elegant squeaked into the kiss, not minding as their masks knocked against each other.

Joker leaned in closer and tilted her back, completely dominating their little game. How dare she just laugh at him when he was a helpless rat.

Rolling her eyes at their blatant affection, Queen pushed them apart. “If you’re finished, we have a Palace to infiltrate.” She scolded them awkwardly, cheeks red with embarrassment at seeing two of her friends going at it. “Joker, don’t get ahead of yourself.”

Detaching himself, Joker looked away with a scowl. "You're not the boss of me." Who was the leader here? He’d do whatever he wanted, thanks.

Panther snickered at Elegant’s rosy hues, elbowing her playfully. “I think you two have kissed enough to break every curse in this place!”

Fox grasped his chin thoughtfully. “Could that be true? Certainly a pyramid as mysterious as this would bound to have traps and curses laid in its stones…”

Focusing back to their objective, they jumped over the ledge behind the Shadow they killed and opened the door to the left. It led to another sand pit with several platforms just high enough that they wouldn’t risk drowning. On the other side of the room held a glowing door that seemed familiar.

Jumping over to it, Fox hummed as he eyed the door. “Ah...This bears the exact same decoration as the door that blocks the great stairs.”

Skull scrunched up his face. “So what, does that mean we ain’t gonna be able to open it?”

Queen shook her head. “No, I think it’s the opposite. How we open this door should provide a hint for unlocking the other one.”

Joker huffed. “Then we’ll just have to find the key. It’s probably somewhere close by.”

Turning their backs to the door, they jumped up onto a higher ledge, ending up in a room that was bare except for a few urns and the most curious contraption they’d seen.

It was some sort of reflector. Light streamed in from a small hole in the ceiling and was reflected to the wall, incidentally in what would be the same direction as the locked door. Streams of green code encircled the reflector, imitating the rest of the Palace’s highly technical atmosphere.

Fox held up his hands in a frame. “The light pouring in from the ceiling is reflecting off of here, but it’s hitting the wall…”

Elegant took a few steps back to peek out the doorway. “If my angles are correct, that light would hit the locked door if the wall wasn’t blocking it. Should we find a way to knock it down?”

Queen grasped her chin. “I doubt it would be easy, but we may be able to if we hit it with enough force…”

Leaving the room, Joker squinted his eyes when he noticed a large crossbow in the opposite end of
the room, angled weirdly in where it was mounted. “Could that work?”

Skull scrunched up his face when he caught sight of the ancient weapon. “Uh, what is that?”

“It’s an ancient weapon called a ballista.” Queen explained. “Though it seems to be broken…”

Panther looked around the room at their height and saw a large button to the right of the locked door. “Oh! There’s a ledge we can walk on. I think I can see a red button there.”

Climbing up onto the ledge, they walked up to a small control panel that housed a large red button. Joker pressed it and a mechanical whirring occurred behind them. They turned around just in time to see the ballista fire a large arrow at the cracked wall, destroying it with a large boom.

“Oh holy crap!” Skull held a hand to his chest. “That scared the shit outta me!”

As the rocks and dust settled, a ray of light shined from the reflector all the way to the door. Once it hit the sigil in the middle, the door rumbled and slid open a path for them.

“Oh hey, it’s open!” Panther cheered.

Elegant tilted her head. “So we can open these kinds of doors by shining light on them...Would it work on the one in the great stairs?”

Queen nodded. “That’s a definite possibility. In any case, this means we can push on.”

Joker waved his hand toward the door. “Let’s keep going then.”

Jumping down to the now open door, they were immediately greeted with a glowing slab, the inscriptions written in Japanese instead of the expected Arabic. “Hey, there’s something written here…” Panther walked up and inspected it. “‘The light shed by the god of the underworld shall become the sign for those who traverse the pits.’ Huh?”

They all looked at each other, clueless. “Could this be some form of omen?” Elegant asked with a frown.

Fox hummed pensively. “Perhaps...God of the underworld, was it? That would be Anubis.”

Skull furiously rubbed his hair. “Ugh, one obstacle after ‘nother here…”

Turning the corner, they ambushed a hound before climbing up on the sarcophagi and onto a higher level. Joker was able to acquire a new Shadow, Isis, to his list of growing Personas. She’d become useful since she knew three elemental attacks.

There were two doors on this balcony. One stayed shut but the other opened, where at the end of the room stood a statue of a dog headed man, and in his hand was a glowing green orb.

Skull stopped and stared. “It’s holdin’ something...Wait, what is this statue anyways? Some kinda dog...thing?”

Queen crossed her hands in front of her. “This is Anubis, the Egyptian god of the underworld.” She explained. “It seems to have some kind of shining orb…”

Elegant blinked, thinking back to what they read earlier. “Oh, could this be what that tablet was referring to? Should we take it with us?”

Joker shrugged. “May as well. It wouldn't hurt.” He reached out and grabbed the orb, admiring
how it was both warm and cold to the touch before pocketing it.

Exiting out of the room, they immediately ducked behind a corner when a sarcophagus slowly opened, a mummy Shadow walking out of it. Joker narrowed his eyes. So now some of the coffins would have unexpected enemies. They’d have to watch out for that.

Quickly taking care of it, they were able to open the other door and climb up to a ledge where another reflector was.

“Hey, is that…?” Skull began when he saw it.

Past the reflector was a view of the great stairs, implying that they were now above the main entrance of the Palace. “...The door to the great stairs!” Fox finished, surprise painting his voice. “That means we are directly above where we ended up after coming through the front entrance.”

Mona looked around. “If this reflector is here, that means there’s a way to turn the direction of the light onto the door!”

In fact, on the opposite side of where they came in from were two pedestals. Joker walked up to one and slotted in the orb they collected earlier, the gem fitting in the indent perfectly. Nothing happened however.

Queen pursed her lips. “It seems we must track down another orb…”

Turning around back to where they came from, they headed down a hallway they hadn’t before, finding another Anubis statue at the end which was holding an identical green orb. Taking it, they ran back to the pedestal and slotted it into the empty one.

Immediately the ground rumbled and the reflector flipped, shining the light coming down from the ceiling onto the large door that obstructed them. The first layer slid away and the lock sigil disappeared.

Skull pumped a fist. “All right, we got it! Let’s get on down there and grab that Treasure!”

There was a slope in front of them which they traversed, jumping back down to ground level. Jumping over the leftover pillars, they ran up to the door. With a rumble, it parted and slid into the walls, another portion of the great stairs now open to them.

“Yes, it’s open!” Panther cheered.

Fox let out an exhale. “We seem to be pushing our way through the doors of her heart.”

Elegant bit her lip. “I hope all our work will be able to help her…”

Queen glanced around warily. “We should be cautious as we proceed forward.”

Running up the stairs, they were blocked by yet another seal. To their left and right were smaller doors, now unlocked.

Mona perked up and waddled over to the right. “Joker, this one seems to be a Safe Room!”

Relieved, the leader opened the door for them. Right away, the archaic stones and furniture were temporarily replaced with an extremely messy room. They could spy a computer setup in the corner as well as bags of trash laying around before meta-reality stabilized back into the pyramid room.
They all took a seat at the main table with a sigh. “Goddammit.” Skull cursed as he slouched over in his stool. “What’s with her? She totally set us up in that trap.”

“That doesn’t necessarily mean she’s hostile toward us.” Queen countered calmly. “There might be a reason for her actions, like fear.”

Elegant sighed. “Even though she wants her heart to change, she’s scared…”

Panther clenched her gloved hands with a squeak. "We'll just have to show her that we're not scary at all!" She forced herself to voice some optimism. "Except maybe Skull. What's most important is helping her and doing it without getting too hurt."

Said pirate turned to give her a flat look.

Mona stood on top of the table, resting his paws on his hips. “We won’t know unless we go further.”

Joker rested his hands in his pockets, opting to stand instead. “How’s everyone doing?”

Fox smiled. “I am at optimal form, and it seems we all are. We are ready to continue.”

Nodding, the leader gave them the signal and they left the Safe Room. Heading to the door opposite of them, he grasped the ankh shaped lever and pulled down, opening the next section of the Palace.

As soon as they stepped in, Mona stopped and frowned, his ears and tail sticking straight up. “I’m sensing Shadows.” He announced grimly. “Lots of them.”

Panther sighed. “That’s to be expected…” She murmured morosely. “We’re basically raiding her tomb, after all.” Taking a deep breath, she straightened up, determination replacing her sadness. “We’d better be cautious as we go in, guys!”

Running up another flight of stairs, they opened a door at the end of the corridor. Going through it, they stopped when they saw Futaba’s Shadow standing just a few feet away.

Elegant sucked in a breath. “Futaba-chan..!”

Her yellow eyes honed in on her and her mouth opened to say something, but she stopped. The noblewoman furrowed her brow at her hesitation. Did she want to say something to her?

“...So you’ve come.” Futaba finally spoke. “This way.” She walked to her left toward a large pillar under construction in the middle of a hall.

“Wait..!” Elegant called out, running after her.

Furrowing his brow, Joker was about to follow her when his eyes caught sight of two rows of holes in the floor. His mind quickly connected the dots and his blood ran cold. “Elegant!” He yelled urgently, running to pull her back by the end of her coat.

Yelping as he jerked her back, she was about to ask why when a split second later, spears jutted out from the ground in a uniform row, right where she was about to step over. Their razor sharp edges shined green from the nearby lights, showing just how easily she could've been cut down.

She stared wide eyed at what could’ve been her death. “...Oh.” Why did she always have to flirt with death like this.
Joker wrapped his arms around her protectively, proving to him that she was still here and alive. He let out a slow breath even as his heart pounded in his chest from the close call. “...Don’t run ahead.” He bit out through clenched teeth.

Elegant sweatdropped and ducked her head. “Sorry…”

The others ran up with wide eyes. “Holy shit, Elegant!” Skull almost screamed, hands in his short hair. “That was way too fuckin’ close!”

“Elegant!” Panther wailed, hands on her shoulders. “Are you all right?!?”

Mona jumped up, trying to spot any wounds on her. “That was just too reckless, Elegant!”

Fox grimaced, hands clenched at his side. “Your desire to reach our target without thinking seems to be a common occurrence here. I beg you to please think before acting.”

Queen frowned disapprovingly as well, a drop of sweat beading at her brow from the close call. “We have to be cautious.” She scolded. “We won’t be able to go the same way unless we can deactivate that trap.”

Elegant winced and nodded timidly. “Right. I apologize for worrying everyone.”

Joker unwrapped his arms, his hand gripping hers in a steel tight grip before he forced himself to let go. This wasn’t the time to let his emotions get the better of him, but he knew this was going to be something he would talk about with her later.

Oof I'm behind in showing art (because i forget) Anyway, I made Airi's critical attack cut in! Can you feel how her disappointment cuts you?
Chapter End Notes

Not really an announcement but eh:

I just want to say thank you to everyone who comments and still keeps up with this story. I'm sure you've all noticed that my motivation and energy in this story is pretty low lately, and has been for the last couple of months. This is due to a factor of things:
- My health. Has always been trash and will always be trash. I haven't been sleeping as much as I should and so it's just hard to concentrate or to drag up the energy.
- My interest in Persona 5. It's been over a year since it came out and while I still love it dearly, the time has allowed me to see past the surface layer. Persona 5 is a very flawed game, the English version being so incredibly flawed in translation and localization it's not even funny. The story is a mess, especially in the latter half (and I'm sure you all know what I'm talking about). The anime is a right mess, the dancing game is sexist af, and the parts of the fandom are so incredibly toxic. I realize I've limited myself too much and have begun branching out again, like revisiting my love for D.Gray-Man and Attack on Titan, and trying out new stuff like Detroit: Become Human. My life has been too much P5 and while I still love it a lot, the rose tinted glasses are off now.
- Drawing is more fun than writing. I'm sure you all know I began drawing in December after getting a cheap tablet to experiment with, and now that it's been almost 8 months, I realize drawing is a lot more fun than writing. I draw constantly, and had even opened commissions! I get to experiment in ways that I can't with writing, and it's easier to draw something I visualize than to write something I visualize. It's easier to translate from my brain to a psd than a doc.

Fall semester is starting for me in 2 weeks and it's pretty daunting since I'll be taking all my major required classes, which means this fic may take even more of a
backburner than it is now. I feel incredibly guilty because this fic is my first baby. I've watched it flourish and grow due to your amazing and overwhelming support, and I don't want to stop writing it, talking about it, promoting it, etc. Most of all, I don't want to disappoint you guys; those who have been here from the very beginning, those just joining, those who have been here but have never said a word, those who leave a comment no matter what. I'm incredibly thankful for you guys.

This fic isn't just for me anymore, it's for you as well. It may take a long time, another year or two, but this fic will never stop completely. Maybe a hiatus every now and then, slow updates (can you believe I used to update daily??? wow), but our journey together will be finished one day.

Thanks again for being here with me, and sorry for unloading so much stuff oof. I love you guys!
Ignoring the hall that Futaba disappeared in, they headed up another staircase and ambushed a mummy. With a rumble, it spewed black and turned into Anubis, the dog headed god who floated in the air with a scale in one hand and an ankh in the other.

Needing a violent outlet for his thoughts, Joker rushed in first and jerked his wrist, his dagger tearing into the Shadow’s crossed legs. Anubis howled in pain and held up an ankh in his direction, casting Mudoon. Dark energy surrounded him before sharpening into needles, but at the last moment they failed and disappeared.

Narrowing his eyes behind his mask, Fox ran in from the side and held a hand to his face. “Goemon!” The kabuki dancer appeared behind him with a clack of his wooden geta. “Bufula!” The air around the Shadow solidified, ice crystals jutting out to cut into its flesh and leaving it frozen. Taking the opportunity, Skull high fived him before swinging his spiked bat up, swatting at Anubis until the ice shattered around it and it howled in pain, falling to the floor.

They quickly surrounded it with their firearms aimed straight at it and it panicked. “Wait! Please, let me go…”

Joker raised a brow. “Join my cause.”

It sighed in relief. “Thank you. You are far more magnanimous than I assumed- Oh!” Floating in the air again, Anubis closed its eyes. “I am not a Shadow, I am from the Sea of Souls. My name is Anubis and you shall harness my power.” Glowing bright, the god of the underworld disappeared into a replica of Joker’s mask, flying and merging into his soul.

Joker raised a hand, experimentally clenching it as he felt a new power course through him. A god, huh?

There were two paths to go down but one held a door at the end. Heading that way, they stopped when the floor collapsed in front of them, denying them access. They peered down the dark abyss, straining their ears to hear the bricks hit something. “I can’t hear a bottom…” Fox murmured, disquiet. “Is there another path?”

Turning right, they ambushed another Shadow and found out it was just a roundabout way to get to the same door as before. Opening it, they had to jump on small platforms all around the room before they made it to a statue of Anubis.

“Yo, this statue’s got a gem.” Skull walked up toward it. “We should take it, yeah?”

“Not yet…” Elegant replied as she eyed the glowing tablet beside it. “‘Any who attempts to steal this gem shall be cursed.’ Hm…”

Skull rolled his eyes. “Dude, we can’t let this “curse” shit get to us, right? C’mon,” He elbowed Joker. “Let’s just take it.”

Pursing his lips, Joker decided to grab it. It was most likely important somehow.

“A curse shall befall you…” A deep voice echoed in the chamber.

They glanced around warily, not finding who it was that spoke. Pocketing the gem, they got off the podium and opened a door to their right. It was another hallway, one lone Shadow patrolling it.
Joker was about to walk forward when his ears caught a whizzing noise and he quickly jumped back, arrows shooting where he just was.

“Joker!” Elegant called out worriedly. “Are you OK?!”

He let out a breath. “Yeah…” He took out the gem they just acquired. “Is this the “curse”?!” Turning back into the chamber, he placed it back into the statue’s hand. Right away, they could feel something had changed, like a weight that pressed down on them wasn’t there anymore.

Retracing their steps, they were able to pass by without any danger of arrows being shot in their faces. Clearing the small scaffolding of Shadows, they found another panel housing a red button. In the distance, they were able to see a reflector, shining light in some part of the pyramid.

Seeing as this was the way to proceed, Joker pressed the large button. The Palace rumbled for a moment, light now streaming up and down some of the monoliths that decorated the open halls. “Hm?” Fox glanced around. “The ambience of that corridor has changed somehow.”

Mona waddled up to the machine. “Do you think there’s something over in the direction Futaba’s Shadow ran off in? Let’s hurry, everyone!”

Turning back to where they came from, Joker hesitated for a moment before grabbing the cursed gem again. It only activated one trap, so it could be useful later on.

Heading back to the hall where Elegant almost met her demise, they found the spears were now inactive, allowing them to proceed further. Clearing the area of Shadows, they opened a treasure box before heading into yet another door. Rushing up the stairs, they checked through several rooms that weren’t formally connected; they had to jump up ledges to continue. At the very top of the chamber was another Anubis statue, one which wasn’t holding a gem.

Raising a brow, Joker slotted in the cursed gem, feeling the heavy atmosphere in this area lighten. It must’ve deactivated a trap somewhere.

Walking down from the podium, they opened the last door, showing it was identical to the last trapped corridor. Walking through warily in case the trap would activate, they let out a breath when they made it through unscathed. There was yet another terminal with a large red button and they realized they were now on the opposite side of the machine they already activated with a perfect view of the reflector.

Joker pressed the button and something too quick for their eyes to track shot out and hit a wall with a loud boom, rubble and dust flying everywhere.

Panther gasped and looked around. “What was that noise..?!”

Queen furrowed her brow. “That must’ve been the ballista. It sounded like it was quite destructive. Perhaps it opened a way for the light to travel.”

Jumping off the edge, they landed in the hall where Futaba lead them to. Using the wall of sarcophagi as a foothold, they climbed up to a secret ledge where the light from the reflector shined through a golden doorway. There was a treasure chest that Joker quickly opened, taking whatever was inside, before they entered the door.

They emerged into a small room which housed a reflector in the center, the light shining straight into a wall. It was bare except for a large screen on one of the walls.

Skull furrowed his brow as he eyed it. “What’s this thing? It looks like some kinda TV screen…”
Elegant blinked and turned to the reflector. “Can we shine light on it like a projector?” Walking up to it, she pressed what seemed to be an activation panel. The screen blinked on, showing an ancient egyptian styled mural of Futaba, but it wasn’t in order.

Fox narrowed his eyes. “Odd. The design seems to be scrambled somehow.”

Panther fiddled with a ponytail. “Maybe it’s kinda like a puzzle?”

Joker walked up to the panel and swiping his finger left and right, rearranged the pieces until everything fit. It showed a young pharaoh with long orange hair, tears streaming down her face as several masked adults in suits read a letter to her.

Mona waddled up to the screen, peering at the mural. “What does this mean?”

Fox frowned as he analyzed it. “This adult seems to be reading something to a crying child..?” He grimaced. “Hm, the emotions of the artist are often depicted in the art they produce...I can sense...serious pain harbored in her heart.”

“I should never have had Futaba...”

Queen sucked in a breath. “Is that voice coming from the mural?”

“She was always such a bother...”

“It seems you caused your mother a great deal of trouble, Futaba-chan...She must have had some kind of maternity neurosis...”

Before they could react, the reflector behind them spun to shine light upon the mural. Once the streams of code hit it, it disappeared to show they were above the great stairs again, and the ray of light hit the next sealed door.

They slowly looked at each other, unnerved over what they heard. “What was that?” Joker asked tensely.

Queen grimaced. “Based on its contents, it sounded almost like a suicide note…”

Fox furrowed his brow. “Could that be what Futaba remembers of her mother’s suicide?”

Elegant held a hand to her mouth. “Is that why she thinks Isshiki-san hated her?” She whispered morosely. “A suicide note…” But Sojiro had never mentioned it. As Futaba’s guardian, shouldn’t he have known about it?

Skull growled and furiously rubbed his head. “But that’s a fuckin’ sick thing to do to a kid if that’s really how it all went down.”

Panther frowned bitterly. “I think we all know that some adults are the worst, but we can’t let this go on any longer. Futaba-chan deserves better than this.”

Hearts heavy at what they learned, they decided to keep going. They couldn’t stop now. Jumping down to the great stairs, they ran up to the blockade. With a rumble, the door slid open for them, disappearing into the stone walls.

“We have opened the second door,” Fox murmured. “But the mystery has only intensified.”

Mona frowned. “There’s no doubt we’re getting closer to the Treasure. Come on, let’s keep moving!”
Running up the steps to the third sealed door, they found another Safe Room. Taking a break inside, they sat down with a sigh. Elegant did her rounds, making sure everyone was in tip top shape. Joker rolled his neck. “How’s our progress?”

Queen looked up from her seat. “Judging by how far we’ve traveled up the steps, I doubt we’re even halfway to the Treasure.” She informed grimly. “However, we’re making good progress.”

Mona nodded in agreement, standing on top of the table. “The Treasure is still pretty far, but as long as we keep on going, I have no doubt we’ll reach it soon!”

Joker nodded. “All right. Queen, Skull, Elegant, you’re up with me. Panther, Fox, Mona, take a break and stay as backup. We’re finishing this today.” Everyone nodded at his orders.

Leaving the Safe Room, they opened the door to what would be the next area they had to solve. A glowing slab greeted them as soon as they entered. “‘When red and blue align,’” Joker read quietly. “‘An illusion will rise. Only proper guidance shall form a path.’ Something red and blue will open the way.”

Skull groaned. “Another puzzle?...”

Heading down the snaking corridor and jumping down the ledge, they stopped when they saw Futaba’s Shadow standing in front of them, the ground underneath her sloping slightly.

Joker immediately reached out and grabbed Elegant’s hand, stopping her from potentially rushing ahead. She sweatdropped but stayed by his side and they approached the Palace ruler as a group.

“You’re late.” Futaba greeted them blandly. “What took so long?” Without waiting another word, she began walking up the slope.

Skull glared after her. “Urghhh, that’s it! I’ve had it up to here with her!”

Walking out to the slope, a bottomless pit to their right, they turned left and followed Futaba. They blinked when she disappeared yet again and a rumbling shook the pyramid. “Wait,” Queen began, dread creeping up. “This shaking...”

Just as she said that, a large boulder with green computer coding on it slotted down at the top of the slope and began its descent.

Its target? Them.

They immediately turned heel and ran back to the corridor they came from, watching as the boulder rolled down into the abyss.

Skull furiously scratched his head. “I’m sick of this bullshit!” He exploded. “What the hell is she thinkin’?!”

Elegant bit her lip. “She’ll fight us every step of the way, even if she wants this...”

Joker let out a sigh. She was making this exceptionally more difficult than needed. He kind of wanted to just smash security panels like he did in Kaneshiro’s Palace.

He peeked out from the corner. They couldn’t travel up the slope, and the other way was a drop that was definitely going to kill them. His eyes caught a small tunnel across from them. ‘Bingo.’ Signalling for his teammates, he crouched down in front of the tunnel and crawled through. Standing up on the other side, they dusted themselves off as they surveyed the new area.
It seemed to be a large chamber of tombs. Several coffins were lined up in the center of the room, the occasional sift of sand falling from the crumbling ceiling. As soon as they took a step forward, several pieces of the floor fell away, meaning they had to be careful proceeding forward. To their left was a small staircase leading to a terrace, a large terminal housing a red button right in front of it.

Walking up to it, Joker was about to press the button when he noticed the slab of stone next to it was blank. He furrowed his brow. Wasn’t this what they passed by earlier? Something about red and blue.

Queen frowned pensively. “This slab is blank...Could there be another step to this mechanism..?”

Turning right and travelling up the terrace, they ambushed the lone Shadow, leaving the coast clear. They could see there were two doors, one of them sealed with a blue symbol. Right above them was some sort of construction scaffolding, a plank of wood falling down.

Joker kicked it with a well aimed heel and it slammed down onto the other side of the terrace, creating a pathway for them over the endless abyss. Opening the door on the side, the hallway housed another slab of stone, the surface also blank.

Elegant furrowed her brow and tried to dust off the surface. “Maybe the sand is hiding the message? There must be-” She was cut off when numbers glowed a bright blue on the stone, a small rumble shaking underneath their feet as it activated something. “B01010..?”

Shrugging their shoulders, they exited the small hallway and back into the large chamber. As soon as they stepped back in, the left row of coffins lit up, projecting globes of data into the air. One of the coffins glowed a bright blue just like the slab of stone while the others stayed yellow.

Mona oohed. “So this thing’s link to the stone slab is what powers it…”

Fox raised a brow. “Quite the impressive contraption. Why don’t we examine it further?”

Jumping over the terrace, Joker hummed as he took in what he was seeing. “...B01010...B...Blue.” So the next coffin should be shut off. He touched the panel and the globe of data disappeared with a zip. He did the same with the coffin after the next and so on. Going back to the terminal, he noticed the slab next to it also said “B01010,” meaning his guess was probably right.

He slammed his fist against the button. With a rumble, the door they couldn’t enter before glowed briefly before the blue sigil disappeared.

Fox raised a brow. “I’m impressed, Joker. You solved that puzzle within seconds.” He turned toward the newly opened door. “The next device must be beyond this point.”

Joker smirked and ran a hand through his hair in a suave manner. “Naturally. Let’s go.”

Panther glanced back at the computer tombs with a frown. “By the way...what’s up with these things? Are they all because of Futaba-chan’s mental state?”

Mona frowned. “It’s hard to say...But it does prove that she might not be as simple a target as we were hoping she’d be.”

Queen grasped her chin pensively. “I wonder about the meaning behind that stone slab as well…”

Glancing between them, Skull laced his hands behind his head. “Hey, our path’s open now. Can we just keep goin’?”
Agreeing, they headed into the next area. It was a series of cramped tunnels with several Shadows patrolling them. Sneaking up on the last one, Joker ripped its mask off. “Show me your true form!” Black pooled out as the Shadow turned into a Lamia, the naked snake woman slithering seductively.

Making eye contact, both Queen and Elegant ran forward. Elegant moved her grip from the staff to grasp the chain end, using her strength to swing her scythe at the Shadow. As it slashed into the enemy and found leverage in its scales, Queen rushed up and delivered a series of punches, her knuckle dusters tearing into its flesh. With a roundhouse kick, she sent the scythe deeper in and it tore through its body.

Jumping away, they high fived as the Lamia dissipated with a scream.

The others stared in surprise. “Whoa..!” Skull gaped. “That was badass! How’d you guys know to do that?”

The biker and noblewoman stared at one another before shrugging. “I’m not sure…” Queen replied. “It just seemed natural. Either way, it’s certainly more effective when the Shadow is surprised.”

Elegant smiled, her weapon fading back into her soul. “It just means we’re a good team. Having coordinated attacks like that could be useful if we encounter more powerful enemies.”

Heading to the end of the corridor, they found another slab of stone, guarded by two sarcophagi. Joker touched it and the numbers glowed red. “R01100 and B10011...It’s like last time.” He concluded, his coat fluttering as he turned around.

Walking back to the chamber of tombs, the stones underneath them rumbled and the other row of coffins lit up, showing spheres of yellow data, one of them being red. Putting in the code for both the blue row and red row, they walked up to the terminal and finally pressed the button.

This time, a large tremor almost shook them off their feet. “Whoa, what’s going on?!?” Mona yelped. “This is a stronger reaction than anything up to this point!”

Looking around, Panther caught something moving in the corner of her eye and she looked up. “Up there!”

In the crack in the wall, they could see identical boulders slowly rolling down, each one’s immense weight shaking the very foundations of the stones around them.

“I think they’re rolling down the corridor!” Skull tensed up. “Dude, they ain’t stoppin’!” He warned. “Is this gonna be OK?!”

Turning his gaze back to the terminal, Joker smashed his fist against the red button in an attempt to stop it. The boulders paused momentarily before resuming their descent at an even faster pace. Dust and sand sifted down from the ceilings, sprinkling them as the boulders passed by without any signs of stopping.

“Ngh..!” Fox winced, bracing himself as the ground underneath them shook. “That only made it worse!”

Queen gritted her teeth. “Joker, do something!”

Cursing, the leader raised a leg and kicked the terminal.
The tremors slowly stopped as the boulders stopped their descent. A silence settled over them, a blessing compared to almost destroying the Palace.

Panther uncovered her ears. “Is it...over?”

They all let out a collective sigh of relief. “Is this what the slab could have meant by “form a path”?” Queen questioned with a thoughtful frown. They turned around and walked to where they came in from.

Jumping up onto a platform, they surveyed the row of giant boulders that blocked the slope. “Damn!” Skull whistled at the sight. “Talk about a mess!”

Mona peered to the left where there was supposed to be a hole, but it’s gone now. “It’s broken...Well, I guess it would be a little more precise to say we broke it.”

Elegant jumped up onto a higher ledge and peeked out toward the row of boulders. “Futaba-chan headed down there...Could we walk on top of these?”

Following her example, they jumped onto the closest boulder before making their way up the slope. Reaching the last boulder in their way, they could see that the rest were jammed all the way back where they fell from. Jumping back down onto ground level, they circled the hallway and saw another reflector in the middle of the corridor. The light shined upward and then straight ahead. Grasping onto a ledge, they flipped up until they reached another small room with a black mural.

Joker activated the screen and the TV switched on, showing a fragmented image of Futaba and an older woman with short black hair. He moved the pieces until it was whole again. It was an image of Futaba crying to herself as the woman was hit by a vehicle in broad daylight.

“Is she jumping in front of a car..?” Queen asked quietly.

Panther felt her brows raise joylessly. “Could this be the moment when Futaba’s mother committed suicide..?”

Elegant stared at the mural. “Isshiki Wakaba...” She seemed familiar. Had she met her before? Maybe at her parents’ funeral.

“F-Futabaaa...”

They looked around, trying to find where the voice was coming from. It was clearly a young woman’s as well.

“...Y-You...aaaaareeee...”

A silence pervaded afterward and the reflector moved to shine the light on the mural, making it disappear. Now with nothing stopping it, the light shone directly on the sealed door in the great stairs.

Skull frowned. “…She died right in front of Futaba’s eyes.”

Elegant closed her eyes and lowered her head. “You don’t get over something like that...” She spoke blankly, trying her best not to remember. It wasn’t the time to wallow in her own losses. She was here to help Futaba with hers.

Fox walked up beside her and placed a hand on her shoulder. “Could her desire to forget those memories cause her to repress them?” He murmured. “Elegant?”
They all looked to her with hesitant but questioning looks and she sighed. “It’s very likely.” She forced herself to say. “I know that my own memories are really blurry now because I didn’t want to remember having those happy times with my parents and living without them.” She pursed her lips and looked away. “But Futaba-chan is taking it very badly... We should keep going so we can help her.” So she wouldn’t have to suffer as long as she did.

Queen softened and nodded. “...I understand too, Elegant. I always knew there was a risk of losing my father in the line of duty. We’ll all help her through this.”

Fox glanced down with a sorrowful frown. "I as well, though I only possess a scant few of my mother. No child should have to endure the pain of their parent's death like this."

Joker gazed at them, a small frown on his lips as well. Sometimes, he forgot that half of their group were orphans because they rarely showed their pain. The other half having absent or neglectful parents, though Skull was the exception having a loving mother still.

This was a cruel world.
Chapter Notes

-peeks outside of hibernation cave after a whole month- he-hewwo? Do I still have readers? pls accept this update as an apology uwu

For real though, I'm sorry I didn't update two weeks ago. School has been...weird, for lack of better word, and I got back into Attack on Titan so I've been writing for that instead. I'm sure this isn't what you guys want to hear though, of me getting into a different series and writing for it LOL I'm sorry!
(But if you are interested, specifically in Levi x Eren, I have one ongoing fic and a oneshot for them coughcough as well as an Eren x reader fic)

Anyway, P5D is coming out in two months, not that I really care at this point lmao and PQ2 is coming out in Japan which again...kinda don't care LOL I'M SORRY I just, I'm not interested. I'm kind of interested in Catherine: Full Body but at the same time, I'm really wary of what Atlus is doing to it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Straightening up, they got back to business. They couldn't just stand around and mope about themselves when someone else needed their help more.

Jumping down from the small room down to the great stairs, they ran up to the sealed door. As if sensing their presence, they slid open and into the stone walls, leaving more of the great stairs open for them. “We’re pretty far in now, right?” Panther asked. “This has to be past halfway.”

Mona wiggled in place, eyes sparkling. “Yeah, the Treasure is definitely close. You better be excited!”

Running up the next flight of steps, they were relieved to find yet another Safe Room. Entering it, they took their seats with a sigh, joints popping as they stretched. Joker took a seat for once, bumping shoulders with Elegant. “How’s everyone doing?”

She sat up and smiled. “Everyone’s all healed and it seems like we all have enough energy to keep going.”

He nodded and turned to the table proper. “How’s our progress?”

Queen rested her hands on the table. “It feels like we’ve come pretty far. I think we should reach the deepest part soon enough.” She paused. “Wait, if we’re climbing the stairs, does that make it the highest part..?”

Mona danced in place. “Either way, the Treasure is close.” He sang. “I can sense it nearby..!”

Skull groaned. “Finally, I’m gettin’ sick of this place…I feel like I'm gonna dig sand out of my ass for weeks.”

Fox grimaced and gave him a long suffering look.
Joker stood up and stretched, adjusting his gloves. “If we’re good, let’s go.”

Exiting out of the Safe Room, they crossed over to the opposite door and opened it. The stones slid open to show an empty room with a staircase on the right, leading up. Following the path, they stopped and stared in surprise when they entered a large hall, two gargantuan monuments of pharaohs sitting side by side, with a small path heading between them.

Fox held up his hands in a frame. “What wonderful form.” He admired. “Seeing such divine sculptures in person is exceedingly rare.”

Panther fiddled with a ponytail. “Yeah, it’s almost like a trip abroad. I wonder if Futaba-chan is really into ancient Egyptian culture then?”

“Hey, now’s not the time to be letting your guard down.” Mona scolded. “I can sense lots of Shadows ahead!”

There was a locked treasure chest to their left which they took. With nothing else to distract their attention, they headed down the path between the two statues and ambushed the lone mummy. Reaching the other side of the large hall, they stopped and surveyed the area. There was a large square gap in the very middle, with several terraces on each side.

Panther peered over the side, yelping when she almost fell.

Reacting quickly, Skull managed to grab ahold of her tail and yank her back. “Yo, be careful!”

She held a hand to her flying heart and sighed shakily. “Whoa, that was close..!” She warily peeked out again, trying to see the bottom. “What the heck is this?! Why is it so deep?!”

Elegant frowned. “There’s no way we can try to jump over this…”

Looking around, Joker spotted a small tunnel within the wall to their left. “This way.”

They crawled through until they made it to the left side of the giant chasm. Opening a door, they traversed a series of winding hallways until they made it to a higher ledge back at the gap. There was another terminal with a large red button which Joker pressed.

A ballista to their right fired in the direction they faced, shattering a stone wall to reveal what seemed to be a small throne room.

Queen furrowed her brow. “So there was a passage hidden behind the wall...I wonder if there’s a way back there.”

Jumping to the next section, they found rooms full of sarcophagi lined up against the wall. One of them had a slightly different color scheme, the scepter blue instead of the normal yellow.

Fox took a step closer to peer at it. “Hm, this coffin has a different design than the others. Does it not make you wonder why?”

Joker frowned and reached out to tap it. The lid slid into several pieces, revealing a hidden red button.

Skull gaped. “Whoaaa, I can’t believe you saw through that trick! It’s gotta be a secret button or something. Let’s try pushin’ it!”

Joker slammed his fist against it. Within a moment, they heard stone grinding from outside of the
room, indicating something had opened.

Panther turned around, trying to find where it originated from. “What was that..?! Could it be in one of the other rooms?”

Retracing their steps, they entered one of the previous rooms where sarcophagi lined the walls. One of them had slid open, showing another red button which Joker pushed. With a rumble, the stone sarcophagus slid back and moved to the side, showing a small secret room with an Anubis statue, a glowing green orb in hand.

Raising a brow, Joker pocketed it before continuing on. They reached a small balcony a couple minutes later which had an empty pedestal. Quickly connecting the dots, Joker slotted the gem they took. The floor underneath them trembled and they could see out in the giant chasm that a path of code formed from the entrance of the hall to a door they could not have reached earlier.

Yusuke watched in awe. “This pathway of light is quite impressive. It seems we will be able to pass over it!”

Panther grimaced. “It’s not gonna disappear while we’re crossing it, right? This is a little scary…”

Elegant smiled, sweatdropping. “...Don’t jinx it.”

Jumping down, they were able to cross the bridge of code to the mystery door without falling into the abyss. Mona gulped as he peeked down at the dark void underneath them and reached out to grasp the end of Elegant’s coat tail until they made it to solid ground again. Opening the door, they traversed up the stairs and unlocked the treasure chest in the corner of the room. Exiting out through the next door, they found another Safe Room.

Though there was no need to, they took a break anyway. “How’s our progress so far?” Joker asked the team. “We’ve been in here for what seems like days now...”

Mona looked up at him with a firm pout. “Not much further now. I’m getting a strong signal from the Treasure!”

Fox frowned to himself. “So, the formative art of this place is coming to an end.” He sighed, disappointed. “I feel somewhat reluctant to leave it.”

Skull leaned over the table. “But we gotta make this place disappear, for Futaba’s sake.”

Fox nodded. “That is true.” He conceded. “Though it is worth noting, those who endure hardship tend to produce beautiful art. In this case however, I will refrain from commenting any further.”

Elegant smiled awkwardly. “Thanks.” She could say her music was deeper when her emotions were stronger, but it wasn’t something someone wanted to hear, that their suffering could be a good thing.

Panther looked at them. “You know…” She began hesitantly. “I realize that half of us can relate to Futaba-chan. Queen, Fox, and Elegant have all lost a parent...and Elegant witnessed hers as well.” She bit her lip. “I hope we can get through to her, to show just how strong you guys are even without your parents.”

The three orphans on their team stared at her in surprise before Queen smiled slightly. “Yes, I hope so as well.”

Fox and Elegant shared a look and nodded as well. While everyone on the team went through
something terrible, losing a parent or even both was a different kind of scarring.

Joker placed a hand on Elegant’s shoulder, silently giving her his support, before he gestured to the door. “Let’s show her this world is still worth living in.”

Renewed with their determination, they left the Safe Room and continued down the short hallway. Turning the corner, they stopped when they saw rows and rows of sarcophagi, all leading up to a giant encrusted coffin.

“Wait up!” Skull pointed to the coffin, or rather, the person sitting on top of the coffin. “Look, there she is.”

They slowly walked up to her, wary of whatever trick she’d try to pull this time. Futaba looked over her knees and down at them with a blank face. “You’re late. I thought all of you had died.”

Skull glowered at her. “We almost did thanks to you! I mean, do you really wanna help us?! Make up your goddamn mind!”

She stared down at them and slowly blinked. “...I’m not sure.” She voiced out blandly. “There’s not much left at this point though.” She closed her eyes and disappeared yet again, fading from their view.

Panther groaned. “Oh...Not again!” She lightly pushed the pirate. “This is all because you picked on her, Skull!”

Black pool in front of them, spawning a Mot as their new enemy.

Fox only sighed. “Your short temper has created more work for us.”

Offended, Skull scowled. “This is my fault?!"

Elegant lightly rapped her knuckles on his head. “Yes. You’re antagonizing her when she speaks to us.”

“...WHO DARES INTRUDE UPON THE PEACE OF THIS HOLY GROUND? THIS IS THE PHARAOH’S TOMB. NONE MAY DISTURB HER SLUMBER.”

Queen snarled and readied her fists, her knuckle dusters appearing in a flash. “We can’t retreat now. We’ll just have to do this!”

The mot screamed out a howl, the monstrous noise attracting a Naga and a Lamia to its side.

Joker brandished his dagger and narrowed his eyes. “Mona! Skull! Fox! With me!” He held a hand to his mask afterward, asking Isis to come forth in his soul. “Isis!” The egyptian goddess cocked her hip behind him, holding her arms in front of her. “Garula!” With a wave of her arm, Isis sent a gust of sharp wind at their enemies, knocking two of them down.

Joker then high fived Mona and took his paw in his hand. Turning in a sharp circle, he threw the feline high up into the air. With a firm pout, Mona summoned his Persona. “Zorro!” The legendary bandit appeared behind him. “Garula!” Using the height between him and the Shadows, the winds became a tornado of blades, cutting deep into Mot and Naga. Naga cried out as it dissipated while Mot slumped over on the ground. Lamia hissed in pain before raising her arms.

Skull winced and fell to his knees, feeling his consciousness float between being awake and knocking out as it sucked away his health. Lamia trilled as she was rejuvenated and slithered over
to slash at Fox.

Scowling, the samurai unsheathed his katana just in time to block her sharp nails. She screamed in his face, the sound both melodious and like nails on chalkboard, and tried to wrap her tail around him.

Quickly popping a Recov-R into his mouth, Skull stood up from his slouch and rushed over, raising his bat up high to swat her away. Fox then ducked underneath his swing and slashed up with his katana, leaving a deep black wound on her. Lamia screamed and began to back away, but Joker appeared behind her in a flash and buried his dagger to the hilt, killing her.

All that was left was Mot who used the time to get back up. The sarcophagus monster roared at them, casting a Mudoon on Mona as he fell back to the ground. Dark energy sharpened into needles before stabbing forward and Mona yowled, falling to the ground in a dead faint.

Joker cursed and ran in front of his downed comrade, shielding his vulnerable form. “Isis! Garula!” Sending yet another wind attack at it, they quickly launched an all-out attack, killing the last of the opposition.

Seeing that the coast was clear, Elegant rushed up and knelt down, taking the unconscious feline in her arms. “Mona..!” She called out frantically, shaking him a little to wake him up. He stayed silent, dark energy needles still sticking out of him. The sight of their smaller teammate in pain, her son, almost had her in tears. They had fought worse things than a Mot, but it had gotten lucky and she hated it. If only...If only she could do a little more than just heal-

Without her command, gold glowed behind her as Xihe floated down, her robes flowing around her dragon tail. The light blue sun hovered lower before enveloping the unconscious feline inside it like a bubble. It glowed briefly before Mona blinked awake. “Huh-?” Panicking inside the orb, he tried to swim out but he seemed to be stuck in place.

Elegant stared with wide eyes at what seemed to be a new power. “Uh, hold on! I don’t…” She bit her lip, trying to figure out what to do. She didn’t know what this was..!

Furrowing her brow, Queen knelt down. “Mona, calm down!” She advised, trying to figure out what was happening but all she could gather was this was benign. “Elegant, take a deep breath and try to let him go.”

The feline managed just barely, face scrunched up with discomfort. Elegant took a deep breath and concentrated. What was she doing? She was slowly healing Mona somehow. It wasn’t as effective as a Diarama, but she was regenerating his stamina as well. Could she try this out with everyone at once?

… No. She wasn’t experienced enough. She wouldn’t be able to do something like that unless she had more power, maybe all ten suns.

Taking another deep breath, she closed her eyes and within a moment, Mona dropped out of the orb with a cough. “Wha- What was that?” Mona coughed, shaking his ears out. “It felt strange...in a good way?” He slowly stood up and flexed his paws. “Did you recover my stamina as well?” He asked curiously and slightly awed.

Fox leaned in closer, a hand at his chin. “Could this be yet another ability linked to the suns?”

Queen nodded. “It certainly seem so. We have already established that these suns are linked to each of us. With Elegant’s position as our Arbiter as well as being our second healer, theoretically she
could heal all of us like this.”

Panther oohed, resting her hands on her knees. “This would be amazing in battle!”

Joker furrowed his brow when he realized the noblewoman was still on the floor. “Is that possible to use in battle?”

Elegant bit her lip. “...No. Not right now anyway.” Her forehead creased as she tried to find answers within herself, but Xihe only hummed at her thoughts. “...Well, never mind. I’ll figure this out later. Right now, we need to get to Futaba’s Treasure.” She turned to Mona who seemed to be back to full health. “Are you OK, Mona?” She asked worriedly. “I’m sorry, I don’t know how that happened…”

Mona purred, resting his paws on his hips. “It may have took me by surprise, but having an ability like that will be extremely useful for when we infiltrate Palaces!”

She sighed in relief before scooping him up in her arms, cuddling his large head. “I’m glad…” She was so glad that she could help her family of thieves.

Skull rubbed the back of his head. “I don’t really understand but let’s keep goin’, yeah? We gotta pay Futaba back for all these traps.”

Fox straightened up, his tail swishing behind him. “She did say ‘there’s not much left’ though. The end of this Palace may be drawing close.”

Regrouping, they were about to head up above the coffin when a side ledge caught Joker’s eye. Jumping up, he found another Anubis statue with a green orb. This would be useful later.

Resuming their infiltration, they jumped over another path of code and wound up back at the great chasm on a terrace, an empty pedestal near the edge. Joker slotted in the green orb and with a rumble, a path of code appeared in front of them, leading to the throne and more importantly, in the direction the reflected light was shining toward.

Fox smiled satisfactorily. “Hm, this sight brings a tear to my eye yet again!”

Running down the newly formed path, they followed the light which brought them back to the hall with the two giant Pharaoh statues. The ledge they stood at was at eye level with the monuments, and using the construction platforms, they were able to cross to the next doorway. Yet again, they found themselves in a small room with a blank mural.

A reflector stood in the middle of the room and with melancholy looks, Joker stepped up and turned on the mechanism. The screen flicked on, showing an extremely fragmented image. They could make out Futaba and Wakaba, but that was about it.

Joker took a little longer to fix it, but once it was done, they realized it was a mural of a young Futaba begging for her mother’s attention.

“...Mom...I’m...I’m tired of eating alone all the time...It’s always just convenience store bentos...I wanna go somewhere. Take me on a trip!”

Panther bit her lip. “The one clinging to her mother would be Futaba-chan, right?” She asked quietly.

“Don’t be so selfish!” A harsh woman’s voice rang out around them. “You know I’m working hard to support you, right?! Ugh!”
The reflector turned and shined onto the mural, making it disappear to show the great stair. The light then traveled further to hit the sigil on the sealed door, unlocking it for them.

They slowly looked at each other. “She seemed pretty angry…” Queen remarked somberly. “Is that the maternity neurosis the voice from earlier mentioned?”

Elegant furrowed her brow. “How could she have maternity neurosis and Ojisan never noticed? He said they were a happy family…”

Skull hunched his shoulders, hooking his thumbs in his pockets. “Futaba was a pretty lonely kid growin’ up though...You think maybe he just didn’t see the bad times?” He looked away, eyes darkening. “No one knew about my dad…”

Frowning sympathetically, Joker placed a hand on his shoulder. “Don’t remember that.” He murmured. “Focus on us.”

Fox crossed his arms. “Could these incidents have compounded together, forcing Isshiki-san to suicide..?”

Before anyone could speak, Futaba appeared in front of them, her linen robe fluttering slightly. “...I must die.” She stated matter-of-factly.

Panther gasped. “Huh..?”

“I killed her…” She continued in a flat voice. “That’s why I’m here in this tomb…”

Elegant sucked in a breath. “Don’t say that, Futaba-chan!” She pleaded. “That can’t be true!”

Her yellow eyes honed in on her. “I must die...No one can save me. Not even you.”

Taken aback, Elegant stared at her. She mentioned her specifically again. Why?

Before they could question her further, the Palace ruler disappeared into thin air. “Futaba-chan!” Panther called out anxiously, but it was too late.

Skull stared wide eyed at the spot she was just in. “Why’d she get so quiet all of a sudden?” He asked, confusion and dread mixing into his voice. “What happened to that snarky personality?!”

Joker furrowed his brow, worried over what seemed to be a regression of Futaba’s inner strength. “Is she getting weaker..?!”

Panther clenched her fists. “We have to hurry and save her!” She stated resolutely.

Queen nodded. “Agreed.” She voiced grimly. “We won’t let her die.”

Jumping down to the great stairs, they ran up to the third sealed door. With a rumble, the door slid away, revealing a stream of green light blocked off by metal grates, a “DO NOT ENTER” sign and caution tape plastered at their eye level.

Skull scowled and stomped up to the final sealed door, trying to find a way to open it. “Hey, there ain’t no door handle or nothin’...Think there’s a way to open it somewhere else?”

Elegant blinked. “Hey...Doesn’t the caution tape and sign look like the ones all over Futaba-chan’s door?”

Mona perked up. “That’s it! It must be her cognition that no one can enter it.”
“I’m surprised that you made it this far.” They turned around to see Futaba’s Shadow standing a few feet away. “Beyond lies the Pharaoh’s Chamber.”

Joker stepped up to her. “The Treasure is beyond here, isn’t it?”

Futaba nodded. “Indeed. However, you need my permission to open this door.”

Skull scrunched up his face and gestured to the door. “Then open it for us.”

She slowly blinked. “I cannot. You must have her invite you in.”

He groaned, hanging his head. “What the fu...eff. Ain’t this your Palace?”

Panther turned to their resident Metaverse expert. “What does she mean, Mona?”

Mona looked up at them. “The Shadow is Futaba, but not Futaba herself. In other words, we need the real Futaba’s permission.”

Elegant furrowed her brow. “But Futaba-chan wouldn’t even talk to us through the door. How would she let us in?”

Queen crossed her arms. “If she knew we need her to open the door to change her heart, I bet she would.”

“Considering that you made it all the way here,” Futaba spoke up, taking a step back as her form began to disappear from their sight once again. “You may be able to do it…”

They were left in silence, only the humming of technology keeping them company. “Let’s do this.” Panther spoke up strongly. “We have to go back to reality and get into her room.”

Skull blinked. “Someone’s stoked about this…”

Fox hummed. “We have no choice but to sneak in again. Apologies, Boss…”

Joker exhaled, resting his hands in his pockets. “Guess it’s up to me to decide when, right? Let’s give her two days. We have the time to spare.” And they needed time to make up excuses in case Sojiro caught them in his house again.

“Oh,” Skull spoke up. “That reminds me.” He held out a hand. “Gimme the calling card. The one Alibaba sent us.”

Fox tilted his head. “What are you going to do with it?”

Skull gave him a “duh” look. “We’re the Phantom Thieves, you know? We gotta announce this. If the Treasure’s there when we get the room open, givin’ this to her will let us take it right away.”

They stared at him in surprise. “Wow, Skull. That’s actually really smart.” Panther voiced, impressed by his quick thinking.

He rubbed the back of his head. “We’ve been doin’ this forever, y’know? Queen, help me think of what to write.”

Queen nodded. “I suppose…We’re finished here for now, right? It’s best we head back so we can get started on this.”

Everyone nodded and they ran down the great stairs to the entrance of the Palace. After what
seemed like days, they were finally heading back home.

Appearing right outside of the cafe, they bid farewell to Ann, Ryuji, and Makoto before entering the cafe as a group. Sojiro was slouched against the counter, a bead of sweat dripping from his receding hairline. “If only it could be a few degrees cooler…” He sighed.

Airi smiled at his complaining. “Why don’t you install an A/C unit? You might get more customers if they had a nice cool place to enjoy a cup of coffee.”

He gave her the stink eye. “And end up wasting money? If customers want a quality cup of joe, they’ll come despite the heat.”

She sighed at his reasoning. She was just trying to help.

They went upstairs to Akira’s room where they took a seat. Akira had went back down to get them all plates of curry, and they were finally able to have a meal. Morgana was able to sit outside of the bag, and ate every spoonful that Akira gave him. “Mom…”

Airi looked at him curiously. “Hm?”

He eyed her carefully from his seat on the work desk. “About that ability we discovered earlier...do you think there’s a special reason why you can support us like that? To have six suns that represent us is weird, even for a Persona.”

Yusuke looked up from his sparkling clean plate, having devoured his curry in seconds. “The thought had occurred to me as well. Xihe, the Chinese goddess of legend, is the mother of ten suns.” He lectured. “She is what many assumed to have inspired the legend of Amaterasu the Japanese sun goddess, and yet even though there are whole temples dedicated to Amaterasu-sama, there is very little we know of Xihe-sama herself. As your Persona, she has six suns. Doesn’t that imply she may eventually gain ten suns?”

“And if each sun represents us,” Akira butt in, already finished with his curry. “Doesn’t that mean we may end up with three more people?”

Airi paused in her eating. “...I...suppose.” She answered very unsurely. “I honestly don’t know. Even though she’s my Persona, it’s not like you can really talk to yourself. You just get a sort of...feeling.” She sighed. “I’ll try to figure this out. I’m sorry I’m the weird one of the team.”

Akira sat up and shook his head. “No, that’s not what we mean.” He reassured. “It’s just strange that there’s a lot we don’t know about Xihe-sama.” Taking out his phone, he inputted the name into the search engine. “It says she existed around 2170 BCE, but other than that, it just mentions she’s one of the wives of Emperor Jun and that she almost burned the world.” Could he have an Ultimate Persona as well? Or did he not have that potential since he can take in other Shadows as his Personas?

Morgana sat up. “We already know Seiten Taisei and now Hecate are both mythological tricksters. It could be that everyone on the team may end up much more powerful.” He looked away. “Even me…” He mumbled inaudibly. “If mom has that kind of connection with me, then...Who am I really? Why do I need this team to figure out the mysteries of Mementos?”
Unaware of his thoughts, the teenagers piled their dishes to be cleaned. Their phones rang out.

R: Calling card’s ready!
An: That was fast!
R: I mean, I already wrote three of ‘em before this, remember?
Ma: But I came up with almost all the sentences...
R: You don’t gotta mention that!
Ai: Good job, you two.
Ai: Everyone did really well today in the Palace.
An: Thanks mom!
R: Hehe, we kicked ass like always!
Y: When should we go to Futaba’s room?
Ma: I think our leader should decide.
Ak: Let’s give it a few days before we go in.
Ak: We need to be 100% prepared.
Y: Of course. We have no choice but to do this.

Sighing, they put their phones away. “I find myself quite exhausted after all we did today…” Yusuke murmured as he covered his mouth, yawning. “I think I will retire early today. Aneki, I will go on ahead.” Without waiting for her, he left the cafe, leaving the trio to themselves.

Airi stood up and stretched, wincing when she realized how tired she was from today. She then leaned down to give Morgana a peck on the forehead before giving Akira a light kiss. “Goodnight you two. Don’t stay up too late.”

Akira gave her an amused smirk and tugged her down onto his lap. “Not staying over this time?” He teased.

She rolled her eyes. “It’s nice to sleep with you, but after a Palace run? I need my own bed.” And a long bath. With Yusuke going first, it’s a guarantee she can stay in the bathtub for at least an hour when she got home.

Morgana darted off to the bed, already curling up to go to sleep. Akira stayed in his chair, resting his chin on her shoulder as he hugged her closer. “…About earlier.” He began quietly. “When you went after Futaba’s Shadow without checking for traps? You need to stop rushing ahead.”

Airi bit her lip and looked down at his arms around her waist. “I know…I’m sorry.”

“Do you know?” He asked, his tone much harsher than he intended. “Because not only were you running ahead without us, you were so focused on going after her that you didn’t see the obvious trap in the ground. You could’ve died again and where would I be? Crying over your dead body?” He hid his face in her shoulder, unable to stem the moisture that gathered in his eyes. He had been able to take his frustrations out on the Shadows earlier, but now with just the two of them together…he couldn’t ignore it. “…How are we going to stay together if you keep trying to leave me?” He asked, voice wavering slightly. ”Please, stop trying to die for us...”

Airi tensed in his embrace, horrified by what he was saying. True, she can admit that she had been reckless because she just wanted to help Futaba no matter what, but…She had also been inconsiderate of her own health and her team, as well as her boyfriend. What if he hadn’t stopped her in time and she was speared through by the trap? There was no coming back from death, and dying in the Metaverse meant she might just disappear like Shadows did.
“Airi!!” Joker yelled out desperately, hands trembling as he shook her, the spears having retracted back into the ground after they had impaled her. “Airi! Say something! Please!”

He ignored the warm blood that pooled around them, soaking into his pants and his coat tails, and he ignored the rest of their team who stood back with hands over their mouths. His gloves were dyed a darker red as he hugged her unresponsive body to him, hoping it was all a nightmare.

“No...No...Please no...” He tried to use a Diarama on her, a Recarm, anything, but they all sparkled for a moment before falling flat. Nothing could revive the dead.

His hand, soaked with her life essence, slowly reached up and cupped her unmoving face, staining her cheek with her own blood. “No...Don’t leave me.” He choked out, breathing erratically as his heart was torn into pieces. “Please...”

Twisting her body around, Airi hugged him tightly to her. “I’m sorry, Akira...” She whispered. She may not want to die, but the thought of him seeing her die hurt more than actually dying. Her reason for living was him. “I don’t want to hurt you like that. I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. I love you...”

She leaned down to kiss him and she felt him reciprocate almost desperately, just trying to convince himself that she was still here, alive, and in his arms. One of his hands wandered to her thigh, crawling up her skirt, and she reluctantly stopped him.

Releasing the kiss, she bit her lip. “We can’t...” She whispered, glancing over at the sleeping feline on the bed. “Morgana’s right there.”

For the first time since April, Akira wished that the feline hadn’t stayed with him, even though he knew it wasn’t his fault he didn’t have a home. He let out a harsh exhale and buried his face in the crook of her neck. “Just...Just stay like this, OK?” He could feel her artery pulsing underneath her skin, strong and healthy, and her signature peppermint scent grounded him to reality. She was warm to hold, and even though she sat sideways in his lap, she still fit perfectly to him.

One of his hands detached themselves from her waist and laced with hers, holding on tightly.

She was still here.

I did at least do something during my month long absence (which again im sorry) and that's to update Airi's character portrait! My art has really improved and she looks a lot better now. As a bonus because FemaleFoxyFTW asked for it, I did her romantic expression too and combined them into a gif oohohoho
Chapter End Notes
Oooo Xihe's mystery is slowly unraveling

Also, as a note, I started uploading all the fanart I get on Imgur! I would use tumblr but it's very confusing for me and the links die, deviantart isn't good since you know, they're not MY artworks, and instagram works only for mobile tbh.
https://imgur.com/user/aristomercu
Akira sighed as he dressed for the day, buckling his jeans. After last night, Airi had gone back home once he had finally let go. He would’ve asked to stay with her for the night but he knew he was being too clingy. Not that he didn’t have a good excuse.

He held a hand to his heart that was beating fast as he thought of her. He...really loved her.

Her kind smiles, her need to mother them, how hard she worked at school and as a thief, her dumb perverted remarks, her elegance...her warmth and love. It’s only been a month with her but he wouldn’t ever want to lose her. He wouldn’t be able to handle it if he lost her. He clung to her like a lost traveler in a desert, finding an oasis.

He knew without a doubt that he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her- who else would he spend it with? No one else wanted him like she did- but he knew it was way too soon to be saying those things. Even if she said yes, people would look down on them, saying that a teenage relationship was destined to end. His own parents would look down on her for being lower class.

He clenched his fists at the thought of his biological donors. He didn’t give a damn. The only thing that mattered was that he knew he loved her and he knew she loved him. They didn’t need rings or anything to know they wanted to be together. If she had actually died yesterday, he would’ve done all he could to find a way to cheat death.

There had to be a way. Igor and the twins probably knew something, but he was glad he didn’t need to go that far.

If only he could say she wouldn’t pull something like that again, but knowing her and her reckless need for self-sacrifice, he knew it wouldn’t be the last time…

He sighed to himself and shouldered his bag. He’d probably go prematurely gray because of her...At least it was time to help out Yusuke on his inspiration journey. It wasn’t a “date,” like Airi kept teasing him about. It was just two brothers helping each other out.

Akira blinked.

Why was he here in the middle of Inokashira lake, rowing a boat with him and Yusuke in it? Cicadas buzzed all around them in the nearby bushes and trees, and the sun was scorching today. Jack Frost was the only reason why he wasn’t melting. “…Why are we on a boat?”
Yusuke only smiled at him on the other seat, sketchbook and pencil in hand that he took out from behind his back. Again, Akira wasn’t going to question where he was holding them when he didn’t even bring a bag. “Did I not tell you? There is something I wish to draw. Every day, I have the opportunity to observe you and Aneki show affection to one another. I find myself yearning to put such a love on paper as its another aspect of the heart, but alas, I cannot draw the two of you as I am too familiar with you and I fear my bias will overshadow it.” He swept his arm out, rocking the boat slightly. “That’s why you shall take up the oars, and we will voyage to sea in search of my next subjects!”

Akira sweatdropped. So this was a date...Dammit, Airi. He could almost hear her giggling over how romantic it was that two handsome boys were together, even though one of them was her boyfriend and the other her brother. Why couldn’t he take her on this boat instead?

“Look at all the ducks! They’re sooo cute!”

They both looked to the side where they saw a man and a woman on their own rowboat, the woman gushing over the wildlife seen in the lake.

The man with her laughed fondly at her enthusiasm. “Don’t get so excited. You’ll fall off, you know.”

Yusuke lit up and lifted his pencil to his sketchpad. “Perfect...This is it. As you know, my previous painting only captured one aspect of the heart: desire.” His pencil scratched paper as he quickly sketched out the scene in front of them. “As such, I was unable to arrive at a truly authentic representation...That is why we are here today on this boat. I heard this was a popular destination for romantic dates, therefore it was only inevitable to find the burning passion between a man and a woman!”

He looked up for a moment to flash him a small smile before going back to his sketch. “You will have an important role to play here today as well. While I draw, ensure the boat remains as steady as possible amid these devilish ripples.”

Akira glanced over the side of the boat, noting that the lake was calm and still. “Err...OK.”

Yusuke glanced up again, eyes lighting up when he took in his subjects who were still oblivious to his attention. “That bashful side profile, those moist eyes...Their overflowing passion is wholly evident!”

Akira turned to look at the couple as well. They were close, yeah, but...maybe it was just him and his own bias about being in a relationship, but they didn’t look romantic.

Yusuke continued sketching however, unaware of his inner turmoil. “They are akin to Adam and Eve...yet in time all lovers must come to know the pain of separation. Separation is the natural end to any relationship...but even beyond that, love endures.” His eyes were almost glowing with how delighted he was. “Precisely...This is the truth of the human heart.” He chuckled, pencil flying all over the sketch. “It will make the most wonderful painting..! It shall be adored by all who gaze upon it!” He murmured fervently. “It may even be given top prize in the next exhibition..!”

He paused and furrowed his brow. “Wait, now is not the time to be thinking of such trivial matters..!” He took turns glancing up at the man and woman in the boat closest to theirs and his sketchpad, imprinting their likeness.

Akira blinked. Why was he so attached to the thought of having his painting liked? Didn’t he
paint because he enjoyed it?

The woman moved to cover her mouth and Yusuke scowled. “Can you please remain still?!“ He chided her.

She gasped and turned to them with wide eyes, finally realizing another boat was nearby. “Huh?!“

“Return to your prior angle!” Yusuke snapped, holding his pencil up to measure their profiles. “I must capture your profiles!”

The man scrunched up his face in defense. “Wh-What the hell’re you doing?!“

Yusuke scowled at the thought of needing to explain. “Rejoice, for I shall preserve your beautiful love so that all coming generations may bask in its glory.” He held up his sketchpad. “Once I complete this painting, you will become new legends in the art world...A modern Adam and Eve!”

The woman covered her mouth, taken aback by his fervor. “Legends? Art..?”

The man glared at them. “This dude’s off his rocker...Come on, let’s report him.” His eyes caught the sketchpad and he paled. “Hold on a sec...Are you drawing us?!“

The woman recoiled back, rocking their boat and sending ripples into the lake. “What!? You’re using us as models?!“

Yusuke nodded and closed his eyes, smiling slightly. “A man and a woman intimately swaying in a dinghy of dreams…” He explained theatrically. “The blush of their cheeks, the bashful looks...Yes, this is the love I was so emphatically searching for!“

Akira sweatdropped. “Uh, Yusuke? I don’t think they’re actually together...“

The man and woman looked at each other. “Love?” The man repeated, looking a little sick in the face.

The woman scrunched up her face. “Uh, I guess you could call it that...but it’s kinda weird...“

The man sighed and gave the teenagers a disparaging look. “It’s familial love. This here’s my sister.” He rolled his eyes and groaned, turning back to his sister. “Ugh, I told you I didn’t wanna come here with you. The only ones who do this crap are stupid couples.”

His sister pouted. “But I’ve always dreamed of coming to Tokyo and riding a boat here!” She scowled. “Though it was supposed to be with my boyfriend...not my brother!”

Akira sweatdropped. Same.

Taken aback, Yusuke almost gaped. “Familial..? So that overflowing passion was just a figment of my imagination...?” He looked down at himself, conflicted. “How did I not recognize it? Aneki and I are siblings in all but blood, but are our bonds truly so different?”

Akira watched as the siblings quickly rowed themselves away from them and sighed. “Love comes in all forms. Maybe you were just looking for what Airi and I have that you didn’t realize it was what you and Airi have.”

Yusuke sighed and put his sketchbook back behind him. “It seems so...Love is a broad, multi-
faceted beast. This only serves to prove how narrow my perspective can be...Had my bias truly covered my eyes from the truth?” He looked up at him. “Akira, are you able to describe romantic love to me?”

Akira sweated. “Uh...I don’t know if I’m the best person to talk about this.” He shrugged helplessly. “It’s wanting the other person to be happy, even if it’s not with you. Their happiness, their health, whatever, it’s your top priority.” He reddened and looked away. “And you’d...want to...you know, kiss them and…” Join bodies, but maybe he shouldn’t say this.

Yusuke only frowned deeper. “I...can’t quite understand, but perhaps...the truth of the heart lies in the eye of the beholder.” He sighed resignedly but smiled. “Akira, I feel as though I’ve learned something today..! Please row us back to shore.”

Akira sweatdropped and sighed, picking up the oars. He quickly rowed them back to the rental dock on one side of Inokashira lake, swatting away the occasional dragonfly that flew too close. It wasn’t mosquito season just yet, but soon, they knew they’d have to go outside with mosquito spray.

Getting out of the boat, Akira was about to follow Yusuke home when he caught sight of a certain blue haired woman, dressed in a short leather jacket and a blue spider web dress. “Hey, Yusuke...I’ll see you later, OK?”

Yusuke turned and gave him a questioning look, but nodded, leaving the park without him.

Akira walked up to Takemi who was with another man in a business suit. “...Based on what I read in the findings summary you sent me, the results are truly amazing. We’ll perform one final exam with our equipment and we’ll be ready to treat Miwa-chan with it.”

Akira blinked. “Miwa-chan? Is the cure finished?”

Takemi turned to him in surprise. “Oh, Guinea pig. I wasn’t expecting to see you here.” She glanced over at her associate. “...Come here. This concerns you as well.”

The man eyed the teenager. “So, this is the kid from your study, hm?”

Takemi chuckled. “Yes, he’s my little guinea pig.”

The man only raised a brow. “You certainly walked a dangerous line, but I’m sure you implemented the strictest of safety protocols.” He paused. “Please put some thoughts into the offer we discussed, will you..? I’ll call you later.” He waved and left the park.

Once he was out of sight, the doctor turned to the teenager. “He’s the doctor treating Miwa-chan.” She informed him. “He just so happened to be a year ahead of me in college. I told him everything since I was so close to perfecting the medicine.” She smiled, softer than any expression he had ever seen on her face. “I have to thank you again. All this is thanks to you helping me with the clinical trials.”

Akira smiled back. “I’m not going to lie, it was rough.” He could still taste the last concoction she made him swallow.

Takemi chuckled at his answer. “I bet, although it was really fun for me.” She rested a hand on her hip. “From my tour of their medical facility and discussions I had with their development team, I’m confident this will be a success, and they’ll complete development on schedule.”
Akira smiled, resting his hands in his pockets. “That’s great. Miwa-chan will finally recover from her illness.”

She nodded absentmindedly. “The final result will be out of my hands though...if I don’t accept their offer, that is.”

He furrowed his brow. “Offer?”

She turned to him with a cool expression. “I was...recruited.” She worded carefully. “He offered me the position of head of research and development at his hospital...Which means I’ll have to close my practice.”

Akira stared at her with wide eyes. What?! She’d have to close her clinic? But where would they get their supplies then?

“I start first thing next month,” She continued. “Unfortunately, Takemi Clinic of Internal Medicine will be gone.”

“And your patients?” Akira asked, slightly urgently.

She raised a brow. “I can recommend them to other clinics in the area.” She examined his troubled expression. “You seem flustered. Are you really that troubled by it?...” She began to chuckle. “Just kidding. The part about being recruited is true, but I don’t intend to close my practice. I kind of like being a general practitioner. I’ll still work with them to develop new medicine though. Once the medicine’s perfected, I’ll be able to see Miwa-chan...and receive my reward: her smile. Oh,” She looked up at him. “I need to give you your reward, too. I’ll think of something to give my little guinea pig for holding up his end of the deal.”

Akira sighed in relief and nodded. “Don’t worry about it for now. I’m just glad you’re keeping your clinic open.” For him and the team. They couldn’t trust anyone else to examine them.

Takemi raised an amused brow. “You’re really concerned about the thought of me closing the office. I know you said it was for your entrance exams, but come on, really?” She rested her hands on her hips. “I think it’s about time you started being honest with me. It’s OK.” She reassured. “You can tell me...” Her eyes sharpened. “Your secret. You and your little friends keep coming to me. There has to be a reason why. Come on, you can trust me.”

Akira tensed. Had she figured them out like Kawakami had? “...It’s just for our entrance exams.” He said coolly.

She stared at him for a few moments and sighed. “So it seems. Well, I’ll be going for now. Come by the clinic sometime, OK?” She waved as she left.

He let out a breath he didn’t even know he had been holding. That was close. If he was honest, having a doctor like her on their side would be extremely helpful, and they wouldn’t need to hide their reasons for visiting.

He pursed his lips. He’d have to see.
Airi fiddled with her most precious instrument now that the house was empty, dressed in only a black tank top and red shorts.

Ryuji had come over earlier saying he wanted to hang out in a place with AC, and spent most of his time chatting with her while reading an Attack On Titan manga. She had even managed to feed him vegetables for lunch, which was a rare occasion. Sure, he complained about it, but it seemed like he was doing it just for the fun of it.

Once Yusuke had come home from his date with Akira in a conflicted mood, Ryuji sat up from his manga and asked him what was up. Yusuke only sighed and said he was having some trouble with his art. Ryuji resisted to roll his eyes at the artist’s one track mind and offered to hang out with him for a bit, that maybe doing nothing would inspire something. Surprised at his offer, Yusuke slowly nodded and the two of them went around the neighborhood, doing guy things together.

Airi hadn’t really caught on to what they were really doing, but she was content to stay indoors today. It was just too hot to go to work or do anything else.

Plucking the strings on her cello, sat in the kitchen, she played a simple tune. She honestly wondered if yesterday night’s moment with Akira had really encompassed her entire character. That she had a tendency to put everyone else above her own well-being. That her need to help Futaba had almost cost her her life and if she was honest?...

She’d do it again.

There was just something about the orange haired girl that set off every motherly instinct she had inside of her. Futaba had suffered enough and even though Sojiro tried, he just couldn’t reach out to his daughter like she could.

The sound from the cello turned deeper as her mood sobered. Maybe she didn’t quite value her life, but she valued everyone around her. She’d do her best to live for them at the very least. Especially for Akira. He made it clear that what happened yesterday in the Palace had shaken him. She would never want to hurt him. She loved him too much.

A noise from outside attracted her attention and she looked out the window, seeing Ryuji run past.

Blinking, she set her cello aside and looked out. Yusuke had his sketchpad in hand and was directing the ex-runner on how fast to go. Ryuji grimaced but did his best, arms and legs pumping at 90 degrees like a professional. The artist observed him as he sprinted past, pencil already flashing all over the paper.

Airi smiled as she watched from the window. It was good to see them help each other. Ryuji always poked fun of Yusuke’s obsession with art but when it came down to it, he’d still help him. It seemed like her brother was finally opening up to the rest of the team aside from her and Akira. Maybe she and Ann could actually model for him one day without going nude.

Her phone buzzed on the table and she picked it up.

Ak: Are you home?
Ai: Yup. Yusuke and Ryuji are here too.
Ak: I’m on my way.
Even after knowing him for four months and being with him for one month, she still couldn’t figure out his mood from his texts. Her boyfriend certainly tried hard to be all mysterious and cool.

Soon enough, her front door opened and voices poured in down the hallway. “Ugh, now I’m all sweaty…I came here ‘cause I wanted to avoid the heat!” She heard Ryuji complain.

“Apologies, Ryuji…but I never knew you could look so graceful while running,” Yusuke admitted. “Perhaps there is more to you than just being a loudmouth.”

“Yeah, of course...Hey, wait!”

Airi burst out laughing just as they walked into the kitchen and she threw Ryuji a cold bottle of water from the fridge. “If you need to, you can use the bath upstairs.” She offered. “I can go wash your clothes at the laundromat.”

Groaning, Ryuji completely drained the water bottle and stripped off his tank top, leaving his abdomen bare and dripping with sweat. “Nah, I’ll be fine once the AC cools me off, but hey!” He flexed, showing his lean but strong muscles that corded his arms. “Been workin’ out with Ann so much that I’ve gotten more muscular too!” He smirked to himself. “Last night? Fifty push-ups.”

Airi gave him an appreciative look and nodded. He did look more ripped, and he was starting to get a six pack. "Good job!"

Yusuke leaned in closer to examine the creases of his muscles. “Hm…”

Feeling awkward with him being so close, Ryuji gave him an odd look. ‘‘Hm’ what…”

Sighing, Yusuke took a step back. “The composition is too ordinary for me...I prefer a greater contrast.”

Offended, Ryuji gaped at him. “Bro!” He gestured to himself and his trim torso. “How is this not enough?!”

Airi watched them attentively from the kitchen counter, idly wiping her nose of any blood. If she didn’t think he and Ann would be wonderful together, she wouldn’t mind if he got together with Yusuke. Polar opposites. Who would be on top? Would it be Ryuji, and her dear brother would blush shyly as he was shown raw passion?

She coughed to herself. Don’t...Don’t be a pervert, Airi.

The doorbell rang and she perked up. “I’ll get it!” Walking past them, she headed to the front door and peeked through the eyehole. She unlocked the door and opened it. “Hey!”

Akira smiled down at her. “Hey, do you want to-” His eyes caught sight of a shirtless and sweaty Ryuji in the hallway and he blanked. “What.”

Airi blinked and looked behind her, noticing the ex-runner. “Oh, do you want a towel at least?”

Ryuji stretched and popped his neck. “Ugh, yeah...I’m all sweaty and gross. Oh, hey Akira!” He waved innocently at his blank faced leader. “You guys goin’ on a date?”

Akira could only stare. Why was Ryuji half naked...and sweaty...in his girlfriend’s house?
Yusuke then stepped out from the kitchen and headed into the tatami room, rummaging through his closet. “I suppose since I was the one who made you exert yourself, I can only offer you a change of clothes.”

Ryuji sweatdropped. “Uh, I dunno if I’ll fit but OK…”

They both headed up the stairs for the bathroom and Akira gaped. What was happening?! Was he just imagining things or did Yusuke just imply they...

Airi closed the front door and pulled him into a hug, him hugging back without thinking. “How was your date earlier with Yusuke?”

Shaking out of his stupor, he lightly glared down at her. “It wasn’t a date,” He stressed. “I was just helping him row the boat at the park.”

Her brows raised. “Oh? Rowing the boat, with just the two of you?” She smiled slyly. “Isn’t that a couple thing?”

“Yeah and I wish I took you instead.” He grumbled. “Anyway, I didn’t come here to talk about my hangout with Yusuke, I wanted to ask you to dinner.”

Airi blinked, blushing at being asked out. “A date? Us? Isn’t it too hot to go outside?”

Akira shrugged. “I didn’t really think about it. I just wanted to spend more time with you, especially after yesterday.”

She softened and stretched up to kiss him. He kissed her back, his hands coming up to rest around her hips. She was still here. She was alive.

Airi leaned back with a gasp, red hue staining her cheeks. “You’re…a lot more affectionate.” She rested her head against his shoulder. “We don’t have to go out.” She murmured. “I’m always happy to spend time with you.”

He smiled softly. “Then let’s do just that.” His expression turned naughty. “Besides, I have to finish what I started yesterday once we can get some alone time.”

Airi stared up at him blankly. How was she the pervert when the real pervert was him?

----7/29, FRIDAY, DAY, YONGENJAYA

Akira pressed the button to call for the elevator. He decided they should steal the Treasure today, which meant they should get some medicine just in case. They’ve been doing well with just their magic, but having actual items would be useful if they ran out. They weren’t even finished with the Palace yet. They hadn’t seen that glowing orb that was the Treasure. Maybe they’d bump into another Shadow later on that would give them trouble.

The elevator dinged and slid open. Walking in, he pressed for the third floor. At least Takemi wasn’t closing her clinic. It was a close call yesterday.

The doors slide open a few moments later and he walked over to the clinic door, opening it. To his surprise, Takemi was sat on one of the waiting room benches with a little girl. The girl whose father begged the good doctor to treat.

She looked up at him and gave him a grin, one tooth missing. “Hi, mister!”
Akira smiled and waved. “Hi there. Are you feeling better?”

She nodded, taking the time to swing her head up and down. “Yup! I’ve been going to school like a good girl!” She turned to the doctor sat beside her. “Hey, Doctor, does it matter who likes someone first?”

Takemi looked up from her chart and raised a brow. “What are you talking about?”

The little girl swung her legs. “There’s a boy I like, but my friend told me that I have to let her have him because she liked him first…”

Takemi smiled with amusement. “Oh, that’s not true.”

She looked up in surprise. “Reeeaaally? Then why did she say that?”

“It’s likely because she’s jealous of you.” The doctor explained calmly. “Just be careful because it might result in pandemonium.”

The little girl tilted her head. “Pandemonium..? Oh!” She slid off the bench and took her small backpack. “I have to get going or daddy will worry! Bye Doctor! Bye mister!” She waved as she left the small clinic, closing the door behind her.

Takemi sighed and stood up as well. “That girl’s gotten a lot better. So much so, in fact, that now she’s gossiping…” She patted the back of her head. “She even comes in on days she doesn’t have to. It appears she’s nearly fully recovered.”

Akira smiled and leaned against the wall. “That’s good. You must be happy.”

She chuckled and nodded. “…I am. It feels good to know I can still help people with the medicine I created. I was able to give her a chance to keep going, and look at her now.” She paused and turned to him. “Which reminds me, the new medicine will be completed soon. Your data has been extremely helpful, due to your generic body type and bland health history.”

Akira sweatdropped. Was that an insult?

“You’ve been a splendid guinea pig.” She continued. “I mean, participant. So thanks again.” She tilted her head as she observed him through half lidded eyes. “…By the way, how have I been doing? Have I been helpful?”

Akira blinked. “Huh?”

She smirked. “For your escapades with the Phantom Thieves, I mean.” She huffed when she noticed his shocked face. “Come on. You and I both know that you were lying about needing to prepare for the entrance exams. I had my suspicions when you brought Kimisawa-chan in, all sick and frail. Common sense would have made you go to a hospital but instead you came to me, and swore me to secrecy. I also visited Oyamada in jail last week. A swing of fortunes like that could have only come at the hands of the Phantom Thieves.”

She tapped a finger against her clipboard as she listed every evidence she could. “And to have it happen when it did, and to have you and your little friends be the first to tell me...Isn’t the only logical conclusion to think that it’s you guys?”

Akira raised a brow, tense that she could figure them all out. It wasn’t unexpected since he usually bought a substantial amount of medicine from her, but... “I wonder…” He murmured
Takemi chuckled at his answer. “Well, I don’t care. The point is that without you.” Her eyes softened. “I wouldn’t have been able to complete my mission. I would’ve never finished the new medicine...while I was being deceived by Oyamada. Miwa-chan would’ve died if it weren’t for your assistance. I would’ve never met any of the townspeople who appreciate my work.” She smiled slightly. “I bet the Phantom Thieves save people in need, just like doctors do, eh? So, I’ll go out on a limb for you. I’ll have even more powerful medicine ready for you.” She gave him an amused smirk. “I trust that you’ll use them appropriately.”

Akira stared at her for a few moments before nodding. “Thank you, Doctor. Please keep us a secret.”

Takemi only chuckled. “Of course. By the way, I’m not giving them to you for free, so you better make some money in the name of “justice.”

He sweatdropped and took out his wallet. “Well...I need some stuff now if you don’t mind.”

Once he finished shopping at the good doctor’s, he went back to the cafe where Morgana was waiting for him in his room. The feline looked up at him, tail waving back and forth. “Did you get our supplies ready?” He asked. “Once we get into Futaba’s room, we’ll show her the calling card and immediately start the heist. There’s not going to be any time to prepare in between.”

Akira nodded and took out his phone, letting everyone know to meet up. It was time to save Futaba and consequently, Japan.

“I got the calling card,” Ryuji announced as he held up their signature red card to all of them sat in the attic. “So we’re good to go.”

Morgana jumped up on the table and looked at all of them. “This is different from past cases.” He informed them grimly. “We’ll be handing the calling card directly to Futaba herself. Once we give it to her, we’ll head straight into her Palace.”

Airi folded her hands in her lap. “I think we’re all ready. I have some lockpicks prepared to break in again.” She grimaced. “Sorry, Ojisan.”

Yusuke sat forward in his seat. “How will we convince Futaba to let us into her room though? Even Boss is forbidden entry.”

Akira leaned back in his chair. “We’ll be honest about it. She knows we’re going to steal her heart, so as long as we tell her this is important in doing that, she should open up for us.” He hoped anyway. They didn’t want to push her too hard.

Makoto nodded in agreement. “Yes, that is the best course of action. Futaba doesn’t know what we’re doing inside her Palace, correct? Hence, if we tell her we’ve come to steal her heart, she’ll surely open the door and let us inside.”

Ann blinked from her seat on the couch. “Wait...That’s it?”
Airi smiled slightly. “I’m sure she would be willing to since it’s her wish. She’s not dumb, far from it in fact. Let’s try our best to be considerate.”

Ann nodded slowly, determination pulling the corners of her lips. “Our feelings should get through if we just try and talk to her.”

“All right!” Ryuji shot up from his chair and stood up firmly. “I believe in Futaba! C’mon, let’s get this done!”

Everyone nodded and stood up.

“Hm? An eyeball..?” Futaba murmured while she went through the multitude of apps on her phone, crouching in her computer chair. “When did that get on here..?”

She tapped the icon and gasped when the room wavered for a moment. Some sort of shade flared into existence in front of her, showing a girl with long orange hair dressed in ancient Egyptian robes.

Futaba jumped off her chair and held an arm in front of her defensively. “Wh-Who’re you..?”

“I am the other you.” Shadow Futaba greeted her blandly.

Blinking, the hacker looked her up and down, noting their various similarities. “Is this some kinda hallucination? It’s different from usual…”

The Shadow tilted her head. “How long will you continue blaming yourself and shutting yourself away from the world?”

Futaba blinked. “Blaming myself for what..?”

“For your mother’s death.” She replied bluntly. “Don’t you think it’s time you grasped the truth of that moment? What happened before your eyes...What happened to your mother…”

Futaba bit her lip and ducked her head. “The truth..?” She whispered.

“Why did you choose to rely on the Phantom Thieves? On her? Are you simply going to shut yourself in and do nothing? Are you going to avert your eyes from the true answer?”

Futaba grimaced to herself, holding her hands together close to her chest. What was the truth..? She…

“If so…” Her copy continued. “I will kill them in your world.” She slowly faded from her eyes and Futaba let out a shaky sigh.

“I-I...What should I do..?” She gasped when someone knocked on her door.

They were here again!!
Chapter End Notes

Yusuke rank 5
Takemi rank 10
Holy heck thank you for 1400 kudos!!!! and 56k hits!! This fic keeps breaking my own milestones every time I come back <3

As a small complaint, I've noticed that some readers comment to debate about the game, and while I'm happy to do so, I would rather they be about the fic. Reddit and forums are a more appropriate place to discuss stuff like that, and honestly it's always the same: this or that could've been better, the sexism, akechi's story is badly executed, makoto is clearly given favoritism above everyone, Atlus is sexist, etc etc.

I'm happy to talk about P5, but please keep comments relevant to the fic itself! Thank you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Airi picked the locks to the gate and the front door, pocketing the broken remains. They made their way inside the house for the third time and took off their shoes, padding up to Futaba’s room.

Makoto winced as she closed the front door behind them. “I’m sorry for sneaking in so many times, Boss.”

Stopping in front of the taped off room, Morgana frowned. “There’s no mistaking it. This is the same door as in the Palace.”

Airi knocked. “Futaba-chan? It’s us again. Can you give us a sign that you’re listening? Even through text?”

Akira’s phone buzzed and he took it out of his pocket.

???: You should’ve told me you were going to come here.

Airi bit her lip and turned back to the door. “I know, I’m sorry we’re making you uncomfortable. We just have a favor to ask if that’s OK.” She took a deep breath. “If you want us to steal your heart, we need you to open the door. Please let us in.”

???: I’m not mentally prepared!

Ak: You have to do this.

???: Easy for you to say…

Makoto frowned and stepped closer to the door. “The other you within your heart told us to have you open it.” She softened her tone. “Deep down, you want to open this door, don’t you?”

???: The other me?

Airi nodded. “Yes. We want to help you, but we can’t if you don’t let us.”

???: Give me some time.
Akira deadpanned. He was getting tired of her procrastinating this. “Ten seconds is enough, right?”

???: That’s too short! At least minutes. Please!

Makoto crossed her hands over her hip. “Fine. But if Boss comes home, we’ll kick down the door and enter if we must.”

They all sighed and looked each other. Guess they had to wait.

Ryuji and Ann both sat down on the floor, while Yusuke took out his sketchpad to pass the time. Makoto, Airi, and Akira whispered to one another about the consequences of knocking down the door, with Morgana occasionally chiming in about their time limit inside the Palace. They didn’t know what to expect once they were able to get past that door and get to the Treasure, after all.

Soon enough, ten minutes were up and they all turned to the door. Makoto knocked. “Time’s up, Alibaba.”

???: All right. I’ll open it now.

Airi idly grasped her arm. “It’s good that she’s letting us in. I don’t think busting the door down would change her cognition. It may just form another door.”

Yusuke hummed. “So she has to invite us…”

Akira, fed up with waiting, knocked on the door again. “Futaba, let us in.”

They looked down as the door handle slowly creaked and the door cracked open on its own. Ryuji rolled a shoulder. “All right. Let’s go in.”

They opened the door wide open and stepped inside, looking around in surprise and disgust. Trash littered one side of the room with newspaper clippings spread all around the floor. It was dark, the only lights shining from the various computer monitors set up in one corner of the room. It was definitely a modern cave.

“What is this..?” Yusuke asked slowly as he looked around the room.

Airi looked on despairingly at the bags of trash piled on top of the mini fridge. “Is she really comfortable living like this..?”

Makoto stepped closer to the computer desk and glanced over all the books piled up on the side. “Medical science, information technology, biology, psychology...These are all technical books…”

Ann looked around with a grimace. “She keeps herself cooped up in a room like this all the time..?”

Akira eyed the small room, not seeing their target. “...Wait, where is she?”

Ryuji blinked and looked around. “Where could she be hiding?”

A thump came from the closet and they all slowly turned toward it. Yusuke shook his head in disappointment. “She’ll shut herself in to the bitter end, hm?”

Morgana frowned, sitting on top of the single-sized bed. “Even if that door’s opened up, we’ll get stopped again inside. I bet a fence or something formed right in front of the Treasure now.”

“Uh…” Airi stepped forward, making sure not to step on a discarded candy wrapper, and knocked on the closet door. “Futaba-chan?” She called out softly. “I know it’s hard, and you don’t know us,
but please—"

“Th-This makes no sense! Explain yourselves!” A young voice stammered from within.

Ryuji stared at the closet with wide eyes. “Whoa, she talked…”

Makoto took a step closer. “We needed to change your cognition.” She explained. “Unless we do so, we can’t steal your heart.”

Yusuke crossed his arms. “I highly doubt she would understand it even if we explained it to her…”

“So basically, my cognition is being a hindrance, keeping you away from the core of my cognitive world?”

They all looked at each other in surprise. “Huh?” Ann gasped. “She understood it?”

Airi idly grasped her arm. “Can’t expect less from Isshiki-san’s daughter. Ojisan did say she was super smart. Yes,” She raised her voice. “Your cognition won’t let us through unless you consciously allow us in.”

“All…?”

Ryuji rolled his eyes. “C’mon. Why’d you call yourself Alibaba and make things more complicated? If you wanted help, you could’ve just asked for it. We would’ve done it even without Medjed butting in.”

“…was…rrassed.”

Akira blinked. “Sorry, can you repeat that?”

Futaba groaned from within the closet. “...’Cause I was embarrassed.”

Ann bit her lip and looked down. “I think I get it…” She whispered quietly. “Asking someone for help isn’t that easy…”

Airi reached out and hugged her with one arm, tugging her to her side. “It’s natural to ask and receive help, though,” She soothed. “There’s nothing embarrassing about it.”

“Futaba,” Makoto called out. “Can you tell us more? How do you know about the cognitive world? Is it from your mother’s research?”

“...Yeah. I knew ‘bout it.”

Ryuji furrowed his brow. “You think this is related to how Boss was gettin’ grilled by Makoto’s sister? ‘Cause if they think cognitive research can help ‘em somehow, then havin’ Futaba’s brain would help.”

Airi bit her lip. “They mentioned cognitive science, right? Hisoka’s Shadow did somehow know about it, so I wonder how far their research got…”

“Cognitive psience with a PSI in front!” Futaba interrupted passionately, voice slightly muffled from the thin wooden doors of her closet. “Less science, more supernatural. That’s important.”

Yusuke raised a brow at her fervor. “Well that certainly got her attention...It seems we’re on the right track.”
Akira furrowed his brow. “Cognitive...psience? What exactly was Isshiki-san working on?”

A silence fell on the room when she didn’t answer. Ryuji frowned. “Shouldn’t we do this later? She seems to have gone through some shit in the past…”

Airi frowned and stepped closer to the closet. “Please, Futaba-chan. You may not know me but my father used to work with your mother. My name is-”

“Kimisawa Airi...I know.”

They stilled at the unexpected interruption. “You...do?” Airi blinked. “Right, because you’re a hacker. Well, I just…” She softened. “I just want you to know that I know how you feel. How much it hurts to lose them.” She lightly placed her hand on the surface of the closet door, slightly crinkling the papers that were pinned to it. “...But you know, even though it happened, you can’t...you can’t give up.” She clenched the edge of her dress with her other hand. “Whatever you may think, your mother loved you. Take it from Sojiro-jisan. He saw how much she cared for you. She could’ve gave you up to focus on her research, but she didn’t. That has to mean something, right?” She smiled gently. “It wasn’t your fault she died, but you are the only one who knows what really happened. Can you tell us?”

“I...M-My mom…”

Ann clenched her fists, tilting her head so they couldn’t see her face in the dimly lit room. “You both...You both suffered so much.” She began shakily. “But Airi got back up and fought back against the person who killed her parents.” She glared at the closet door. “Yusuke got back up! Makoto got back up! You can do the same, Futaba-chan! What really happened?! Why would they say your mother had maternity neurosis? Was her death really an accident?”

Eyes widening, Ryuji tried to shush her. “Whoa, Ann..!”

“We saw what your heart is like, but we still can’t figure anything out.” Ann continued strongly, pushing him away. “The mother that Boss told us about is completely different from your cognition. Why is that? We want to hear the truth.” She pleaded. “We want to help you.”

“...M-My mom...was…” Futaba breathed shakily, as if she was in pain. “The...one who killed her...was...Nngh…”

Makoto frowned sympathetically. “She most likely can’t remember because her heart has become distorted from suppressing her memories.”

Ann quieted and looked down. “...Yeah. I’m sorry, Futaba-chan. A lot has happened to us and I...We want to make sure we can help you as best we can, so-”

The closet door slammed open and the petite girl reached out with her eyes clenched shut. “Th-There!” Futaba yelled, her entire body trembling in her loose JLMK shirt and shorts. “Now steal it!”

They stared at her before sweatdropping. “...What’s gotten into you all of a sudden?” Ryuji asked, weirded out.

She shook her head, never opening her eyes. “C-C’mon, hurry it up!”

“Um…” Airi smiled sheepishly, standing close enough that if she moved, the younger girl would be touching her. “It doesn’t work like that. We really only needed you to open the closet, but thank you for being strong.”
Gray-purple eyes fluttering open in surprise, Futaba stared up at her. For a long time. To the point where Airi actually started feeling uncomfortable. “Um, I’m sorry we made you think you had to do that…”

A shimmer of disappointment appeared in her pale purple eyes. “You…” Futaba whispered. “Really don’t remember…” Without waiting for an answer, she slowly backed into the closet and closed the door again. “...Did you guys trick me?”

Airi stared at the closet door, confused. What..? So it wasn’t her Shadow trying to mess with her. She didn’t remember? What did that mean?

Akira furrowed his brow. “No, we didn’t.” He reassured. “We did need you to open up to us, so to speak.”

Morgana frowned from his spot on the bed. “She’s aware of the cognitive world, but it seems she doesn’t understand how a change of heart occurs.”

Makoto grasped her chin thoughtfully. “Um, Futaba, how much do you know about the cognitive world?”

“...I know that there’s another world based on cognition, but I don’t know how to get there.” Futaba spoke nervously, her breath occasionally hitching. “Can you guys go there? You said you ‘saw my heart’ earlier.”

Yusuke nodded. “Correct.”

“How...How do you do it?”

Akira idly tweaked a strand of hair. “We use a smartphone app to get there.”

“An app?”

Ryuji laced his hands behind his head. “Yup. We just gotta put in a name, place, and keyword, then bam. We’re in. So in this case, it’s “Sakura Futaba” at “Sakura Sojiro’s house, and-”

“Futaba.” Makoto interrupted with a worried frown. “You don’t happen to have this app, do you?”

“This... I don’t.”

Airi sighed with relief. She wouldn’t be in danger like they were. She would be safe. “That’s good.”

“Can you take me with you too..?”

Akira frowned. “No. Just leave it to us, OK? We’ll take care of your Palace.” Having someone enter their own Palace? Sounded way too dangerous.

“...OK. I’ll leave it to you.”

“Good.” Ryuji rolled his neck. “And you better not forget our promise, all right?”

Looking at each other, they began to leave one by one from the small and cramped room. Ryuji stopped in front of the closet when he remembered. “Oh yeah!” He rummaged through his cargo short pockets. “Almost forgot! The Treasure’s not gonna appear if we don’t have her read this...” Taking out the calling card, he slipped it in through the crack.
“Hm?” They heard Futaba pick up the piece of paper. “A calling card?”

He nodded. “It’s the one you prepared. Read it, OK?”

“...I can’t read it. It’s too dark.”

He rolled his eyes. “You *could* just come out…”

“It’s embarrassing…”

They sweatdropped at her answer.

Morgana stood up from the bed, garnering their attention. “I’ll make sure she reads it, so you guys go on ahead.”

Airi nodded. “We’re counting on you, Morgana.” She turned back to the closet. “Futaba-chan, please make sure you read it, OK?”

“...OK.”

Looking at each other, all but one thief left the room.

Once the door handle clicked in place, Futaba slid the closet door open and stepped out. She sighed, holding the card in one hand. “She didn’t recognize me…” She whispered. “It’s been years, but...How could you forget me?” Her lips tighten for a moment before she shook her head, lifting the card up to read. “Let’s see…”Sakura Futaba has committed a great sin of drowning in sloth. Thus, we will rob every last bit of those distorted desires.” She frowned morosely. Unbeknownst to her, for a moment, her Shadow took her place and shook her head. “No. I’m going to die…”

Morgana jumped up on the bed and nodded to himself. “She read it.”

Catching sight of the black blur, Futaba yelped in surprise and fell back on her rear, watching as the feline escaped out of her room again with a pout. “Neko-chan! You again?!”

Driving to the Palace, they exited out of the bus and stared up at the pyramid. The atmosphere pulsed with animosity, fueling the already hot environment like a kettle boiling over.

Panther fingered her whip, eyes darting around for enemies. “The Palace’s security level is so high I can feel it from all the way out here…”

Skull frowned from next to her. “Futaba seemed totally up for gettin’ her heart stolen...What’s up with this?”

Mona hummed as he observed the Palace. “Hm...Something about this place seems really unusual. Either way, there’s only one thing for us to do now that we’ve sent the calling card!”

Joker looked up from his phone. “Everyone ready?”

They nodded and he moved them to the summit Safe Room. Exiting out, they turned to the blocked off passage. “I hope she read the calling card…” Elegant murmured as they stood ready for it to be open.
Skull scowled. “I mean after all the trouble we went through, she damn well better’ve read it!”

With a rumble, each green pillar slid down and the gate disappeared, showing a small platform that seemed to be an elevator. They all let out a collective sigh of relief. “Good, our way is clear.” Fox smiled.

Panther grinned excitedly. “Well yeah, Futaba-chan opened the door herself.”

Mona jumped up, paws waving in the air. “The Treasure’s just up ahead! Let’s finish this!”

Climbing onto the platform, Joker pressed the pedestal to activate it. It shook before it ascended upward toward the top of the pyramid. Through the top of the tunnel, they could see something blue up above them. Once the lift stopped, they paused to admire their surroundings.

“So,” Queen breathed. “This is the place that represents Futaba’s room.”

They stood on broken walkways made of the same stone as the pyramid, but they floated within a sphere of information. Data passed by at speeds too fast for the human eye, zeroes and ones compiling the codes. It was like an overload of information constantly processing.

Joker raised a brow. “The heart of a hacker…” He looked around, eyeing the few enemies that were in the distance. “Where’s the Treasure?”

Mona stepped forward, his big blue eyes honing up at the top of the floating structure. “I’m getting a strong signal from above us. The Treasure has definitely manifested.”

Queen frowned, clenching and relaxing her fists. “There’s no knowing what may lie ahead, so let’s be vigilant as we push toward the Treasure.”

Running through the myriad of stairways and paths that threatened to crumble around them, they finally made it to a closed door. Elegant clasped her hands together and in a glow of golden light, healed everyone of their existing wounds. As of right now, the pink sun trailed after Panther, occasionally pulsing to send a wave of invigorating energy into her. It was slow, but it was better than nothing, and she had exerted herself against the last Shadow they faced.

“There’s no doubt,” Mona stated as they stopped at the door, the only door they could see within this land of data. “The Treasure is right past this point.”

Fox exhaled, letting his katana fade from their most recent battle. “What may await us within..?”

Elegant felt her entire body tense. “No matter what it is, we’re ready for it. We’re going to save Futaba-chan from herself.”

Joker nodded and opened the door. “Let’s do this!”

The heavy stones groaned as they were pushed to the sides, and they slowly walked into the dead silent room. It was dark, dark enough that they couldn’t see anything around them. The only exceptions were the occasional digital floor panel that led up to a stone coffin in the middle of the room.

The doors closed behind them with a definite bang, sealing them within the pharaoh’s tomb. Skull looked around their dark surroundings, confused. “The hell? This ain’t what I was imaginin’!”

Fox raised a brow. “Were you expecting a mountain of treasure or something of that sort?”
“There IS that over there.” Panther pointed out, gesturing to the stone coffin in the middle of the dark room.

Skull slumped over with disappointment. “That’s it..?”

“The Treasure must be inside.” Queen concluded.

Joker darted his gaze from corner to corner before warily stepping forward. “Let’s check it out then.”

Mona sparkled at the thought. “T-Treasure…” He drooled, following after his leader.

Elegant sweatdropped. “Be careful. We don’t know what kind of trap-” She was cut off as a loud and animalistic screech echoed outside, followed by the entire structure around them trembling slightly.

They tensed, feet spread apart for balance. “There’s something here…” Fox murmured, now on guard.

Skull grimaced, summoning his bat. “I gotta bad feeling ‘bout all this…”

Something hit the ceiling with a loud boom, knocking out several of the stone blocks that upheld the top. They covered their eyes as bright sunlight shown through the deep darkness they had adapted to.

“FUUUUTAAAAAABAAAAAAA!!!!”

Something inhuman screeched at them and blocked out the sunlight, showing one large eyeball peering down at them. They gasped and took a step back from the gigantic monster that reduced them to ants.

“Is that a Shadow..?” Queen stammered. “No...It’s…”

Fox narrowed his eyes. “It’s not Futaba!”

Mona tembled in his spot, fur bristling in fear. “Don’t tell me…”

The large monster knocked the stones again, clearing the entire ceiling away with a brush of its large cat-like paw. They held up their arms to shield themselves as rubble and rocks smashed around them, destroying the top infrastructure.

With a gust of its large wings, the human headed monster threatened to blow them off the very top of the pyramid. It was covered in beige fur, extending from its paws to its tail. It had a red sleeveless blouse on its upper body, its white feathered wings stemming from its back. The human head snarled down at them with a woman’s face, rectangular glasses blocking out the menace seen in its eyes. Its black bob cut framed its face perfectly, even as it flew around.

Skull covered his eyes from the harsh winds. “If it’s not a Shadow, then what is it?!”

Mona struggled to answer him as his claws dug into the flooring, the only thing keeping him from flying away into the air. “It’s...a cognition!” He clenched his eyes as dust and dirt flew around them. “A monster that Futaba’s cognition created!”

Elegant used her scarf to cover her mouth and nose from the sand, barely able to keep her eyes open from the wind. She recognized those features from the murals. “She...She must be Isshiki
Wakaba! How Futaba remembers her as!" She gritted her teeth as another gust almost blew her over. “A monster!”

One of the pillars next to her cracked off and flew in her direction. “Look out!” Panther screamed, too far to make it.

Joker saw it as well and his breath hitched with fear. “Elegant!” He began dashing to her spot but he knew in the pit of his stomach he wouldn’t make it in time.

Eyes honing on the rock that was about to hit her, Elegant summoned her scythe in a flash and sliced it in half, the two halves flying past her. Summoning her knuckle dusters, Queen stood up on her feet and with a mighty roar, sent a fist flying against it. It shattered into multiple pieces, falling harmlessly around them. The other half met Fox’s katana and was chopped into dust, each swing of his arm too fast for anyone to see.

With the rubble cleared, they looked up at the sphinx that had Wakaba’s face. “Do not approach the Pharaoh’s tomb!” It screeched at them, the sound as sharp as blades and as loud as a thunderstorm. “Misfortune will fall upon you!” It continued to circle them in the sky with each beat of its large white wings.

Mona grimaced at how high up it was. “Ugh, look at it flying about! We can’t reach it like this! Let’s take it down with our guns and magic!”

Elegant was the first to kneel down, sniper rifle already in hand. Looking through the scope, she sacrificed some of her health and shot a One-Shot Kill. The beast howled as the bullet hit its flank, but it was too small to have done any real damage to it.

Taking out their guns, they unloaded several clips of ammo into their enemy, hoping it would be enough to garner its attention so it would land.

With a twisted scowl, the sphinx flew in close and slammed its paw down. Skull let out a yell of pain as he was knocked to the ground, almost rolling over his back. With its other paw, Wakaba swatted Joker as well, making him wince as a claw left a line of red on his chest, blood slowly oozing out.

Mona quickly whispered out a Mediarama, healing them back to full form. Gritting his teeth, Joker held a hand to his mask. “Hua Po!” The red fairy appeared behind him, her butterfly wings helping her stay in place in the harsh desert winds. With a wave of her arms, negative energy surrounded the sphynx, weakening her attack.


Running out of bullets, Elegant held back a curse and lifted a hand to the right side of her mask. “Xihe!” The sun goddess hovered behind her, her robes flowing peacefully. She snapped her fingers. “Kouga!” Light spears pierced the beast, leaving lines of black on her body.

With a roar, Wakaba flapped its wings and flew up high in the sky, to the point where they couldn’t even see it. “H-How far did it fly up?!” Mona squawked. “What’s it gonna do?! Don’t tell me...Is it gonna dive down at us?!”

Tensing at the possibility, they braced their arms and weapons in front of them for the inevitable attack. Elegant clapped her hands together, strengthening their defenses with a Marakukajaja.

They blinked rapidly, trying to see the beast against the harsh sunlight that pierced their eyes.
“Damn that thing…” Mona winced. “When’s it gonna strike..?!?” Seconds ticked by, turning into minutes, and their hearts pounded as they could only wait for the inevitable.

Something dotted the sun, the figure quickly blocking the light as it descended faster and faster until its colossal body crashed onto the floor. They all cried out as they were knocked back from the force, debris and rubble cutting their suits as they rolled back from the beast.

“Is everyone all right?!?” Elegant yelled, clapping her hands in a prayer. Golden light encircled each of them as they were healed.

Fox winced as he slowly got up. “I’m all right! This will be a trial to overcome…”

The sphinx went back to flying around them in circles, its gray eyes behind its specs never leaving their much smaller figures. Joker cursed as he got back to his feet, vest already mending as if time rewound. “This isn’t good...We can’t do enough damage unless she lands.”

Mona grimaced behind him. “I can’t tell at all when it’s gonna attack…”

Skull turned to him incredulously, the cut on his cheek rapidly disappearing as the healing magic took care of it. “What do you mean you can’t tell?! You gotta tell us, Mona! We can’t keep this up!”

The feline resisted the urge to cry. “I-I can’t help it! There are some things that even I can’t do!”

Queen wiped the blood from her mouth. “What can we do then?!?” She clenched her teeth. “We won’t be able to last!”

The grimness of the situation set in, and they could only brace themselves for a grueling fight ahead of them. One where they didn’t know if they could win...

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“So this is inside my heart…” Futaba marveled as she looked around the sphere of data that surrounded her. “I didn’t think it’d be like this…” She was able to discern every piece of information that flashed by, recognizing each and every one of them as something she had learned before.

Taking a few steps forward on the cold stone floors, she recoiled when a large portrait fell in front of her. “Huh..?!?”

“Do you remember?” Her copycat appeared in front of her, staring at her with yellow eyes.

Futaba stared up at the portrait. Even though it was in an ancient egyptian mural, she knew without a doubt what it represented. “This is the suicide note…” She whispered dispiritedly. “The men in black suits read it right after Mom died…”

Her copy nodded and a new portrait replaced it. “That’s correct. Look at the next one.”

Futaba hugged herself, the mural bringing back the sound of screeching tires, of bones breaking upon impact, of blood pooling on concrete. “This...This is…” She forced herself to say it. “When Mom jumped in front of that car…”
“That’s right. Now the next.”

Crouching down, Futaba slowly shook her head. “No…”

She tried to resist but her copycat called out to her. ‘Don’t run. I thought you made your mind up after you talked to the Phantom Thieves.’

Biting her lip, Futaba let out a shaky sigh. “OK…I’ll look.” She stood back up and forced herself to gaze upon the third mural. “…It’s me complaining.” She mumbled. “Mom scolded me for bothering her…”

Her Shadow nodded. “Yes.”

She flinched, folding into herself. “I knew it. It was me who killed Mom.” She sobbed. “I was a bad daughter…I weighed her down, and she hated me for it.” She rubbed her eyes, tears falling in little droplets. “…It’s just like I remember…”

Her Shadow regarded her for several moments. “Are you sure?”

Sniffling, Futaba stopped and blinked. “Huh?”

“Remember everything. Don’t avert your eyes. When did this happen?”

She bit her lip. “Just a little before Mom died…I whined about wanting to go on a family trip…” She kept her head down, shame and guilt wallowing up inside her. “But she scolded me and said no.”

“Was that all she said?”

Futaba sighed. “Mom said…’I’m too busy right now. I need to finish my cognitive research as soon as possible.’”

“And what did you do?”

She fidgeted with her hands. “I threw a tantrum.” She mumbled. “Told her she thought her research was more important than I was. That’s when she scolded me…”

“What did she say afterwards? There was more.”

Futaba furrowed her brow, trying to remember something that she had buried deep in her mind for years, but when she did, her eyes widened. “Did she say..?” She gasped. “‘My research is almost over. Once it’s finished, we can go wherever you like. I’m sorry I’ve left you alone for so long, Futaba. Please try to understand, though. This research is really important to me and Arihito. I need to complete it, even if it costs me my life as well.’”

“Did she hate you?”

“She didn’t..?” Futaba breathed out in shock.

The mural glowed softly, showing one small detail that made a huge difference in her memory. “Wh-What? She smiled…” She flinched and held her head as a stabbing pain coursed through it. “Agh! My head…It hurts…” She clenched her eyes. “Which is true?!?”

“Your memory is…”

Futaba furrowed her brow when her copycat disappeared and a loud screech pierced her ears. She
They panted, all of them either on their knees or collapsed onto the floor in exhaustion. Sweat, sand, and grime covered them after a long and grueling battle that had yet to bear any fruit of their labor. The sphinx continued to fly in the air, screeching warnings at them from its vantage point. Even after several healing spells, they just couldn’t remove the aches that came with exhaustion.

“The hell?!” Skull gasped for breath as he rested his hands on his knees. “We ain’t doin’ shit to it!”

Footsteps, human ones, garnered their attention and they gasped when they saw a familiar orange haired girl exit out of the same door they had come in from. “Futaba-chan..?!” Elegant gasped, forcing herself to take a step toward her. “Why...Why are you here?!”

Queen stared with wide eyes. “You came into your cognitive world?!”

Futaba nodded timidly. “Mm-hm…” She slowly walked closer, unaware of the large monster that masqueraded as her mother hovering just above her.

Mona looked up in shock and horror. “The person themselves coming into their own Palace..? If that happens…”

A screech cut them off and Futaba gasped, finally catching sight of their enemy. “That’s…” She winced as several apparitions appeared before her, invisible to all but her but their voices rang clear. They all screamed the exact same things her own head had haunted her with for years, a neverending nightmare of suffering.

“You killed her!”

“You monster!”

“What do you have to say for yourself?!?”

“It’s your fault!”

Unaware of the people and only of the voices and her visible pain, Elegant quickly rushed to her and knelt down, placing a comforting hand on her back. “Futaba-chan! What’s wrong?!”

“It’s my fault…” Futaba whispered somberly. “It’s my fault that mom…”

“That’s right!” They all looked up at the sphinx, its face twisted into an ugly and demented scowl. “You killed me!”

Alarmed, the other thieves grouped themselves around her, protecting her from the cognition.

“I doubt that Isshiki-san had really been like this…” Fox murmured as he held his katana in front of him.

Mona nodded in agreement. “Futaba’s desires and guilt must’ve distorted her cognition of her. The
wish that her mother was alive again is mixed in as well, along with those eerie jeers.”

“You are nothing but a demon who stood in my way!” The beast roared down at them, almost spitting acid with how venomous each word was. “I wish you had never been born! That way I could’ve announced my results without having to waste my time on you! I poured my heart and soul into that research! It would’ve been the discovery of the century!”

Joker furrowed his brow, catching onto the scientific implications. “Research? Is this about cognitive psience..?”

Incensed at this fake cognition that only spewed out vitriol, Elegant glared up at the cognition. “Shut up! You’re not her real mother! A real mother would always put her children before herself!”

The sphinx bared its teeth like a mad animal. “You’re going to die! There’s no meaning to your life! No one needs you!”

“I should never have had Futaba. She was such a bother…”

“It seems you caused your mother a great deal of trouble, Futaba-chan…She must have had some kind of maternity neurosis…”

Elegant turned back to her, eyes wide in horror. “No, that’s not true! Please, Futaba-chan!” She shouted desperately, hoping that she would be heard. “Listen to my voice! Sojiro-jisan cares so much for you, and we care for you too! That isn’t your mother!”

Futaba clenched her eyes and held her hands to her head, trying to dispel the voices but to no avail. “Urgh..! B-But…But…”

Queen looked on in horror, shielding her teammate and their target. “So because she thinks she killed her mother…and because she thinks she deserves to die…Futaba gave birth to a Palace where her mother wants her dead..?”

Panther ran up to the hacker as well. “Futaba-chan, look! There’s no way that monster is your mother! It’s just an illusion you created!”

Futaba crumbled into herself. “I don’t…”

Elegant placed her hands on her face and gently tilted her head up. “You know that’s not your mother.” She soothed. “You know that she never hurt you. She did her best to raise you, even when she had so much work to do. She loved you!”

Futaba stared at her with wide eyes. “Really..?” She breathed out, wanting so much to believe her words.

Fox readied his sword, holding the handle with both hands. “Isn’t this a false memory that’s been imprinted upon you?”

“A false memory..?” She slowly repeated before wincing.

Invisible to all but her, a man in a black suit appeared in front of her. “You made your mother destroy all her research, Futaba-chan…” He said mockingly. “She had worked so hard on it as well…She lost her mind, and it’s all because of you…”
Futaba winced, overwhelmed with everything that was happening around her. So many people shouting at her. What could she believe in? “M-Mom...I-I…”

A new presence appeared and they tensed. “It’s her Shadow!” Mona announced restlessly.

“Sakura Futaba.” Futaba’s Shadow called out. “Remember! You’re the reason she committed suicide. You were just getting in the way of her research. Why did you think it was suicide?”

Futaba hunched over herself. “…Because of the note.”

“Exactly. The men in black suits read her suicide note to you, and what was written on it?”

“All of her complaints...about me.”

“Yes. The shock and the pain led you to avert your eyes, but they kept reading it aloud in front of your relatives. Think hard. Was that suicide note real? Would the mother you loved so much truly have written that? Did she ever say such horrible things to you?”

Stilling, she finally realized the truth that she had been too distraught to realize. Everything had been a lie.

Getting to her feet, Futaba stared at her Shadow unflinchingly. “No! She scolded me whenever I had tantrums, but she cared for me!”

“What denies you is an illusion…A curse put upon you by the heartless…”

Tears gathered in the corners of her eyes as she clenched them shut, her teeth grinding together to hold in her screams.

“You knew from the very beginning and yet, you cowered in fear…”

Her nails dug into her scalp, gripping bundles of orange strands. “...That’s right. I knew, but I…”

“It’s all your fault..!” The sphinx screeched down at her. “This time, you’ll be the one to die!”

“Will you die as you are told..? Who will you obey..?”

She couldn’t breathe, the pain was too much. It hurt, it hurt just like when her uncle beat her, when her friend cut contact with her, when her sister in all but blood disappeared, when her mother died right in front of her…
“Cursed words spat out by a seething illusion? Or the truth within your own soul?”

“It’s your fault!” The cognition screamed, its words repeating like a broken record. “It’s all your fault!” With a flap of its large feathered wings, Wakaba sent a gust in their direction, threatening to blow them off the top of the pyramid.

Slowly letting her hands fall, Futaba looked up with determination. “I won’t let those distorted lies deceive me anymore...And I won’t be led astray by other’s voices either...” She clenched her fists, her nails biting crescents into her palms. “I’m going to trust my own eyes and my own heart to distinguish the truth from the lies.” She glared up at the cognition, the source of her nightmares and hallucinations. “There’s no way you’re my mom!” She yelled out strongly. “You’re just a fake created by those horrid adults! I’ll...I’ll never...”

She took a deep breath and shouted with all her heart. “I’ll never forgive them!”

Her Shadow appeared and floated behind her, a smile gracing her face for the first time before she disappeared in a burst of light.

The thieves shielded their eyes from the light when a whirring mechanical noise caught their attention and they looked up. Panther gaped at the sight. “What is that?!”

The burst of power died down, revealing a UFO lined with green code with bulbous lights shining underneath the saucer. A gargoyle statue sat on top, a contrast of old European and modern sci-fi. Tentacles slinked down and grasped the hacker, pulling her up into the spaceship.

The thieves could only stare with their mouths open as she was literally abducted right in front of their eyes.

Futaba gasped as she was enveloped in darkness. “Contract...I am thou, thou art I...The forbidden wisdom has been revealed.”

Her eyes fluttered open as data upon data appeared around her, reflecting off of her large glasses. Even though it was strange to float in some sort of subspace, she knew what she was doing. Every line of code that dictated this world scrolled by and she could understand every single one. “No mysteries...No illusions shall deceive you any longer.”

The thieves stared up at the large saucer that hovered above them. “Futaba?!” Joker called out.

“I’m OK!” The young girl's voice echoed out from a speaker in the UFO.

Elegant stared up with wide eyes. “A new Persona...Green?”

“Please help me...That thing’s gotta go!”

Smirking when they realized she had awakened her Persona and was on their side, they turned back to their enemy, determination renewed and weapons out. They were going to win this.

The UFO flew up high in the sky, camouflaging with the environment so as to not draw attention from the cognition. “This is my heart’s world, right? Hacking into my distortion should be no problem for me!” Flying toward the back of the area, she created a perfectly working ballista.

Mona gaped at the sight. “A-A ballista?!”

“Shoot it down with this, then beat the crap out of it!”
Joker quickly connected the dots in his head and smirked, twirling his dagger. “Thanks! Queen, go man it!”

Queen nodded at his command. “Roger!” She ran toward the back and slowly messed with the controls.

In the meantime, Elegant knelt down with her sniper rifle once more and shot a One-Shot Kill. The sphinx screeched in pain but continued flying around. Holding a hand to his mask, Skull shouted. “Seiten Taisei! Zionga!” The arrogant monkey god flew in on his mystical cloud and sent a bolt of lightning.

Panther high fived him and followed up with a Tarunda, weakening the cognition’s attacks. Queen was finally able to move the ballista and it slowly turned, its gears groaning under its immense weight.

“Change direction!” Futaba directed from above. “Aim the tip at her!”

Joker held a hand to his face. “Jack Frost!” The little snowman bounced behind him. “Bufula!” The air around the sphinx froze, condensing into spears before stabbing forward into its flesh. With a growl, Wakaba flew closer and swiped its paw, knocking them all over to the ground. Wincing as she got back up, Elegant clapped her hands, summoning Xihe to heal them all.

“Good job!” Futaba shouted from her UFO. “Adjust vertical alignment!”

Queen grunted as she pulled the chains that controlled the ballista, aiming the arrow at the flying beast.

“All right, fire!”

The arrow shot out at mach speed, piercing straight into the sphinx. Wakaba wailed, the sound like nails grating on chalkboard. Black blood spewed from its wound as it staggered and fell onto the pyramid.

Using the opportunity, they all pointed their firearms at it and it growled. “Nnnngh..! How dare you..! Children that defy their mothers...should DIE!”

“Shut up!” Futaba yelled out of her comm defiantly. “You’re not my mom! You’re just a monster born from my own weakness...Everyone, keep attacking it! Don’t let up!”

Initiating the all-out, their weapons flashed in the strong sunlight as they leaped and slashed and bludgeoned as hard as they could. Wakaba screeched at all its new wounds, black slowly oozing out onto the rubble. With it so close, they could finally use their weapons.

Fox rushed up and with his katana, slashed several times at its face before dodging a paw aimed in his direction. Backflipping out of its trajectory as well, Joker slid in between its defense and jammed his dagger straight in its glasses and to its eye, its cry of pain mixing in with a wet squelch when he yanked it back out. Following his lead, Queen used the time to pulverize the large monster with her knuckle dusters, each hit getting stronger as she had years of martial arts to back her up.

Panther slid underneath the biker’s last kick and jerked her arm up, her whip lashing out in a net pattern. Running back, Joker grasped Elegant’s waist, pivoted on his heel, and threw her high. Flying up past the monster’s scalp, Elegant aimed downward with a spin, using her momentum to carve her scythe into the cognition’s face. Tugging her blade free, she placed the soles of her boots on its face and launched herself off. Mona jumped in her way and she used her momentum to grab
him and throw him in the direction of the cognition. With his surprisingly immense strength, the feline sliced down with his scimitar, one last wound to the sphinx before it screeched and shook them all off.

It flew back to its usual circling sequence high up in the sky, far out of their reach. **You little…!** It growled. **You goddamn braaats..!**

Flying back in on her UFO, Futaba replaced the used ballista with a new one, and Queen rushed back to man it like before. Using the small reprieve to her advantage, Elegant snapped her fingers, shielding them all with a Marakukaja.

Panther and Fox sided up with each other and held up their submachine gun and assault rifle, unloading several clips into the cognition. Screeching, Wakaba flew in closer and slammed a paw down, crushing Skull under its full weight. He cried out before consciousness was robbed from him and he fell over onto the floor.

Panther gasped. **Skull!!** She rushed up to him and knelt down, shielding him while the others distracted their enemy.

Mona waddled up in a hurry. He frowned when he noticed how close the two blonds were, how much she worried over their resident loudmouth, but shook his head and held up his paws for a Recarm. Blue light surrounded the pirate before his eyes opened with a groan.

Panther sighed in relief. **I’m so glad you’re all right..C’mon, we have to keep fighting!!** She held out her hand and Skull accepted, letting her pull him up.

**Adjust alignment!** Futaba directed Queen. **And fire!**

Shooting the ballista, the arrow shot down the sphinx once more and it crashed against the pyramid. Taking advantage of its moment of weakness, they attacked yet again, Futaba guiding them from above.

**Nnngh, Futaba…!** Wakaba groaned. **If only I had never birthed you..!**

**No matter what you say to me…** Futaba whispered. **...I will live! FIRE!**

Holding up his 9mm, Joker shot his last bullet. Flying true to its trajectory, it pierced through the cognition’s forehead and it screamed, unable to hold itself up anymore. Sliding down the side of the pyramid, it finally fell over, dead.

Now that the battle was over, Futaba flew in closer and Necronomicon disappeared, dropping her to the floor.

Elegant rushed up to her side, kneeling down next to her. **Futaba-chan?** She called out worriedly. **Are you all right??**

Her whole outfit had changed while she was inside the UFO. Instead of a long sleeved shirt, shorts, and striped socks, the hacker was instead in a skintight black turtleneck with glowing green stripes running all over. Her black cargo pants had knee pads and a utility belt, and her mask was a variation of night vision goggles.

The others slowly walked up, tired but satisfied after a long and grueling battle. **Damn, you’re freakin’ incredible!!** Skull exclaimed excitedly.

Queen tilted her head worriedly. **Futaba?**
Standing up, Elegant held out a hand. Staring at it for a moment, Futaba grasped it with a green gloved hand and let herself be pulled up before dusting herself off of any sand or dust. Catching sight of her outfit, she stopped and gasped, turning herself sideways. “Whoa! What in the world?” She stretched her arms up, admiring how her outfit stretched with her. “Ooh! It’s totally skin-tight!”

Joker rested his hands in his pockets. “You all right then?”

Futaba opened her mouth to answer but a glowing light caught their attention.

“Another thing showed up?!?” Skull readied himself, bat in hand, but stopped when the light formed into a figure.

Futaba stopped, eyes wide. “Mom?!”

They all stared at the apparition. Clothed in a sleeveless black turtleneck and slim black pants, Isshiki Wakaba gave her daughter a soft smile. “Futaba. Thank you for choosing to remember the real me.”

Futaba sniffled at hearing her voice again, tears running down behind her goggles. “I’m sorry for being so selfish. Mom…”

She took a step forward but the apparition shook her head. “Don’t come over here. This isn’t where you’re supposed to be, is it?”

She slumped, disappointed. “But I finally got to see you again…” She pleaded, voice hitching as she resisted the urge to cry.

Wakaba laughed gently. “Are you being selfish again?”

Clenching her fists, Futaba held them close to her chest. “Um, I…” She stuttered shyly. “I love you, Mom…”

Wakaba smiled. “I love you too, Futaba.” She voiced sincerely. “Now, you should get going. Sojiro will take care of you now.” With one last smile, she disappeared in little sparkles of light, her memory finally resting in peace.

Futaba stared at where she just was and took a deep breath, blinking her tears away underneath her mask. Letting out a slow exhale, she turned around and began walking back, taking Elegant by her hand on the way.

The noblewoman gasped in surprise and didn’t fight her. “Uh, are we going somewhere?”

“Home.” Futaba chirped, tugging her along with her. “I know how to use the Nav now.”

The others stared after them as they left, confused. “Huh?” Queen blinked, and blinked again. “Oh…”

Panther gaped. “She left and took Elegant with her…”

Fox sighed. “That girl marches to the beat of her own drum, doesn’t she? I suppose she had taken a soft spot to Elegant.”

Joker sweatdropped. “We just let her walk away, kidnapping our teammate, and we didn’t say anything…”
Queen grasped her chin thoughtfully. “But if we have her on our side…” She stilled when a thought occurred to her. “Wait, what about her Treasure?!”

Skull perked up. “Oh yeah! We almost forgot.”

They turned to the coffin which now laid to the side, overturned and empty. Panther tilted her head. “It’s empty?”

A blast sounded out and they jumped, the pyramid rumbling underneath them a second after.

Skull turned to their metaverse expert. “What’s goin’ on?! Wasn’t it supposed to be here?!”

Mona jumped up, ears and tails sticking straight. “Futaba herself was the Treasure!” He informed them quickly. “And she’s gone, so of course it’s empty!” Another rumble almost sent them off their feet. “Shoot, this is bad…”

Fox furrowed his brow. “What’s the matter?”

Mona turned to them with a grimace. “Not only did the real person come into her own Palace, she awakened to a Persona while she was here! This place could collapse any second now!”

Queen straightened up as well as she could. “We’ve accomplished our mission if her Palace is crumbling.” She concluded hurriedly. “We should hurry back to reality.”

Joker nodded and gestured to the side of the pyramid. “Let’s go! There’s no time to waste!” He was about to call out for Elegant but caught himself when he remembered the hacker had taken her with her. She was probably safe then. Well, more safe than them.

The top floor began to collapse and they jumped over the edge, running down the pyramid as if it was a giant set of stairs. With each step they took, the previous step exploded, signalling that they had to move fast.

“It’s catching up to us!” Fox yelled as debri and dust flew over their heads.

Skull winced as his knee was jarred with each step, treating this more like parkour than actual running. “Running here’s a bitch!”

Panther kept pace with him, eyes wide with panic. “Mona! Turn into a car already!”

Mona bounced down next to her. “I know! I know!” He panicked. “I-” He was cut off as Panther took him by his scruff and launched him into the sky with a war cry. He yowled as he was thrown but finally in a puff of smoke, transformed into the bus. Their masks almost flew off their faces with how fast they were going.

They were almost there when an even bigger explosion rocked the solid steps beneath their feet and catapulted them off and into the air. Stretching his interior out, Mona caught them all in his bedding, absorbing them inside the vehicle. Quickly taking the wheel, Queen floored it, dodging each falling block of stone that could’ve spelled their death.

Joker could only hope Elegant was having a better than they were as he hung over the front seat, resisting the urge to vomit.
And Futaba's Palace is done!

---

Thank you so much to Moh/Adrian for this wonderful poem:

This tapestry woven with colours so bold,
Has a plethora of stories waiting to be told,
Entwined in a corner; black accompanies pink,
Within that space love blossoms in ink.
On a night where a boy tried to save a soul,
Rehabilitation seemed distant in that cell so cold,
Love was the furthest thing from his wretched mind,
Distance he kept; he was shunned in kind.
It looked so hopeless and the future seemed bare,
She lit up his life just by being there.
Orphaned she was with a past so impure,
Ups and downs they would together endure.
Romance would blossom and remain so steadfast,
Seeing as the Fool and the Aeon were together at last.

The World Is Ours

I literally cried when I received this, and I'm even going to print this out and frame. I never thought in my life that I would ever get poetry.

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Sooooo.... is this an awkward time to say this story is going on hiatus? ;w; I'm sure you all saw it coming since my updates aren't even adhering to a 2 week schedule. I've been writing a lot of AOT and been busy with school and inktober, I'm just super tired. Don't worry, I'm not discontinuing this story! I'm just not very interested in P5 right now (more into AOT of course) so this story will be taking a backburner for a while. How long? Not sure either.

But even though I won't be updating this story, I'll still be updating my other stories! I have more ideas for A World That Could've Been, and I've been meaning to update Soma and Country Bumpkins. I'll also still get notifications for new comments on this fic, so I'll see every new one! I'm very active on this site regardless, so don't worry about me!
Thank you so very much to all of you for giving my fic a chance, for liking it enough to keep up with it, and hopefully to still like it in the future when I come back to update this!
Chapter 177

Chapter Notes

-peek in- is...is anyone still here? ;w; Tadaima~!

I think I'm back. Mostly.

Updates will definitely be slow since I want to acclimate back into writing Airi and P5 in general, but I think I can safely say I'm taking this fic off of hiatus!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

YONGENJAYA

Appearing back in front of Sojiro’s house in their normal clothes, Airi gasped as Futaba immediately collapsed on her, anchoring her to the ground. “Futaba-chan!” Resting her back against the cement fence of the house, she gently shook her. “Are you OK?! Hey, say something-”

“Airi-nee…” Futaba whispered as she snuggled closer, tucking her legs underneath her. “Don’t leave me again…”

Airi stilled.

What? Airi-nee? That was too familiar of a suffix to give to a stranger, even if their parents had been co-workers and friends. What was going on?

She tried to lift the younger girl, but even for her petite size, she was too heavy to be moved. Sighing, Airi leaned back against the fence and decided to wait. She was weak if she couldn’t even lift a petite girl.

She bit her lip and looked up at the afternoon sky. What happened to the others? Were they OK? Did they escape the Palace in one piece?

“Futaba-chan?” She whispered, looking down. “Are you feeling all right? You might be really tired since you awakened your Persona, and-” She stopped when she realized the hacker had closed her eyes, breathing evening out into slow breaths. Moving her left hand out from under the younger girl’s legs, Airi checked her pulse. Slow but strong. She had fallen asleep then.

Sighing, she smiled slightly. It was kind of nice to have someone younger depend on her again. She hummed a simple tune, hoping it would help the younger girl in her dreams. She deserved a nice, long break.

“Airi!”

She looked up down the street and saw Akira, Morgana, and Makoto running toward her. “Hey…” She smiled awkwardly from her spot on the ground.

Makoto held a hand to her mouth in horror when she saw the unconscious hacker in her arms. “Futaba? Please, say something!” She knelt down next to them. “Could this be our fault..? Is it because we defeated her monstrous mother..?”
Morgana shook his head. “No, that was nothing more than a cognitive being created in her mind. Destroying it wouldn’t cause memory loss or place a physical burden on her...”

Airi bit her lip. “I think it’s more because she just awakened her Persona. Akira, can you..?”

Akira nodded, kneeling down to place his hands beneath the petite girl’s back and legs, and lifted her up in his arms as if she was as light as a feather.

Now that she wasn’t weighed down, Airi got up and dusted herself off. “Her pulse is fine, but I think it’s better if we got a professional to check. Makoto, can you go get Dr. Takemi?”

Nodding, the council president sped down the street in the direction of the clinic.

In the meanwhile, Airi picked the lock on the gate and front door, allowing Akira to go first with his baggage. He carefully maneuvered up the stairs, waiting for his girlfriend to open the door to the hacker’s room before placing her gently on the bed.

Futaba didn’t even react when he took off her glasses and placed them on the computer desk.

Airi took charge. Brushing some of the newspaper clippings out of the way, she pulled the covers over the unconscious girl and checked the AC unit on the wall, making sure it wouldn’t be too cold. Eyeing the messy room, she reluctantly took a seat on the bed, idly petting the hacker’s head.

Akira rested his hands in his pockets. “Is she OK?” He asked quietly.

She shrugged helplessly. “Her breathing and her pulse seem normal but I’m not a doctor...Oh.” She looked up at him curiously. “How was the escape?”

He only groaned as he remembered the terror of running away from an exploding building. “Not fun...You were lucky you didn’t have to run down the side of the pyramid.”

Morgana snickered as he took a seat on the bedside rack. “I saved the day, of course!”

The door squeaked open, showing Makoto and Takemi. Airi stood up and moved out of the way, letting the doctor take over.

Putting on her stethoscope, Takemi checked Futaba’s heart and lungs, grasping a thin wrist to check her pulse. Placing a hand on her forehead, she checked for a fever before taking out a flashlight from her lab coat. Clicking it on, she opened one eye and shined the light down, observing how the pupil contracted normally.

Clicking it off, Takemi stood up from the bed. “I know I said I would help but a house call is going to cost you, you know.”

Akira sweatdropped and sighed. “...That’s fine. How is she?”

Takemi chuckled. “It was a joke. I did say I would help the Phantom Thieves.”

Airi and Makoto gasped, with the latter taking a step back. “What?” the council president started. “We aren’t-”

“There’s no use hiding it,” the doctor interrupted calmly. “I already figured it out.” She smiled slightly. “Thank you for helping me with Oyamada.”

Makoto blinked slowly. “Um...You’re welcome..? So...how is Futaba-chan’s condition?”
Airi bit her lip. So now Takemi knew. Knowing her however, she knew the doctor wouldn’t blab. Another adult they could trust next to Kawakami. “Her pulse and breathing seemed normal…”

Takemi nodded approvingly. “That’s right. Her pulse, breathing, temperature, and blood pressure are all normal. No ocular abnormalities either. I’m not sure why, but it seems this girl is in some kind of light stupor.” She glanced down at her patient. “Furthermore, she lacks muscle for her age. I doubt she has much stamina either.”

Makoto grasped her chin pensively. “I see. The rebound from her awakening was too strong…”

Morgana hummed, his tail waving back and forth. “There may have been too many abnormal circumstances…”

“...We should tell Boss,” Akira reluctantly suggested.

Morgana stilled and looked up at him, alarmed. “Wouldn’t he figure out our identities?!”

Airi bit her lip. “...You can say I wanted to meet Futaba-chan really badly and found her like this. It’s a good excuse.”

Makoto frowned worriedly. “Are you sure? He may yell at you...Though, we really can’t keep quiet about this.”

Airi shook her head. “It’s fine.” She smiled slightly. “He knows I’ve been wanting to meet her, and if he can see that she’s fine with us, he’ll let us be friends with her.” She turned to the doctor who stood waiting. “Thank you for coming on such short notice, Dr. Takemi. Why don’t we walk you out?”

Getting back to the cafe where the others were waiting tensely with drinks in front of them, Akira moved to the counter. “Boss, something happened with Futaba.”

Sojiro jerked up, staring at him with wide eyes. “What?!” He narrowed his eyes behind his specs. “How would you know?”

Airi bit her lip and stepped forward. “I...I really wanted to meet her and I knew you wouldn’t let me, so...I went inside your house, but I found her unconscious. I think you should go see her, she’s not waking up.”

Sojiro gaze turned accusing. “You...broke into my house.” Holding his head, he let out an aggravated sigh. “What am I going to do with you..? All right, let’s go.” He tore his apron off and marched out of the cafe, the teenagers timidly following him back to his house.

Squishing into the small room and turning the lights on, they looked down at the unconscious girl on the bed. “Futaba, hey, heyy!” Sojiro called out.

Futaba didn’t respond, only her chest rising up and down in slow intervals showed she was still alive.

The thieves looked at each other uncomfortably.

Sojiro sighed heavily. “Oh dear…”
Ann fidgeted with her hands in front of her. “Um... About Futaba-chan...” she began but awkwardly trailed off.

He turned to them and blinked at their mournful expressions. “Hm? Why do you guys look so down?”

Airi bit her lip. “She’s not waking up.”

The barista raised a brow. “What, this?” He gestured to the unconscious girl. “It happens every so often.”

They stared at him in shock. “Huh?” Ryuji gaped. "This is...common?!

“She must’ve used up all her energy,” Sojiro continued nonchalantly. “It’s like she runs out of batteries. I think it happens ‘cause she doesn’t get enough exercise.”

Ryuji slumped over in relief. “What..?”

“She stays like this for a few days whenever this happens.” The barista shrugged. “I’ll make sure she gets plenty of rest. Here, keep an eye on her.” He slowly maneuvered out of the room to the hallway. “I’m gonna go close the store.”

Once he left, they turned to each other with sweatdrops.

“This is normal..?” Akira weakly voiced out.

Makoto grimaced. “It’s hard to describe how I feel right now...”

Ryuji idly cleared the floor around him with his feet. “Same. I’m kinda frustrated...”

Ann played with a ponytail. “I’m glad she’s OK...but what are we gonna do about Medjed?”

Airi idly grasped her arm. “Ojisan said this only lasts a couple of days, so hopefully she’ll wake up soon. The deadline’s still pretty far away, so-”

“Ah...”

They all turned to the bed where Futaba was blinking herself awake. “Medjed...” She pouted sleepily. “Tired. Gonna sleep for a bit.” She closed her eyes again and in an instant, they could her softly snoring away.

Ryuji gaped. “She fell asleep again!”

Ann could only stare in surprise. “Futaba-chan!...” She received no answer from the now sleeping girl and she sighed. “For a bit...? How much is she planning on sleeping...? We probably shouldn’t wake her up either...”

Yusuke crossed his arms. “What to do...” He sighed.

Akira pursed his lips. “I doubt we can find another hacker with her skill. We may just have to wait, though that’s not what I really want to do, given the circumstances.”

The door opened again and Sojiro shooed them out. “C’mon, kids. You don’t need to stay any longer. I’ve got this now.”

Hesitantly nodding, they all shuffled out to the hallway.
“Airi.”

The cellist tensed at the sharp call and turned back to see him tapping his foot, arms crossed in front of him.

“Come back here.”

She bit her lip. Seemed like she was going to take the fall.

She turned back to the others and waved off their concerned looks. “I’ll be OK. Get home safe, all of you.”

Akira frowned but leaned down to give her a peck on the cheek before following the others out of the house.

Airi stayed in the dark hallway, waiting nervously while Sojiro closed the door to Futaba’s room, leaving them alone.

“Now then…” Sojiro glared down at her with his arms crossed; the very image of a disappointed adult. “What were you thinking, breaking into my house? You realize that’s a criminal act, right?! It’s highly illegal! You went behind my back, betrayed my trust even!”

She winced and looked down. “Yeah, I know…”

“How do you even know how to pick locks anyway?” He interrogated. “I know I locked my doors today.”

She refused to meet his gaze. “…I learned,” She murmured. “Years ago.”

He stilled. “Years ago..? When you…” He sighed and a long and uncomfortable silence fell upon them.

Airi didn’t raise her head.

She never told him what had actually happened, only that she was at an orphanage and got one of her high school teachers to sign on as her guardian. He hadn’t seen her for almost nine years when she was finally able to move back to Yongen, and those first couple of months of her visiting the cafe often consisted of awkward conversations and him doing his best to actually look at her in the face.

“I…” She wrung her hands in front of her, distracting her from delving too deep into her memories. “I went through a lot that I never told you, and…I had to learn.” She shrugged slightly. “I’m sorry for breaking in and going behind your back about this.”

She could feel the weight of his gaze on her and it made her feel so minuscule, so wrong and dirty. Regular teenagers didn’t know how to break into houses with lockpicks. Regular teenagers didn’t have to starve or steal.

She accepted that she had to do what she did to survive, but saying it to an adult made her feel like she was *scum*.

Sojiro sighed heavily before placing his hands on her shoulders, making her peek up at him timidly. “I’m angry, yes, but…” He fought with himself for a moment as if he wanted to yell at her. “…I’m glad you were able to tell me about Futaba’s condition. Even though this happens often, it makes me worry every time. I won’t ask what you went through.” He gave her a small smile. “Just
know that I’m glad you’re back, and that Futaba has someone like you who cares so much for her.”

Airi breathed out, tears of relief gathering in the corners of her eyes. “Thank you, Ojisan…”

“Don’t break into my house again,” he quickly added, letting his arms fall to his sides. “Just ask me for the keys next time.”

She smiled sheepishly. “OK…Um, is there anything I can do to help Futaba-chan?”

He rubbed his chin. “…Actually, there is. You’re on vacation now, right? I still have to open the cafe every day. If you’re free, do you mind coming to check on Futaba during the day? She’s usually fine, but another set of eyes could help.”

Airi perked up. “Oh yeah, I can do that! I’ll make sure to come by.” She clapped her hands together. “I can also make some nutritious soup to help her stay hydrated. Sitting in front of the computer all day can’t be healthy…” She rambled on.

She could help her, and maybe figure out why she had called her Airi-nee…

Getting back home and taking a nice long shower, Airi sat down in the living room and turned on the TV.

“There’s still no response from the Phantom Thieves to Medjed. What do you make of this?”

The camera changed to show Akechi’s face.

She frowned when she noticed the slight bags underneath his eyes that the studio’s concealer couldn’t cover up, as well as the permanent downward slope of the corners of his lips. He was stressed.

“Most likely, the Phantom Thieves simply don’t have the means of confronting them,” Akechi extrapolated. “After all, Medjed is quite different from anyone they’ve gone up against thus far. It seems their best option is to reveal their identities before more people are needlessly harmed.”

Airi sighed.

So long as Futaba woke up and did as she promised, everything would be fine. She felt offended that Akechi had expected them to just give up, but she knew he wasn’t aware of their powers and he felt it was for the greater good.

She didn’t know how to feel about the student detective anymore. On one hand, he was arrogant and shared the same first name as well as physical features that reminded her of her once-tormentor who she barely remembered, but on the other hand, he was clearly working hard to help people, just like they were. The only problem was he thought the Phantom Thieves were villains.

She hugged her knees and sighed.

Life was so complicated now, but…she didn’t regret a moment of it.
Chapter End Notes

It's a little short, sorry!

In any case, for all returning readers, thank you so much for waiting so patiently for my slow ass! Airi lives forever in my heart! Thank you for your support of her!

I know I didn't update during her birthday on 4/16 (I honestly thought about it but I was having a rough time with my health) but here's an artwork I did for her bday!

Comments about the fic are appreciated, thank you again! <3
Airi laughed as Yusuke explained to her the fallacies of European art greats and how eccentric each artist was. “Didn’t Michelangelo paint himself in the Sistine Chapel without being asked?” she asked.

Yusuke chuckled next to her as they paid the entrance fee at the ground floor before taking the elevator all the way to the top of the skyscraper. “Indeed he did. That was his signature on most of his arts.”

They had decided to spend the day together. After such a stressful couple of weeks dealing with Medjed and Alibaba, and then knowing that they were going to see Madarame in less than a month, Airi felt like she had to make it up to her little brother. If he wasn’t needed during a phantom thieves related event, he would either be out in Shibuya people watching or holing himself up in the Study to paint. Only Akira had managed to take him out on little dates around the city, but she had yet to do that herself.

When she brought this up during breakfast, Yusuke offered to take her to one of his favorite spots in the city: the Planetarium in Ikebukuro. He wanted her to see what he had seen and experienced there.

She had never been here before so she looked around curiously. The small lobby was well lit with several windows, letting the sunlight shine in. Models of planets like Jupiter, Saturn, and Neptune hung from the ceiling like colorful balls, and the ceiling was painted with constellations. There were a lot of children running around as well, with star shaped lollipops from the gift shop. The top of the skyscraper itself was actually spherical, with the viewing hall taking up most of the space behind closed doors.

Giving their tickets to the usher, they entered the dark auditorium and Airi gasped, eyes wide as she took in the sight.

Above them was a sea of stars, each light twinkling softly in the universe. The Milky Way was so close that she felt like if she reached out, she would be able to touch the star dust that slowly rotated. Even though it made her feel like a spec in the grand scheme of the nebula, it was so humbling.

“Wow...This is gorgeous,” Airi whispered in awe.

Yusuke hummed appreciatively next to her. “Indeed. It’s quiet and beautiful.” He held his arms out, uncaring of the other viewers who dodged around them to get to their seats. “To see the universe with my bare eyes is more than any human can dream of. Aneki, do you see that?” He pointed at a cluster of light on the ceiling. “That is our galaxy, and we all exist because one lone star exploded, giving birth to life as we know it. The natural chaos in the heavens is proof of harmony itself.”

Airi smiled and nodded. “Yeah, I understand what you mean. Stars are birthed from the death of other stars, and they too will die. It’s violent but there’s beauty in it.” She grinned up at him.
“Thank you for bringing me here, Yusuke.”

He gave her a gentle smile. “Of course. Beauty like this should be shared.” His eyes roamed the auditorium for free seats but blinked when he caught sight of a familiar figure. “Is that..?”

Airi peered behind him, perking up when she noticed her boyfriend and Mishima were here as well. Taking Yusuke by his hand, she led him to the other two Shujin students. “Akira! Yuuki!”

Akira perked up and turned around, giving her a soft smile. “Hey. I didn’t know you were coming here.”

Mishima took a step back in shock. “That’s him! The eccentric! Wha- Wait, Airi?” He stuttered, his eyes trailing down to their linked hands. “Are...Are you on a date?!”

Airi snickered, latching onto Yusuke’s side. “Are we?” She joked. “How many dates can Yusuke go on with us before he snaps?”

“We came to experience the mysteries of the universe,” Yusuke replied calmly, unperturbed at being on a “date.” “I’m glad to see you here as well, Akira.”

Mishima glanced between them all. “You...You both know this eccentric?”

Yusuke glared at him. “How rude! Who are you calling eccentric?”

Akira sweatdropped. Poor Yusuke. “Have you heard the rumors?”

Airi tilted her head. “Rumors? About what?”

Yusuke glared at his fellow blue haired teenager. “Yes I have. I expected your chosen company to be more eloquent.”

Mishima sputtered before ducking his head. “S-Sorry...I didn’t think you were Akira and Airi’s friend, er...date. You just matched the description of the ‘rumored eccentric,’ so it just slipped out...”

Akira rolled his eyes. “Yusuke is Airi’s brother. Neither of us are dating him.”

The Phanboy slowly blinked. “Brother..?” He rubbed the back of his head. “I guess I really don’t know her as well as I thought...”

Airi smiled sympathetically, though it was a little awkward since she now knew he used to like her. “Yusuke is my adoptive brother. He’s one of us.” She winked. “Who’s this ‘rumored eccentric’ you’re talking about?”

Mishima stared up at the artist in surprise before slowly nodding, understanding that he was a phantom thief. “There have been rumors about a man constantly talking to himself here...” He stared up directly at Yusuke as he said that. “...And mumbling strange things.”

Yusuke raised a brow. “...I see. That does sound like odd behavior.” He smiled. “However, can you not sense how nature’s divine providence has drawn us together here?”

Mishima gave him a weirded out look. “What?”

The thieves turned to him quizzically.

“What I meant was...WHAT?!” He took a step back. “You might be that eccentric from the rumors
after all…”

Akira sweatdropped. “...Why don’t we just leave this behind?” Even though their resident artist was probably the prime candidate for the eccentric.

Yusuke checked his phone for the time. “The screening is starting soon. Why don’t we take our seats?”

Mishima floundered. “Uh...right…”

They were able to find empty seats in the first row and they sat down. The theater darkened even more and the ceiling lit up to show a simulation of the known galaxies, giving them a prime view as if they were in a spaceship. Meteors sped past them, shining lights sailing through the stars in a myriad of celestial colors.

Airi stared up in awe. “It’s beautiful…”

Akira smiled and wrapped an arm around her shoulders, not minding the armrest between them. “Not as beautiful as you.”

She rolled her eyes but she couldn’t fight the smile on her face. “Oh stop it, you. You’re the most beautiful person I know next to Yusuke,” She teased and he immediately scowled.

Mishima glanced at them from his seat on the far left, Yusuke sitting between him and the couple. “Uh…”

The artist cut him off. “This 'rumored eccentric'...” He chuckled. “I’ll be sure to keep a careful watch for such a person as well.”

Akira snorted. “Isn’t that nice, Yuuki?”

Mishima slowly nodded, lost. “Y-Yeah. I’ll be...counting on you?”

They enjoyed the rest of the show, getting lost in the vastness of space.

It ended too soon in Airi’s opinion as she stretched her arms in the air, walking out of the auditorium. “That was so beautiful.” She smiled to herself. “I want to come back again.”

Akira glanced down at her. “We could make it a date, just the two of us,” he offered, guiding her over to the gift shop. They hadn’t been on one in almost a month.

She brightened at that. “Really? That’d be nice!” She leaned up to kiss him on the cheek, knowing this wasn’t the time nor place to be lovey-dovey especially with so many people around.

Akira smiled, cheeks reddening just a little from the affectionate gesture, and offered to buy her a confection at the snack stand.

Mishima wilted at the sight from a few steps back and sighed. “I guess they really are in love…”

Yusuke stood next to him, raising a brow. “Naturally. It is a tale as old as time.” He smiled slightly and held his hands up in a frame, capturing the couple as the focus. “Do you see it? They represent opposites and yet, is that not what they say? ‘Opposites attract’?”

Blinking, the Phanboy observed as the phantom thieves leader, dark and mysterious to all but some, softened for the lady in front of him. How the class representative smiled, like a rare flower that only bloomed under special circumstances.
Sighing, Mishima smiled resignedly. “Yeah...Matsumoto in my class said they were like Hades and Persephone.”

Yusuke gasped with delight. “That is a wonderful analogy!” He began to view the couple in a new light, tilting his framed hands in different angles. “Could I...Hm...What if...”

Mishima sweatdropped as the artist continued to mumble to himself. “Uh...”

“Sorry!” Airi walked up to them with her sun shaped lollipop, tugging Akira behind her. “I’m not sure what you two are doing, but Yusuke and I will be going to Shibuya next.” She smiled shyly. “I want to try playing my cello at the station square.”

Akira stared down at her in surprise. “Really? Are you ready for that?”

She pouted. “Are you saying I’m not strong enough to? I’ve been playing in public for a while now...” And with every performance, she gained confidence. Most of her audiences would enjoy her fiddling, though there have been one or two who said her music was grating. It hurt to hear but she could understand that, and she was constantly improving the more she played. She could play anywhere now, even without Akira there to support her.

Mishima stared at her with wide eyes. “You play the cello? Wow...Maybe you could do a performance during the school festival?”

Airi quickly backed away, hands in front of her. “Um, I don’t think that’s a good idea.” She laughed nervously. “It has to be a class participating event, remember? I’m not even part of the music club, so...” Playing in front of the school? No thanks.

Akira blinked. “School festival? Are we deciding on that already?”

She shook her head. “Not yet. I’ll be addressing it when we get back from the school trip.”

Yusuke checked his phone for the time. “Aneki, it’s getting late. Shall we go?”

She nodded. “Yeah, let’s go.” She turned to her two classmates. “Are you heading back to Shibuya?”

Waving bye to Airi and Yusuke (or in Akira’s case, giving her a goodbye kiss), the two Shujin students headed up to the Diner for a small lunch.

Taking a seat, Mishima sighed. “So you remember those two guys who beat Akiyama-kun up?” He grimaced. “Well, it turns out they were really dangerous. I looked them up...and found some seriously scary info.”

Akira raised a brow, nursing his cup of coffee. “Yeah?”

Mishima nodded weakly. “Apparently they’re part of a gang that’s involved in extortion stuff like that all the time. I wish I had known that going in...” He winced. “One slip of the tongue in that act I pulled, and I would’ve been dead.”

Akira gave him a flat look. “I was there with you, wasn’t I?” His frown morphed into a smile. “I didn’t need to step in though. You showed some real courage by yourself.”
Mishima blushed and hid his face with the menu. “Y-You really think so? But I pissed all over myself again while I was researching those guys…”

Akira sweatdropped. Waaay too much info.

“Honestly though…” The Phanboy continued quietly. “You’re amazing. You weren’t afraid in the slightest. Maybe it’s only natural after all the nightmares you’ve been through…” He smiled, bittersweet. “You have someone to go back to.”

Akira stared at him guiltily. He never spoke to him about his crush on Airi, and he practically rubbed it in his face earlier at the Planetarium.

“Yo, Mishima!”

They both looked up to see Akiyama and his two friends walk up to them in the small Diner. Akiyama trailed behind his two friends, face drawn and conflicted compared to their cocky grins.

“Hi…” Mishima greeted them weakly, already bracing himself.

“Whoa, it really is Mishima!” One of them voiced in fake surprise.

“Dude, right?” Their other friend nudged. “Nobody else could be THIS boring. Hey, you figured out what you’re gonna do after high school?”

Mishima looked down and shook his head. “Um, not yet…”

“How ‘bout the military? Nobody’d ever notice a zero lie you stealthin’ around.”

The first guy laughed. “Hahaha, too true! I bet you could sneak in anywhere, huh? You’d be Japan’s ultimate weapon!”

“Shut up!” Akiyama finally spoke up, glaring at his two friends.

Mishima stared at his former bully with wide eyes. “Akiyama-kun…”

The second guy stopped and stared at his friend. “Huh? Something wrong?”

Akiyama glanced away awkwardly. “Uh, it’s nothing…C’mon, let’s just forget him. It’s no fun messing with Mishima anymore.”

The first guy gave him a confused look. “Whaddya mean, no fun? You’re always the one screwin’ with him the most.”

Akiyama shrugged. “I dunno, guess I got tired of it.” He mumbled. Pushing past his two friends, he stood in front of Mishima’s seat with a consternate frown. “Hey, about last time…” He paused. “I’ve been thinking, well…I should prolly thank you.”

His friends look at his back in disbelief. “Huh?” The first guy uttered. “Something happen with you two? Y’know, you HAVE been actin’ weird lately, Akiyama…”

“Yeah,” Their other friend agreed. “Don’t think I haven’t noticed all them bruises you’ve got.”

“I-I…” Akiyama looked down at himself, conflicted in saying the truth or looking cool in front of his friends.

Making the decision for him, Mishima rubbed the back of his head. “Um…’before’? I don’t really
know what you’re talking about.” He hinted, giving him an apologetic smile.

Head shooting up, Akiyama stared at him with wide eyes. “Mishima…” A hint of gratefulness passed by on his face before he hid it behind a nonchalant facade. “...My bad, guess it was someone else…” He pursed his lips. “...You’ve changed though.”

Mishima blinked, taken aback. “Huh?”

Akiyama turned to the phantom thieves leader. “Yo, Megane. I always see you two together...You been coaching him?”

Akira raised a brow. “Something like that,” He replied coolly.

“Heh…” The former bully chuckled. “That so? I’m kinda jealous. Anyways, seeya later.” He walked toward the exit and his two friends scrambled to go after him.

The two Shujin students stared after them before Mishima chuckled to himself. “It looks like Akiyama-kun’s gonna be just fine. He’s a pretty strong-willed guy. And…” He rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. “I really have changed, huh? Do you think maybe now I’m starting to be like the Phantom Thieves...?”

Akira snorted and reached out to gently push his shoulder. “You’re already one of us, remember? Our most important member, too.”

Mishima lit up. “Really..? Then, I’m gonna work even harder now to make sure I live up to your legacy!” He grinned brightly. “I’m...I’m a member of the Phantom Thieves!”

Akira shushed him, though he had a small grin himself. “ Shh! Don’t say that so loudly, OK?”

Covering his mouth, Mishima nodded sheepishly. “...You know, I always used to think I couldn’t amount to anything. I had no friends, I got pushed around, my...my crush was only nice to me because we were in the same class, but I somehow managed to step up and help Akiyama-kun with those thugs. It made me realize...there really are things I can do to save people. I don’t have powers like you guys, but that’s OK.” He smiled. “That’s why I’ve started writing a documentary on the Phantom Thieves. The research I did on that gang Akiyama-kun was wrapped up in was actually what pushed me to do it, and now I’m basically putting together a massive log of all your activities from the Phan-Site.”

Akira blinked. “Really? I can’t wait to watch it then.” A documentary on them and their efforts in helping people? That would be cool. “Don’t use our real names though, use our codenames.”

Mishima pouted. “I know that. What are your codenames anyway?”

Akira chuckled, drinking the rest of his cup. “Joker, Elegant, Panther, Skull, Mona, Fox, and Queen. I’m sure you can tell who’s who.” But was that all of them? Futaba had awakened her Persona, and Airi was still missing four suns from Xihe. Did that mean their team would only grow from there? “...Don’t finish the documentary just yet.”

Mishima gave him an odd look, unaware of his inner dilemma. “I won’t be. The Phantom Thieves are finally gaining their foothold in the world so there’s a lot to document! I mean, I won a composition contest back in 5th grade, so this shouldn’t be any more difficult, right?” He shook his head. “Anyway, this calls for a celebration...My treat!” He puffed up his chest proudly. “Screw the fountain drinks and let’s go straight for the fancy fruit juice! It’s three times the price, so it’s gotta be three times better!”
Akira smiled impishly. “I’m feeling steak today.”

Mishima shrunk back. “But I only have so much money…Can’t you pay that yourself?”

Making a trip back home to grab her cello, Airi took a seat on the bench next to the Hachiko statue in the Station Square.

She took a deep breath, trying to calm her racing heartbeat.

This was the most populated place she had ever played in. People passed by without a care, walking to and from work. Some were too absorbed in their phones to even look up from their screens. It was hot, even as the sun began to set, but here in the shade and with the trees shielding her, she could tolerate it.

Unclasping the case, she pulled out her precious instrument and pulled out the endpin, placing a sponge on the bottom so it won’t get scratched. She began tuning one string at a time. “Do…Re…” She sang with it to make sure it matched the pitch she wanted.

Yusuke was sat a few benches away, sketchpad in hand as he observed her.

She had to put on a good performance for him at the very least. She did say as fellow artists they could inspire one another, and he was still in a weird slump.

Placing the bow just above the bridge, she played a few experimental notes. Though the Station Square was still bustling with commuters, a few people did stop to watch. What could she play? Something classical? Studio Ghibli? A cover?

She looked up at the constantly crowded area, noting just how stressed everyone was. How they rushed from place to place, knowing that they would be on time if they were early, how high strung city life really was. Something soothing then.

Straightening her back and making sure her instrument was placed firmly between her thighs, she took a deep breath and began. A lot of pieces she listened to were closer in pitch to a violin than a cello, but the cello had a depth to it that a violin couldn’t compare to.

The piece began slow, her taking the time to prolong the high notes. Gradually, she picked up the pace, arriving at the crescendo of the song. She wobbled her finger on the A string and it produced a perfect vibrato, resonating throughout the Square. A moment of calm in a sea of turmoil. Soon enough, she was dragging the last note out, letting it fade with a silent sigh.

Her audience- and there were a lot of people now watching her- clapped politely.

“That was beautiful…”

“I needed that after today…”

“I wonder what else she could play?”

Airi smiled happily to herself. It felt nice to hear that her music could help, even just a little. It would’ve been easier with an accompanist but she had never played with anyone else.

Taking a deep breath, she began her next piece. It was faster, with a lightness to it that the previous
song lacked, but it conveyed just as much if not more. ‘There will be ups and downs...It’s up to you if you will get back up to try again…’ Her cello sang, a bubble of peace and contentment in a city that never relaxed.

Yusuke watched avidly, the pure music that echoed in his ears creating images in his mind. He looked down at his sketchbook and began drawing, a light that drove the darkness away. It wasn’t something he would want to put in a gallery, but he would paint it nonetheless...

Ending it with one more song, Airi stood up from the bench, held her cello in her left hand, and bowed. Her audience clapped and cheered for her before reluctantly going back to their lives. The crowd quickly dispersed now that the free show was over, and she began to clean her instrument to be packed up.

“That was absolutely wonderful, young lady.”

She looked up and perked up when she realized it was the politician Akira occasionally helped. “Oh, hello!” She smiled. “I don’t think I ever got your name, but Akira works for you, right?”

The politician, a slightly portly man in a suit with a receding hairline and a friendly face looked surprised for a moment before breaking out into laughter. “Ah, I recognize you now, the young lady from Ore no Beko! It’s been so long since, I almost forgot. My name is Yoshida Toranosuke, it’s a pleasure to meet you.” His crows feet deepened as he smiled.

Airi bowed slightly. “It’s nice to meet you, Yoshida-san. My name is Kimisawa Airi.”

He bowed back. “Your brilliant performance has left a chipper mood around the Square. I hope that means my speech will go well tonight…”

Airi tilted her head. “I haven’t been very concerned with politics. May I ask what your message is?”

Yoshida chuckled. “I can’t fault you. Many youngsters find politics boring.” He cleared his throat. “Ahem, the government has been remiss of their duties to the people. So many psychotic breakdowns have occurred, and yet not a single politician within the Diet has addressed this. How does this look to their citizens? The ones who voted them in?” He spoke passionately. “The next generation, your generation, are our future, yet our government has not addressed any of their citizens’ concerns. An elected official should not be swayed by money or fame! They should be able to perform their job to the will of the people who elected them!”

Airi stared at him with wide eyes, covering her mouth as she felt shivers from the power in his address. “Wow…”

Panting from his speech, Yoshida paused and chuckled sheepishly. “My apologies, I always seem to get carried away with my speeches.”

She slowly shook her head. “No...No, that was amazing. I felt real conviction from your voice,” She replied in awe. “I felt like I really could believe in you...Are you running for Prime Minister? I know the elections are coming up this winter.”

Taken aback, he rubbed the back of his head. “Oh, no...I definitely don’t have the backing for that kind of position. There’s a lot of campaigning when it comes to running for the executive branch. I am only running for a seat in the Diet.”

She nodded slowly. “With your speech skills, I feel like you could definitely try for Prime Minister. Would you take up the position if it were offered?”
He blinked. “I highly doubt something like that would ever happen, but...if there are no candidates, then yes. My goal is to be able to help the people and Japan as a whole. Your generation’s support means the future of this country.”

She smiled. Knowing Akira supported him, it made her want to believe that with someone like him as the leader of their country, it would mean a better home for everyone.

“Aneki.”

She turned to see Yusuke walk up to her, sketchbook already put away in the void of his belongings. “Shall we go home?” He asked.

She nodded. It was getting late and she needed to check up on Futaba. Sojiro had opened the cafe later today so he could keep an eye on her, so it was up to her now.

Yusuke turned to the politician and bowed slightly as a greeting, receiving a nod in response. After bowing goodbye to Yoshida, they took the train back to Yongenjaya where Yusuke continued home.

For Airi however, she headed to the cafe. Entering her home away from home, she walked up to the counter and held out her hands hopefully.

Sojiro stared down at her and sighed. “At least you’re asking.” Rummaging through his pocket, he took his keys out and placed them in her outstretched hands. “Take this, too.” He took a plastic bag from under the counter, filled with a container of curry. “It’s a special blend of curry that she likes.” He paused. “At least, I think she likes it...It’s the only real food she ever asks for. Otherwise, she just asks for chips and other junk food...”

Airi sweatdropped. That wasn’t healthy. “Got it. I’ll start cooking tomorrow.”

He gave her a flat look. “Are you insulting my curry?”

“Only saying it’s not really the healthiest thing to eat,” She replied innocently, leaving the cafe before he could say anything else. Well, since she hadn’t had the time to start that stew just yet, this curry would have to do. Hopefully Futaba would be able to stomach it.

Arriving at Sojiro’s house, she shifted her cello case as she opened the gate and front door, making sure the large case wouldn’t hit the edges. Though she could bring it everywhere and play it everywhere, she still took care in making sure it would never receive a scratch.

Sliding the front door closed, she flicked on the lights, illuminating the hallway. It was silent, the only noise that could be heard was of her taking off her heels.

Padding to the small and cramped kitchen just behind the staircase, she rummaged through the messy cabinets with a disapproving frown. Sojiro really didn’t put much effort in tidying up his personal kitchen. Maybe because he spent so little time here.

Transferring the still warm curry onto a plate and taking a spoon from a drawer, she held it in her hands and carefully walked up the stairs, turning right to Futaba’s room. The door was closed as always, and after freeing one hand, she knocked. “Futaba-chan?” She called out.

No one answered.

Giving it one more try, she knocked again.
She placed her hand on the door handle and slowly pressed down, cracking open the door. It was dark, only the dim light from the glow-in-the-dark star curtains and the computer screens illuminating it. The room was still an absolute mess, and she tried to avoid stepping on any of the newspaper clippings that littered the floor.

Placing the plate of curry on the computer desk, Airi put her cello case down next to the closet before kneeling next to the bed, observing the younger girl.

Futaba was snuggled under the thin blanket, limbs straight out. Her long orange hair was a mess from turning and tossing, and even a little drool escaped the corner of her mouth, accompanied with barely audible snores.

Airi resisted the urge to giggle at the sight. How cute.

Placing her hand on the sleeping girl’s shoulder, she gently shook her. “Futaba-chan? Wake up. You have to eat.”

Futaba scrunched up her face and rolled onto her side, showing her back to her.

Unimpressed, Airi shook her again. “Futaba-chan. Wake up.”

A groan escaped her. “No…Shweepy…”

Airi sweatdropped. Shweepy? “Aren’t you hungry for curry?”

At the magic word, Futaba tensed up in her bed and sat straight up, rubbing the crust from her eyes. “Curry..?”

Airi smiled. “Mhm. Ojisan sent some over from the cafe.”

Stilling once she realized who was talking to her, Futaba slowly turned her head in her direction, eyes wide, before yanking the blanket over her head. “A-A-A-Airi-nee..!” She yelped, voice muffled by the comforter. “What are you doing here?!”

Airi stared at the huddled figure under the blanket before pursing her lips. “…Why do you call me that?” She asked hesitantly. “I mean, I don’t mind, but it’s a bit strange that you’re calling me something so familiar.”

The bump shuffled farther away, hitting the cardboard boxes that lined the wall next to the bed. “…Um...You don’t remember?” She yelped, voice muffled by the comforter. “What are you doing here?!”

Airi stared at the huddled figure under the blanket before pursing her lips. “…Why do you call me that?” She asked hesitantly. “I mean, I don’t mind, but it’s a bit strange that you’re calling me something so familiar.”

Airi blinked. “Huh..? Remember what?” She couldn’t see the younger girl’s face, but the blanket crumbled slightly as if her head had dipped down.

“Oh…” The disappointment was apparent with her voice cracking. “…Never mind.”

Airi frowned and decided to take a seat on the bed. Reaching out with one hand, she gently petted the top of the mound where she assumed Futaba’s head to be. “I’m sorry…”

“Why?” She asked quietly. “You don’t even know why you’re sorry…”

“I’m sorry for disappointing you,” Airi corrected. “I’m not sure why you’re asking me if I remember. Can you tell me what it is that I’m supposed to remember?”
The blanket moved, and she felt a slight tremor from it. “...Not what,” Futaba refuted weakly. “Who.”

Airi furrowed her brow. “Who?”

A sniffle came from the mound, startling her. “...Me.”

She stared at the blanket for a few moments, mouth opening then closing then opening again. “Huh..? What do you mean? Of course I remember you. The others and I helped you inside your Palace-”

“Not that!” Futaba shouted, her voice bouncing around the small room, leaving them in a heavy tension. “...You don’t remember. I get it. It’s fine,” She mumbled, though her voice shook. “Can you go?”

Airi frowned. “But-”

“JUST LEAVE!”

The room was silent now, but that absence of noise was louder than anything.

Staring at her with wide eyes, Airi bit her lip and turned away, a stab of hurt going straight through her heart. Seemed she couldn’t help everyone, not matter how hard she tried...

With a sigh, she stood up from the bed, heading to grab her cello case when a noise caught her ears. Quick gasps broke through the silence, the breathing shaky as if-

Airi quickly turned around and tore off the blanket.

Futaba was huddled into a ball, her entire body trembling as she grasped her head. Tears fell from her clenched eyes and she inhaled and exhaled too quickly, face reddening in an unhealthy shade. “Hah...Hhh...”

Airi resisted the urge to curse. A panic attack. “Futaba-chan!” She was about to reach out to help her but stopped at the last moment, knowing that being touched could cause her to react negatively, especially in her state. Desperate now, she looked around the small room to see what could help. Hydroxyzine? Aromatherapy? She didn’t carry any peppermint oil on her unless she was going into Mementos.

Dammit! What could she do?

“M-Music...”

She looked back down at Futaba who gripped her arms, trying to breathe. “Music...” She choked out, coughing a bit afterward. Music?

Quickly grabbing her case, Airi unclasped it and took out her cello. It was still tuned from earlier, and she didn’t have time to worry about it. Taking a seat on the computer chair, she began plucking a few gentle notes, her eyes never leaving that small and vulnerable figure just a few feet away. It seemed to help but it wasn’t enough.

Futaba was beginning to sway in her spot, and her eyes were half lidded, not seeing anything.

Airi clenched her jaw. What could she play? She had told herself she wanted to help others with her music. Was there anything that could calm the younger girl?
A memory came to her from just three weeks ago of her playing for Akira, saying she hoped it would help with nerves. Could she...

Taking a deep breath, she straightened her back and dragged her bow against the strings, starting slow and changing the notes to a deeper pitch. The sound pierced through the gasps, drowning them out.

Glazed eyes slowly moved to the musician, trying to focus on her even though her own blood screamed in her ears.

Airi smiled tenderly in her direction, letting the song do its work. It was soft and airy, letting her know it was OK, just breathe and be calm. She was here for her.

Letting the melody wash over her, Futaba tried her best to take slow breaths. It was loud enough to pierce through the foggy feeling in her head, and yet still serene enough to help calm her heart. The adrenaline rush left her even more fatigued than before, and she sagged against the boxes that made a makeshift wall next to her bed. This was the song. It was even better heard in person.

“Ai...ri...Nee…” She breathed out, her panic finally passing.

Letting the notes fade when the younger girl was well and truly relaxed, Airi leaned her cello and bow against the mini-fridge and stood up, slowly approaching the bed. “It’s OK, Futaba-chan…” She soothed. “Everything is OK now…”

Carefully taking a seat on the bed, she rubbed her back, up and down, in a reassuring manner. She didn’t know what had triggered the younger girl into a panic attack. Maybe it was her. Maybe her presence was just too much, or whatever she thought was too distressing.

Futaba’s breathing evened out, and her eyes were closed.

Assuming that she was close to sleeping, Airi decided with a heavy heart to just let her rest. She had done enough damage today...

Guiding her back down on the mattress, Airi was about to get up when a hand snatched her wrist, and she looked back down. “Airi-nee…” Futaba breathed out weakly, eyes still closed. “Don’t leave me again…”

Letting out a slow breath, Airi stayed in her seat and used her other hand to pet her head. “I won’t.”

Reassured that she wasn’t actually leaving, Futaba slipped into slumber again, soft snores leaving her open mouth.

Airi watched her for a while, her hand never ceasing its caress. Why...? Why had she had such a reaction to her leaving? And she didn’t remember her? She had never met Futaba before this summer...right?

Her phone buzzed and she quickly slid the screen, lest it wakes up the sleeping hacker.

R: Hey, is Futaba still asleep? It’s been a whole day already.
An: You’re way too impatient...
Ma: Calm down.
Ak: We just have to wait.
Y: Yes. Let us drink some tea to calm our minds.
Y: Oh, some rice crackers with the tea would be lovely as well.
Ai: I bought some yesterday. They’re in the snack cabinet.
Ai: Futaba woke up for a little bit but she went back to bed.
R: Whoa! Are you there right now?
Ai: Ojisan asked me to take care of her until she finally regains her strength.

She glanced at Futaba, noting just how small she really was. For a fifteen year old, she was very flat chested, and her build was tiny. Judging by that vision of Wakaba they saw inside the Palace, it’s not genetic for her to be so petite. It must mean she had starved as well, but during a critical period of growth.

Airi had been lucky in that she had school lunches to fill her. Futaba hadn’t been in school for a while now it seemed, and judging by that mountain of trash next to her closet that consisted of empty chip bags and energy drinks, she hadn’t been eating healthy either. Sojiro enabled this, even if he didn’t like it.

Ai: It could take a while. She’s not getting the right nutrients.
Ma: Should I come over to help?
Ma: I should be free most of the week.
Ai: Let’s give it a few days. I don’t want to crowd her.
Ai: She’s freaked out enough from just me.
Ak: Keep us updated.
Y: Perhaps she could do with some tea.
An: Er, I don’t think that’ll help...

Putting her phone away, she looked back down at the sleeping girl who still had a grip on her right hand, and then at the untouched curry she left on the computer desk. What to do…

Something shook her shoulder and Airi scrunched up her face, slowly opening her eyes. “Huh..?”

The first thing she saw was Sojiro’s frown. He was stood over her with his arms crossed. “You know,” He began, exasperated. “When I asked if you could help with Futaba, I didn’t mean to fall asleep with her.”

Airi slowly blinked, sitting up from the slumped over position she was in. She had fallen asleep? Checking her phone, she realized it was now 10PM, four hours after she had arrived. She then turned her head to check on Futaba, who was still sleeping peacefully.

Airi sighed. “Sorry, Ojisan,” She whispered. “I was going to leave after I brought her curry, but she had a panic attack and asked me to stay.” She bit her lip. “Does she frequently have attacks like that?”

Sighing heavily, he took a seat on the computer chair. “Not as frequently before, but they do happen,” He answered her quietly, not wanting to wake up his daughter. “It’s been a while, though. They happened more often when she first came here.” His lips twisted into a bitter scowl. “She’s had a lot of problems, and most of the time I can’t help her...I’m glad you were here for her this time.”

Airi softened. “Of course. I don’t know her well but she’s already wormed herself into my heart.”
Xihe chuckled inside her soul. Hm?

Sojiro rubbed the back of his head. “Anyway, it’s late. You should’ve gone home hours ago. Go on, I’ll take care of the rest.”

Chapter End Notes

The two songs Airi played: FFX-2 Lightwaves and Your Lie In April's I Appoint My Friend A As My Accompanist

Mishima rank 9
Chapter Notes

A lot of people have been asking about my interest in P5R, so I should probably put this here: No, I'm not really interested. It's intriguing to see the updates, but I have yet to feel any excitement for any of the news, so overall I'm not really interested except maybe in egg boy.

Regarding a re-write to include P5R, my answer is a **BIG** **hell no**. If you've been following this fic for a while, or have arrived while it was on hiatus, you'll see how much i've been struggling to write for this, so there's **no way** that I'll put myself through the torture again just to include a few other characters for a rerelease that I'm, again, not interested in lmao

I love this fic and I love what p5 has introduced to me, but I don't think I will be writing more for this series once this fic is done. Whenever that'll be lol.

Thank you all for 1600+ kudos though! That's an amazing achievement!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

----7/31, SUNDAY, DAYTIME, YONGENJAYA BACKSTREETS

Airi wiped her forehead of sweat, and her other hand continued to stir the stew.

After yesterday, she knew that feeding Futaba with something nutritious and easy to digest was the best way to deal with her constant need for sleep. She could simply drink this up and go back to sleep, letting her body absorb all the nutrients she needed to increase her energy.

The stew held potatoes, tomatoes, greens, beans, herbs, and chicken bones with chunks of beef. Beef was the only meat she could think of that would work for a nutritious stew. Pork would get tough and chicken would attain a dry texture.

Letting it simmer for the next five hours in a slow cooker, she took out her phone and tilted her head at the new message. “A movie..?”

“I realize this isn’t the best time to relax,” Makoto began, slightly shy and awkward. “But this movie came out recently and I thought it would be worthwhile to spend time together.”

They were all gathered in front of the movie theater on Central Street, dressed in their casual summer clothes. It was busy since it was a weekend, with plenty of shoppers hanging around. Makoto had already been waiting here when they all arrived.

“I’ve been looking forward to this for some time, so…” Makoto squirmed in her spot, keeping her
head down. Ryuji laced his hands behind his head. “What movie is it? I’ve been itchin’ to see something anyway…”

Makoto smiled. “Ryu ga Gotoku 3. It’s directed by a famous director, that’s why.”

He perked up. “Oh seriously?!” He grinned widely. “Hell yeah! Let’s go before the seats are all taken!” He rushed ahead inside the movie theater without waiting for any of them.

Ann groaned, holding a head to her forehead. “Why does he always rush ahead…Ryuji!” She ran in after him.

Yusuke crossed his arms. “Ryu ga Gotoku, you say? ‘Like a dragon.’ It sounds like an interesting concept.” A smile slowly spread on his face. “Let us see what this famous director has to offer.”

Airi smiled. “I’m up for it. Thanks for inviting us, Mako.”

Makoto reddened. “M-Mako..?” She beamed, cheeks red. “Yes! Let’s!”

Akira chuckled and took out his wallet. “We’ll make it a team treat, then.”

Once they paid for their tickets and somehow found amazing seats right in the middle of the theater, they were ready for the movie.

Makoto was sat in the middle with her back straight, fists clenched with anticipation. Ryuji constantly shoved popcorn into his mouth, occasionally letting Ann grab some from the bucket before yanking it back possessively. Yusuke sat with his arms and legs crossed, ready to critique whatever was going to come on the screen. Akira offered to share his popcorn with Airi since she didn’t want to ruin her appetite, and occasionally held a piece out for Morgana inside his bag.

The movie soon started and Makoto gasped, eyes sparkling with excitement.

They all turned to observe her, not expecting the usually mature council president to get excited about movies.

Airi smiled to herself. Seemed she was an action lover.

“So the money from the clan has disappeared...again.”

“Don’t think you’ll be accepted back into the clan so easily! They put out a hit for you!”

“Kiryu-chaaan! Let’s play a game...of dodging bullets!”

“On top of the Millenium Tower? I’m on my way.”

“Kiryu...Let’s settle this, once and for all.”

“Agreed...This has gone on long enough.”

Makoto was practically vibrating in her seat as the action packed movie went on, with plenty of gun fights to hand-to-hand combat, finally ending with a scene of Kiryu walking away from the city that lauded and villinized him.

As the credits rolled, the lights came back on and people began leaving the theater. Stopping in the hallway, Makoto finally realized her behavior and ducked her head. “Um, I’m sorry for dragging
everyone here. It just seemed weird to see a yakuza film by myself…”

Ryuji grinned. “Hell naw! That movie was so cool!” He held up his fists. “The way Kiryu was all pumped and shit to save those people, and the way he went against the clan. Dude, this one was so much better than the last one!”

Makoto perked up. “Yes! I found the last one to be disappointing as well. They were trying to add in so many storylines that it became too confusing.” Pausing, she held a hand over her mouth. “Sorry, it seems strange that a girl would be so...enthusiastic over things like this.”

Akira raised a brow. “Why? You like it. There’s nothing strange about being passionate about things.”

Yusuke nodded in agreement. “Passion like that should never be restrained. How else would your real self show?”

Makoto ‘oh’ed. “My real self…” She smiled slightly. “That’s right. I had promised to be truer to myself…Then.” She took a deep breath. “I like action movies!” She confessed with a red face. “I really like martial arts ones, too!”

Ann grinned. “There you go!” She linked arms with her. “Next time, just call us up without feeling embarrassed!”

Airi smiled and linked her other side. “Yeah. We’re all friends, and it was nice to be able to do something that didn’t feel tense.”

Touched by their acceptance, Makoto nodded and smiled shyly. “Right...Let’s go get some lunch!”

Once arriving home near sunset, Airi packed up the now finished soup to bring to Sojiro’s house. She was anxious about doing this again, biting her lip hard enough she winced from the pain. She didn’t want to freak Futaba out like yesterday.

Grabbing the keys from the cafe, she headed to the barista’s home and let herself in. Toeing off her shoes, she brought the broth to the kitchen to transfer it to a bowl, adding a scoop of rice to make it more filling. Bringing the bowl upstairs, she knocked before entering the trash-filled room.

She frowned at how cold it was. Had the hacker changed the AC? It wasn’t healthy to sleep in cold temperatures.

Placing the bowl down on the computer desk, she grabbed the AC remote and turned it up. It was still cool but not as much as before.

Turning to the sleeping figure on the bed, she hesitated for a moment before she shook her. “Futaba-chan. You have to eat.” Like yesterday, the hacker didn’t even respond, too deep inside her dreams to hear her.

Shaking her again, Airi finally got a response.

Futaba slowly cracked her eyes open and groaned. “...Sleep...”

“You can go back to sleep once you’ve eaten,” Airi stated quietly. She held out the bowl of soup
and rice to her. “Here. Try to eat as much as you can.”

Futaba stared at her, not making a sound, but she slowly took the bowl with her smaller hands. She looked down at the contents with a pout. “...Do I have to?”

Airi nodded. “I made the stew for you especially. It’s very healthy for you.”

Sighing, Futaba scrunched up her face in preparation and began to eat, tilting the bowl so that the soup would slide straight down her throat without touching her tongue. She even managed to finish the whole thing without a single pause, licking her lips once she was done.

Airi took the bowl back. “Was it OK?”

Without looking at her, Futaba nodded shyly. “Yeah...”

Not wanting to push her, Airi straightened up. “You can go back to sleep now. I’ll come by tomorrow with another bowl, OK?”

“...Kay.”

Disheartened by the curt answers, Airi did her best to smile at the younger girl before leaving, closing the door behind her with a click.

Futaba stared at the door before flopping back down onto the mattress. “...Why do you care so much if you don’t remember?” She whispered, already closing her eyes once more. “Why? Why...Airi-nee. Why don’t you remember me...”

----8/2, TUESDAY, DAYTIME, YONGENJAYA

Rolling his neck, Akira got up from bed and changed out of his sleepwear. Yesterday after the movie, he had gone to help Makoto. She had been receiving texts from that Tsukasa guy who was dating Eiko, and had heard negative rumors about him. Something about tricking girls into prostitution, or something of the sort. She had wished she could ask her father for advice since he had always been her rock, but she knew that she had to tackle this with her own brain because Eiko was her friend.

Akira had made sure to call Airi after, letting her know he wasn’t doing anything with the council president that she didn’t want him to.

Airi only laughed quietly and called him Mr. Faithful, knowing that she was his only love.

It didn’t sound as convinced as he had hoped, though. Did she still doubt his fidelity?

He had also headed back to Shinjuku to help out Chihaya’s fortune telling booth. She still didn’t know how he was changing people’s futures, but honestly, did that need special fortune telling powers? Belief in one’s self can change everything, and that business lady clearly needed some confidence. That was all there was to it.

His phone buzzed and he took it out.

M: Man, this is crazy.
M: I can’t keep up with the influx of posts.
M: Isn’t it tough being popular, Phantom Thieves?
M: Anyway, here’s the latest lead I have.
M: This one seems to be about someone...abusing their power?
M: I wonder if it was written by a former employee of the company in question.
M: Apparently one of the higher-ups has been claiming the achievements of his subordinates as his own.
M: That really sucks.
Ak: Kind of typical from a business.
M: You can’t seriously just be accepting of that!
M: Now, I know the name of the company, but I don’t have any details on the person himself.
M: The company’s over in Shinjuku, so try asking around places where business men could hang out.
M: A bar at night might be a start. That should be a good place to get more info on this situation.
M: I hope this isn’t asking too much of you...Sorry, I’ll look for another one, just in case.

Morgana jumped on his shoulder and read the texts. “It would be a shame to let this one slip away. This is a textbook example of corporate exploitation.” He hummed glumly. “It might be difficult to get the employees to open up to you, though...Maybe if you get a job at a bar, you’ll be able to learn some information.”

Akira sweatdropped. “Which means working at Crossroads...Well.” He exhaled. “It can’t be as bad as Ore no Beko, right?”

Before that happened, he was going to go help out Yusuke again. He mentioned he had wanted to go to a church...

Airi scrunched up her nose as she stepped into Shinjuku, bright neon lights shining from the party district and the hot muggy air slapping her in the face. Hanasaki’s Flowers actually had a sister store in the area and she had to deliver the orchids in her arms because they had run out.

Dodging the advertisers, she finally arrived at the flower shop and dropped off her delivery. The proprietor thanked her before shooing her out, saying a young lady like her would be like blood in the water with sharks around.

Airi grimaced at the analogy but nodded.

Walking out, she stopped when she caught sight of Crossroads. She hadn’t been back for a while...

Walking to the bar, she opened the door, blinking rapidly when the disco ball shined into her eyes at the right angle.

Ohya was there as usual, and Lala was behind the counter in her usual customary hostess kimono. There were a few adults in the bar, all of them wearing business attire from a long day of work. What was unexpected was seeing her boyfriend behind the counter, an apron on his front.

Was he working here now? Was this like, his third job?

Walking in, Lala caught sight of her and waved her in. “Kimisawa-chan! Welcome, welcome. I can’t serve you alcohol but I can give you a soft drink?”
Airi smiled and waved. “A milk tea is fine if you have it.”

Lala nodded and turned to Akira who had just finished talking to one of the adults, unaware of the new customer. “Kurusu-kun, a milk tea!”

He perked up and nodded, crouching down to the mini fridge behind the bar.

While he was down there, Airi took a seat, watching him over the counter with an amused smile.

Finishing the drink, he turned around and placed the cold glass in front of her, keeping his head down. “Your drink,” he murmured respectfully.

“Thank you, dear.”

His head shot up at the familiar voice and he stared at her with wide eyes, mouth hanging open.

“A-Airi?”

She waved a small hello. “Yes, that is my name.” She smiled a cheshire smile, cupping her hands around the cool glass. “I would hope you know it since you were moaning it a week ago.”

He sputtered for a second before awkwardly adjusting his glasses, cheeks red at being reminded of their “fun nights.” “I just didn’t expect to see you here...” He narrowed his eyes. “Did you come here alone?”

She laughed sheepishly. “I’m not alone anymore, right?” She countered, dodging his question. “I was doing a delivery for the flower shop and thought I’d stop by.” She sweated under his disapproving frown which only grew deeper. “...I love you?”

Rolling his eyes, he checked the time and noted it was the end of his shift. No one had spoke about their manager or boss being unfair, so he’d have to try again some other night.

Lala walked up to him behind the counter and he bowed. “Good job, Kurusu-kun,” she praised. “Not bad for your first night here. You may just become my best employee.”

Airi perked up, finishing her milk tea with a satisfied sigh. “If he works here again, would he have to crossdress?” She asked, trying to keep the hope out of her voice.

Akira gave her a dirty look while Lala laughed, covering her mouth with the sleeve of her kimono. “He wouldn’t have to...though a cute boy like him would be absolutely darling in a dress.” She winked, fluttering her heavily done eyelids.

Airi sighed dreamily. “I think he would be so beautiful...”

She admired just how smooth his skin was, how captivating his eyes were with his thick lashes. Her boyfriend was just so gorgeous and he would look amazing in a dress. She would take so many photos.

Akira scowled petulantly at her daydreaming. “I’m not doing it unless you’re doing it.” He countered without thinking.

“Deal!” Airi immediately cheered, laughing at the realization on his face that quickly morphed into horror. She’d get to see her boyfriend in a dress! “Should I let you wear one of mine or should we shop for one?” She asked excitedly.

Akira only sweatdropped. Only he could have a girlfriend who could pull the rug from under his
feet like this. Taking off his apron, he took his bag with Morgana inside and shouldered it before leading Airi out of the bar, taking the train back to Shibuya. “You wanna do anything right now?” He checked the time on his phone as they walked out onto Central Street. “It’s not too late…” His stomach growled and he winced.

Airi tilted her head and smiled. “Sounds like you’re hungry, so we can go eat. I’m a little hungry, too.”

Looking around the busy street, they decided to go to Big Bang Burger. Walking into the half empty fast food chain, Airi ordered a small burger and fries for herself before taking a seat at one of the tables.

When Akira walked up to the cash register, the employee beamed. “Welcome to Big Bang Burger, open twenty-four hours a day because there’s no day or night in space! I see you have a 2nd Mate Badge on your bag.” She gestured to the pin that dangled from his purse. “Would you like to try your luck once more and take on the second Big Bang Challenge? The universe awaits!”

Akira sweated. Should he..? He barely survived last time, but then again, with how cheap it was, it was a steal even if he didn’t finish.

He paused. Now he sounded like Airi on saving money.

“Sure, I’ll take it.”

The employee grinned. “Great! That’ll be ¥500.” He handed over the money and received a receipt in return. “Please take a seat and we’ll bring out your order shortly!”

Nodding, Akira walked over to the table Airi had occupied and sat down on the opposite side, rolling his neck and cracking his knuckles.

Airi looked up from her phone and her eyes widened, recognizing his actions as similar ones he performed only three months ago. “Oh no...Don’t tell me you actually-”

The employee from before walked up to their table and clasped her hands together in front of her. “Thank you for your patience! Your aim this time will be...The Gravity Burger!”

Another employee came up, struggling to hold the tray in his hands, and placed it down on the table with a loud bang.

Every eye in the restaurant was glued to the massive behemoth that they tried to pass for a burger. Once again, the bun was about as large as an extra size pizza, two giant patties of beef which must be the equivalent of half a cow, and a plethora of lettuce, tomatoes, cheese, and onions.

Akira subtly gulped. It was bigger than his head…

“This is the Gravity Burger, a burger so large that it has its own gravitational field,” The employee explained in a dramatic tone. “It will not be overcome as easily as the Comet Burger, but should you conquer this challenge, you will receive a fabulous prize.”

Airi gave her boyfriend an encouraging smile from her seat across from him. “You can do it, Akira! I’m cheering for you!”

Akira stared at her sweet smile, full of love and support for him, and he nodded, squaring his shoulders. His gaze sharpened and his mouth hardened into a thin line, handing his bag with Morgana in it over to his lover.
Airi sweatdropped, hugging their bags together on her lap. He was taking this way too seriously.

“It’s time to get the thirty-minute challenge started!” The employee stated, taking out a timer from her apron. “Ready...Go!”

Immediately grabbing the large burger, Akira began his perilous journey, tearing through the mass of greasy fast food with his teeth. ‘There’s so much lettuce...and the meat is cold…’ It wasn’t the greatest thing ever, but he forced himself to keep eating. He couldn’t lose face.

Morgana sneaked his head out of the zipper and winced at the messy sight. “There’s no time for chewing...You’ll just have to swallow!”

Another employee came up with Airi’s much smaller order and she began eating as well, occasionally feeding bits to the feline.

She looked down at her measly earth burger and then up at the gravity burger that was slowly but surely being devoured, and she couldn’t help but admire Akira. ‘Where does he put it all..?’ Did he have a black hole for a stomach? Because there was barely an ounce of fat on him as it was.

Choking down the last bite, Akira coughed, his throat finally clear of food. He did it again...somehow.

“Holy shit...!” A guy sitting two tables away gaped at the now empty tray. “I can’t believe he did it!”

“I know right!” The girl with him exclaimed. “That looked so intense, he must’ve been glad he had his girlfriend to cheer him on.”

Blushing, Airi beamed at her boyfriend who looked like he was about to hurl, his eyes glazed over.

If she recalled correctly, someone had said that as well last time, back when they had seemed to be dancing around one another. It was almost absurd, just thinking how much had changed in just a few short months. She hoped for many more months together.

Taking out her phone, Airi grinned. “Say cheese.”

Akira barely looked up, face smeared with ketchup and mustard with a piece of lettuce hanging on his cheek, and grimaced when she took a photo of him. “Why.”

The employee clapped. “Congratulations on conquering our second Big Bang Challenge!” They announced gratuitously. “We award you with a 1st Mate Badge!” She held out a small box with a badge inside which he took. “There’s only one more challenge that awaits you. Best of luck!”

Bowing, the employee left them alone to go back behind the counter.

“Wow…” Morgana regarded him with awe. “You devoured that thing! The speed and tactics were so impressive!” He wrinkled his nose. “I’m full just watching you…”

The other patrons within the restaurant slowly returned to their meals, chattering to themselves about what a feat that was, and Akira slowly slid down in his seat. “Ugh…”

It started out OK, but by the end of it, he was barely hanging onto his sanity. He could feel his throat swell as if he wanted to throw up but he somehow held it in and reached over to the table to grab a napkin.
He missed several times, his palm smacking the tray instead, and Airi sighed.

Getting up from her seat, she shuffled into the booth and sat next to him, letting him rest against her. Taking a napkin from the tray, she gently wiped his face clean. “There, my little baby,” She cooed playfully, snickering when he groaned.

He looked up at her with a pitiful expression. “Kiss it better?” He mumbled.

She gave him a look. “I’m not kissing you, not after witnessing you down an entire gigantic burger.”

“Damn it…”

A loud clatter caught their attention and they looked behind the counter to see one of the employees had tripped and dropped a metal tray. The employee looked overworked; dark circles underneath their eyes and the soles of their shoes were completely worn through.

Now that they looked closer, they noticed that almost all the employees in the kitchen seemed exhausted.

Akira frowned, ignoring his food coma for a minute. He knew working in a fast food restaurant was tough, but only because Ore no Beko was understaffed. BBB had more than enough workers, so what was going on..?

“Something smells fishy…” Morgana murmured, narrowing his eyes at the employees.

The three of them didn’t notice another young lady frowning sadly at the sight, her curly brown hair hiding her fair face from the other patrons. She clenched her hands on the hem of her mint green dress before walking out of the restaurant, with no one the wiser.

Chapter End Notes

makoto rank 5
yusuke rank 5
Chapter 180

Chapter Notes

Oops I forgot to update again >A<

See the end of the chapter for more notes

----8/3, WEDNESDAY, YONGENJAYA, RAINY

After a very intimate night with the toilet in Leblanc, Akira forced himself out of bed the next morning.

Groaning, he stretched his aching limbs and ruffled his hair, trying to keep himself awake.

Constant thudding sounded out next to him as the sky had split open early in the morning hours, gray clouds covering the sun. It was raining hard today, his windows splattered with never ending water.

Staring up at the dreadful weather from his quiet room, he silently wondered what he could do today.

It felt...weird, to take a day off.

Ever since he came to Tokyo, he had been on the move nonstop. Becoming a phantom thief, making real friends for the first time in his life, taking out a rapist, a fraudulent artist, a mob boss. Each day was spent either helping someone or finding some way to improve himself.

He glanced over at the daily log on the table of the workbench.

He had written his daily activities down as instructed, but he had omitted so much of what really happened in his life that it may as well be describing another person. He had written down that he went to school, the courses were hard but manageable, and his friends were great.

Yet, he couldn’t mention just how much he appreciated his time here, in a home where he was welcome in, with friends he belonged with, and the hard grueling days he spent fighting in the Metaverse, shedding his own sweat and blood to the cause of saving others.

Each injury was one that hurt in ways he wasn’t familiar with out here. A searing burn, the agony of shaved flesh, bleeding wounds, blows that could knock him out in an instant.

He looked down at his hands, at the slight calluses forming on his palms.

His fingers were long and slim, and the lines etched deep in his skin. A man’s hands. The hands that had ended countless lives of Shadows with a quick flick of the wrist, but they were also the hands that protected his friends.

If it weren’t for them, he doubted he would be where he was now: A person whom he could take pride in. A person who didn’t hide, who fought for what he thought was right.

He clenched them tightly.
No matter what, so long as his team-- his family as Airi always said-- was by his side, he could accomplish anything in this cruel world.

His phone rang, and he picked it up off the windowsill, looking at who was calling him. Ryuji?

He accepted the call and placed it next to his ear. “Hello?”

“Yo! It’s rainin’ pretty hard, so I was thinkin’ I’d come over and we can hang out! It’s been a while since we could relax, and the movie didn’t really count.”

Akira smiled at his best friend’s enthusiasm. “Sure, but what do we do?”

“I could bring some manga! The next volume of My Hero Academia is out and it’s pretty good! I could also bring my PS2 if you want. I’m pretty sure that old TV you got in your room can handle it.”

Akira chuckled. “Sounds like a plan.”

“Cool! I’ll be there in a bit.”

Hanging up, Akira looked around, finally realizing his constant companion was suspiciously absent.

He shrugged it off. Morgana knew how to take care of himself.

When Ryuji arrived thirty minutes later, the ex-runner closed and shook his umbrella in the doorway before entering the cafe. He held a bag full of plastic wrapped manga as well as the old Sony game platform he promised to bring.

Sojiro only raised a brow from behind the counter and crossed his arms. “Make sure to keep it down, ya hear?”

Ryuji gave him a grin and a thumbs up. “No worries, Boss! I doubt you’ll get a lot of customers anyway, it’s really pourin’ out there.”

Akira smiled at his sass. “Yet you still came.”

Rolling his eyes, the barista shooed them upstairs where they would be out of the way.

Throwing himself on the couch, the ex-runner took out all his goodies. “So I got the latest volume for My Hero Academia, but then I realized I never asked if you were even into it, so I ended up bringing the first five volumes for you…” He rambled on and on while Akira brought over a chair.

He hadn’t caught up with any new manga or anime in a while, so it would be interesting to check out what was currently popular. The last thing he remembered reading was Bleach, but he had slowly lost interest after Aizen’s defeat. “I haven’t read My Hero Academia before, what’s it about?”

Mindful of his elder sister’s cooking downstairs, Yusuke quietly entered the Study and shut the
door behind him.

He looked at the corner of the medium sized room and grimaced at just how much of a contrast there was between the Study and his designated painting area.

The tarp underneath his easel had dozens of dried paint spots, showing just how often he was working in here. His canvases were stacked behind it on a new rack, some of them finished and some of them still in progress. The bookcase he had modified into his paint stand held countless tubes of acrylic and oil, as well as his multitude of different brushes. No matter how much effort he placed in taking care of it, the wood had become stained from drying brushes.

To his left were two bookcases filled with text he had never touched. He didn’t feel like he had a right to go near those since they had apparently belonged to the Kimisawas.

Taking a seat on the stool in front of the unfinished painting, he laced his fingers in front of him.

He could not even begin to describe just how grateful he was that she had opened her home to him. To have welcomed him in when she barely knew him, only of his “tragic” past. She had fed him, taken care of him, and had even accommodated his needs with art. He could admit to himself he had flourished here, in this house that he now called home.

His fingers tightened their grip. And yet had he been anything more than just a burden? He paid for his share of the utilities, and yet it didn’t feel enough to justify his presence here. He took up space, using what was supposed to be a guest futon for his own bed. He supposed he could move into the Study-- there was more than enough space if he was honest-- but she insisted that he slept away from it.

‘Peace of mind away from work.’ She had said.

Yusuke smiled to himself.

It wasn’t as though she was not a handle to live with as well. She spent an inordinate amount of time in the bath, leaving him less time to cleanse himself. She insisted on doing their laundry together to save money, even when his clothes held paint on them that could stain her own clothing. Her diet consisted of more meat than he was comfortable with, preferring more vegetables himself. He suppose it came from the fact that meat had been a luxury for her until recently.

She also played loudly.

Not that the melodies weren’t beautiful, but he quite liked the peace and quiet of the house. As soon as she began to practice on her cello, the entire house practically vibrated from the instrument’s music. He swore he could even feel the vibrato through the floors.

She was not an ideal roommate, but...he wouldn’t have it any other way.

He was wanted here, not treated like a machine to produce art. They had no blood to connect them, but he was closer to her than any of the so-called “siblings” he had in the old atelier. There was no pressure from a demanding guardian to dampen their relationship like those had been. She accepted him for all that he was, even though he knew he appeared strange to the average person.

Akira as well. Their meeting had been turbulent to say the least, but they had become good friends. His leader was a person he could count on, as a thief and as a brother.

Yusuke picked up his brush, planning on finishing this one painting.
This would never be showcased in a gallery. He even admitted to himself that this would not garner him the reactions he wanted, but after watching her perform at Shibuya, he felt that he knew what he wanted to paint. It would be a thank you to his two closest friends.

Perhaps one day, he would be able to paint something for each of his friends.

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Even though it was raining, Airi felt that she still had to do her duty.

Opening her umbrella from her front step, she walked down the street to Leblanc, a thermos of soup in her bag. Grabbing the keys from Sojiro at the counter, he gestured up the stairs.

She paused when she walked up to the attic, surprised to see Ryuji here as well. He and Akira were both in the middle of a game, the case on the table labeling it as Street Fighter.

Ryuji turned to her and perked up in his chair. “Oh hey Airi! Wanna play?”

Akira turned his head as well to see her at the edge of the stairwell.

Airi smiled and waved. “No thank you, I’m only here to grab Ojisan’s house keys. He mentioned you were here so I thought I’d say hi.”

Ryuji leaned his arm against the backrest of his chair. “Whaddya need his keys for?” He asked curiously, the match in the game already over.

Akira tilted his head. “You’ve been checking up on Futaba every day, right?”

Airi nodded, holding up her plastic bag with a thermos inside. “She still doesn’t have enough energy to stay awake for more than a few minutes a day, so I use that time to feed her.” She bit her lip worriedly. “I hope she’ll have enough energy before Medjed’s deadline arrives…”

Ryuji wilted in his seat. “Shit. That’s comin’ up soon, right?”

Akira sighed, putting his controller down. “Yeah. The 21st. We need her to do something by then.” He pursed his lips. “I don’t want to force her since she’s still so fragile, but she’s our only hope in this situation.”

Airi grimaced. It was up to her to hopefully get enough nutrients in the younger girl. “I’ll do my best.”

The leader grasped his chin thoughtfully. “I could go ask Dr. Takemi and see if she can provide us with some of that supplement she prescribed you when you were sick. She did say she’d help us.”

Ryuji furrowed his brow. “She did? I dunno, she seemed kind of aloof to me. We’d prolly have to pay for those drugs.”

Akira shook his head. “She’s in on our secret like Kawakami-sensei. She figured me out right before we went in for the Treasure.”

He winced when his best friend shouted right in his ear. “What?! When the hell were you gonna mention this?!”
Ryuji threw his controller down on the table where it landed with a noisy clack, and crossed his arms. “I could understand Kawakami ‘cause she knows, like, most of the team already, but the doctor?” He grimaced. “Ain’t it risky to have another adult know our secret about us being the Phantom Thieves?”

Airi placed a finger before her lips, making a shh noise. “Quiet, you don’t want Ojisan to hear that.” She sighed and grasped her arm. “It would be good to have her on our side since she’s our main supplier of medicine.”

Akira nodded in agreement. “Exactly. She’s grateful that we helped her out, so why not let her help us out now? If we ever get as bad as that time...” He glanced at the cellist with a guilty frown. “She can help us.”

But he would do everything in his power to make sure it never happened again.

Ryuji scrunched up his face but reluctantly nodded. “Guess you’re right...Hey, maybe if she’s gonna help us, she won’t charge us anymore?”

Akira sweatdropped. “If only...”

Giggling, Airi said bye and left the cafe once more, heading over to Sojiro’s house.

Letting herself into the quiet house, she did as she had done for several days: put the soup she made into a bowl, add rice to it, and brought it upstairs.

Knocking on the door, she slowly let herself in. She let out a silent sigh when she noticed Futaba was still in bed, bundled underneath her blanket with only a few strands of orange hair sticking out.

Placing the bowl on the computer desk, she looked around the room with a grimace. The floor was still littered with newspaper clippings and there was trash everywhere, especially piled in the corner next to the computer.

Bending down, Airi picked up one of them, a stab of pain in her heart when she realized these were all different news articles about her mother’s “suicide.” Every single one on the floor were from different news outlets, all detailing the same incident with different words. ‘Woman Commits Suicide In Front Of Daughter.’

Letting out a shaky sigh, Airi quickly gathered them up into a neat pile next to the metal rack of figures and books. Clearly these meant a lot to the young hacker, even though she could guess it probably added to her guilt when she was distorted.

Straightening up, Airi leaned over the sleeping figure and gently shook her. “Futaba-chan, time for food...”

Not receiving an answer as usual, she continued to shake her until she heard a small groan.

Curling into a ball under the blanket, Futaba hid herself from her. “G’way...”

Airi frowned down at the small lump underneath the comforter. “Futaba-chan, you know you need to eat. How else will you gain your strength?”

“D’n wanna...”

She sighed. “Please? For me? Or at least for Sojiro-ojisan. He’s worried about you...”
The blanket quieted, before Futaba peeked out at the edge like a turtle. “Why?” She muttered. “I’m just a burden…”

Airi frowned and slowly sat down on the edge of the bed. “I can’t speak for him, but...I know that I want to see you healthy and strong.” She smiled gently. “I want to see you outside, not just cooped up inside here.”

Scowling, the hacker hid back inside her fabric fortress. “Outside is scary…” Airi heard her say, even while muffled by the blanket. “People are scary…”

“That’s true….” Airi whispered, eyes glazed over. “I can’t deny that there aren’t monsters out there, but you know…” She slowly smiled. “You have your Persona by your side...Necronomicon, right? And you have me too. The Phantom Thieves are here for you.”

Futaba stayed silent, but she slowly shuffled herself out of her web of blankets and sat up, rubbing her face of crust.

Airi didn’t comment on the fact that her eyes were red, and only got up to bring her meal closer.

Taking it without a word, the young hacker quickly gulped it down, some of it dribbling from the corner of her mouth.

Grabbing the tissue box from the metal rack, Airi waited until she was done eating to wipe her mouth clean.

An embarrassed blush began to hue her cheeks and Futaba pouted. “I-I-I can do it m’self…” She muttered, snatching the tissue to furiously rub her face.

Airi only giggled. “Of course.” She stood back up with the empty bowl. “I’ll be back tomorrow.”

“...Can I have somethin’ else?”

Blinking, she turned around to stare at the younger girl. “Huh...?”

Futaba looked away, avoiding her gaze. “...I’m tired of veggie stew,” She confessed. “I want something else.”

Blinking, and blinking again, a smile began to spread on her face. “Sure.” Airi beamed. “I’ll try to vary it up for you.”

She was beginning to accept her.

Keeping her head down, the hacker burrowed herself deep into her blankets, most likely to sleep again.

Smiling fondly at the sight, Airi quietly closed the door behind her and left the house. She didn’t notice that the younger girl hadn’t fallen asleep yet, her gray purple eyes staring at nothing underneath the darkness of her comforter.

“You care about me but you don’t even remember me…” Futaba whispered to herself. “Are you just pitying me..?”

“Say hello, Futaba.” Wakaba gently nudged her daughter who stuck steadfastly behind her legs.

It was a bright and sunny day at the park, and one of the rare times Wakaba had taken a day off from her research.
Futaba only hid her face in her mother’s black pants, staring up at the stranger through her big glasses and letting her black hair hide how anxious she was.

Arihito laughed at her reaction, lines beginning to etch on his face from age and stress. “Your daughter is so cute, Wakaba-san!” He bent his knees a little to match the young girl’s height more. “Hi Futaba-chan, I’m Kimisawa Arihito! I’m your mommy’s assistant at work!”

He gestured to a little girl with pink hair off to the side picking dandelions from the grass. “That’s my daughter, Airi. She’s my little princess. Hime, come here!”

The head of rose strands perked up and turned around, a bundle of freshly picked flowers in her hands. She rushed over, doing her best not to get her pretty dress dirtied, and stopped next to her father.

“Dad, look at these!” Airi beamed, holding up her dandelions.

Arihito grinned. “They’re beautiful, hime-chan. Why don’t you give one to Futaba-chan?”

Wakaba chuckled, holding a hand to her mouth. “Airi-chan hasn’t changed since I last saw her. Still so lively and lovely.”

Arihito puffed up his chest with pride. “Of course, she’s my daughter!”

Airi blinked, finally catching sight of the other girl her age, and smiled brightly. She quickly walked closer but Futaba took a few steps back, shyly clenching her green overalls with her hands.

Airi stopped but held out one of the dandelions she picked. “Here! This one’s the prettiest!”

Futaba stared at her and then down at the offer and back up again. “Um…”

She looked up at her mother for help but Wakaba only smiled. “Go on, Futaba. Airi’s a good girl.”

Pouting slightly, the six year old looked back down at the slightly older girl and hesitantly reached out with one pudgy hand.

Airi grinned when her offer was taken. “Futaba, right? I’m Airi! Nice to meet you. Do you know what dandelions stand for?”

Slightly intimidated by her exuberance, Futaba glanced down at the flower in her hand, petals bright and yellow. “No..? I never researched flowers.”

“My mommy told me they mean love’s oracle, like the key to happiness or something!” Airi babbled, pulling at her braided ponytail to put a dandelion in it. “I think they fit you!”

Futaba slowly blinked and looked down at the flower again with new admiration. “Really? But you don’t even know me…”

Airi grinned. “I know you’re Futaba and you know I’m Airi! See? We know each other.”

Futaba looked up at her mother once more, and after receiving a nod and a smile, looked at Airi and grinned, showing one tooth missing. “Kay!”

Airi held out a hand to her. “Let’s go play!”

Futaba took her hand and let her be dragged toward the playground. “Can we have spaceships?”
Futaba blinked and tugged at an orange strand of hair.

Was that why she didn’t recognize her? Because she dyed her hair orange? But then she had seen her mother’s cognition inside her Palace, so...Why did it seem like she didn’t remember her at all?

Chapter End Notes

Ryuji being the otaku nerd of the group lmao

In case you didn't know, there is a spinoff fic focusing on Airi and Akira's AU lives at https://archiveofourown.org/works/15148361
I tend to update smaller things more often than big fics like this, since I'm so busy with school and life now.

I love and appreciate comments <3
Airi wiped her forehead of sweat.

Even though they had the AC on inside the house, she didn’t like using it while she was cooking. It would be a waste of electricity anyway.

Since Futaba had been ingesting soup and rice without any difficulties, she figured she could make more solid food for her.

She smiled happily to herself when she remembered that the younger girl had requested it out of her own volition. Futaba was getting comfortable with her, and maybe soon she can ask why she had called her “Airi-nee.”

She stirred the pan, making sure to add water to make it a flurry.

Thicken the sauce, add already cooked mushrooms and chicken, sprinkle some chopped garlic and onions-

“Aneki.”

She looked up from the pot to see Yusuke appear in the entrance of the kitchen.

“Are you free right now?” He asked, shouldering his bag. “There is a movie I wish to see and I invited Akira along.”

Airi bit her lip and turned back to the pot where it was slowly coming to a boil, chunks of potato floating at the surface.

She could leave this to simmer for a while, and she did want to spend her summer making good memories with her family. On the other hand, Futaba and Sojiro, and even the rest of the team, were counting on her to get Futaba out of bed and healthy again.

Then again, she couldn't rush, either.

“...Sure,” she decided to acquiesce. "Just give me a few minutes.”

In the corner of her eye, she noticed Yusuke light up and walk out of her peripheral toward the entrance way.

She idly wondered what movie they were going to watch. It had to be something good if Yusuke was excited for it.

Akira sat back in his seat inside the theater, arms crossed, watching the big screen in front of him.
He didn’t think this was what Yusuke meant when he said he wanted to watch a movie, but in hindsight, it did make sense.

“I love him, but every day I’m learning. All my life, I’ve only been pretending. Without me, his world will go on turning—a world that’s full of happiness that I have never known.”

“Do you hear the people sing. Do you hear the people sing?”

“Here they talked of revolution, here it was they lit the flame. Here they sang about tomorrow, and tomorrow never came.”

It was all in English so he didn’t quite understand the words spoken, but the Japanese subtitles at the bottom helped.

He looked over to his left where Yusuke watched the screen avidly, never blinking. He was very into the movie.

He then looked to his right where Airi was also sat with wide eyes, mouth slightly open. She wasn’t reading the subtitles at the bottom, and her right hand kept moving—Oh.

He tilted his head when he realized she was tapping the armrest during the same timing as the song that was being sung. When the music swelled, she sat up straighter. When it became softer, she would slowly sway her head as if she was enveloped by the melody.

Akira smiled fondly at the sight and refocused back on the movie.

Even now, he was still learning new things about her.

Once the movie ended, both siblings let out a groan of disappointment and Akira snickered at their reactions. The other moviegoers had already left, but both Yusuke and Airi slowly walked out in a daze.

“That was amazing…” Airi breathed out, slowly taking another step out of the movie theater and into Central Street. “The music was so…”

“Magnificent,” Yusuke finished for her, eyes lit up with inspiration and awe. “Not only the music, but the composition of each shot, the cinematic transition from dialogue to song, the costumes, all of it culminated into…” He stopped right outside and turned to his sister and leader with his arms spread out in joy. “A work of art!”

Akira smiled indulgently. “It was pretty good, even though I didn’t understand much of the English. Thanks for inviting me.” He noticed some fiddling to his right and turned to see Airi hunch her shoulders. “What’s wrong?”

“Uh…” She bit her lip before smiling sheepishly. “What was the movie about again..?”

The two young men gaped at her. “Wha-?” Yusuke began then immediately paused, staring at her in disbelief. “...Are you implying you sat through two hours of what was most likely this year’s—nay, this decade’s best film, and didn’t remember anything?”

She pouted. “Hey, I remember the music! I just…” Her eyes darted to the side. “Got too engrossed in the songs and...didn’t really remember the plot.” She laughed sheepishly. “We can buy it when it comes out on DVD and I’ll re-watch it then.”

Yusuke gave her an unimpressed look but sighed. “Very well.”
Akira snickered. “Can I expect to hear your renditions sometime soon?”

Airi brightened and clapped her hands together in delight. “Maybe! But with something like that, I’d need an accompanist. It just wouldn’t feel complete without a piano and I don’t know anyone who plays.” At that, she paused and gave them both an appraising look. “Unless..?”

Yusuke shook his head.

Akira rubbed the back of his neck. “I know how to play a little but it’s been years. I wouldn’t be good at it.” At her crestfallen expression, he hurriedly added, “But maybe one day when I have some time, I can pick it up again.”

He took her hand into his own and tugged her closer, pecking her bare forehead. “I’d much rather watch the real musician at work.”

Heating up, Airi smiled shyly. “I’ll be sure not to disappoint.”

Her phone beeped in her purse and she took it out, gasping when she saw the time. “Ah! I should be heading back to feed Futaba-chan. I’ll leave you two on your date.” She winked, ignoring Akira’s immediate glower at her insinuation and ducked down a stairway to the subway.

Sighing and giving up, Akira turned back to his pseudo-brother. “So? Anything else you want to do since we’re out?”

Yusuke blinked but glanced away, toward the direction of Shibuya’s closest residential district. “…There is,” he murmured quietly, his joyous mood from the film slowly disappearing and replaced with a somber frown. “If you don’t mind a moment of your time.”

Catching onto his tone, Akira nodded and followed him through the thick and noisy throng of shoppers.

The crowd slowly thinned out, disappearing completely once they left the busy shopping district. Large houses loomed over them in the quiet and wealthy neighborhood, each one more impressive than the last.

Turning the corner, the immaculate image of the neighborhood was abruptly cut by a structure of rusted metal and rotted wood.

Madarame’s shack.

Akira sucked in a breath at seeing the decrepit building again.

It almost felt like it had been years since they had been here, helping Yusuke realize the truth of his situation.

His eyes slid to his taller companion, settling on the almost pained grimace on his face. He stayed silent as he followed the artist up to the front door.

Yusuke glanced up at the still broken light in the awning, to the brown metal sheets that made up the shack, and down to the rotting foundations. “Hm…” He breathed out. “This place has not changed the slightest…”

“It feels nostalgic,” Akira admitted quietly. “Like it’s been years since we were here.”

Yusuke nodded in agreement, his eyes never leaving the front door. “Indeed it does. I haven’t
come back here since moving into Aneki’s.” The hand not on his bag straps clenched. “The truth is,” He began bitterly, “Despite my best efforts to convey the meanings of the heart, I am no closer to understanding it. Such a troublesome roadblock has never presented itself to me while I was living here…” He sighed. “Aneki has tried to help, but I do not wish to bother her more than I already have.”

He turned to his leader. “As you know, I spent most of my young life in this house, alongside Natsu-nii, Yukimi-nee, Daichi-san, and even Arisawa-san and Matsuouka-san, though I don’t remember them. There was no end to our talent here, and that is why we have come here now. I wish to reevaluate myself within its decrepit walls,” he revealed, turning back to the doorway. “By coming to this place, I may be able to rekindle the passion for art I once held.” He looked at his open palm. “The passion of an inquiring mind on the hunt for pure beauty…” He whispered. “Before I learned of Madarame’s foul nature.”

Taking a deep breath, Yusuke walked up to the door with the goal of opening the way but paused when he noticed it was already cracked open. “Hm? Is someone inside..?”

Sliding the door open with a crack, the two thieves looked into the musty and barren house, noting that some of the lights were on.

Entering the abode cautiously, Akira tried to close the door behind him but the rusted slider only moved partway until it completely jammed. He tried to force it, grunting when it fought him every step of the way.

Yusuke glanced back and grimaced. “I’m not surprised it broke. It had begun to rust even while I was a pupil here.”

He glanced back to the hallway, looking up at the ceiling when he heard footsteps padding toward the stairs. They walked deeper in, wary of who the intruder was.

Wood creaked as footsteps headed down the stairs, finally showing a suited man with a bowlcut. Nakanohara looked up in surprise at the two unexpected teenagers. “Yusuke! And Kurusu-kun. What are you two doing here?”

Yusuke blinked. “Natsu-nii. I wasn’t expecting to see you here.”

The older ex-apprentice grimaced and looked around. “I was in the area and thought I’d stop by...This place is completely stripped of everything now. The police confiscated everything but the paintings which I was able to take back.” He sighed. “I thought I would feel something here, rage or sadness or anything, but I barely feel anything except nostalgia…”

He looked to his left at a barren room. “Sousuke-senpai and I used to stay in there, until he…” He grimaced and turned back to the two teenagers. “Well, I have to get going. Daichi and Toushiro will be waiting for me at home.”

Walking closer, he placed a hand on his younger brother’s shoulder. “Try not to stay too long. I know there’s a lot here you remember but the past should stay the past.”

Yusuke looked at him with a conflicted frown. “I know, but this is where my skills as an artist were at its peak. I need to see if I can recapture that.”

Nakanohara furrowed his brow. “Is that so? Well, I suppose I can’t keep you from here. Just...don’t let that journey to the answer blind you. I know that now.” He patted his shoulder once more, gave Akira a nod, and left the premises, not even bothering trying with the broken door.
They watched him leave before Yusuke looked down at himself. “What does he mean?” He murmured. “I shouldn’t let the journey to the answer blind me…”

Akira stayed silent.

He didn’t really want to say anything but he had noticed the artist had begun thinking of art based on what he thought people wanted, instead of painting what he wanted. When they were at the art gallery, he had been torn by the lack of reception, but he hadn’t cared about that before.

Yusuke had to remember why he loves art.

Yusuke slowly padded into the art room where just three months ago, he had wanted to paint Airi and Ann nude. “You know,” He began. “I lived here not long ago, yet it feels almost like the distant past at this point…” He walked over to the window where there used to be a shelf for paints. “Being here has brought back memories, though. Whenever I acted out of line, I was made to sit calmly in this corner. Yukimi-nee was punished so often I almost thought this was her spot.” He turned to the left. “Ah, and over here was a bookshelf, filled to the brim with various tomes. It contained art compilation books for the most part, but there were a few manga that Natsu-nii had tucked away as well…” He frowned forlornly. “At times I would take a break from my art to hide and read them…”

Akira listened attentively, trying to imagine a younger Yusuke hanging around here to read manga. He remembered back in Kaneshiro’s Palace that he mentioned Uzumaki.

Yusuke turned to the corner closest to the door. “This is also where we would gather to eat when the atelier still had a large pupil count. Natsu-nii, Yukimi-nee, Daichi-san…” He sighed. “Sensei is particularly fond of salty food, so—”

He flinched and held a hand to his chest. “Sensei…?” He exhaled sharply. “What am I saying?” He clenched his eyes shut. “Why do I still treat him as my mentor? How long will I allow him to control my life…?”

Akira placed a hand on his shoulder. “Yusuke?” he called out, concerned. “You’re not looking so good…”

Snapping out of his thoughts, Yusuke jerkily nodded. “I’m fine...My apologies.” He pursed his lips, looking around the room. “The truth of the matter is, I used to paint in this room...and I did it simply for the joy of painting. No matter what I took as my subject, my hands would move of their own accord to capture its essence…” He grimaced. “But back then, I only saw the superficial beauty of the world. I could not see the grime beneath. After learning the truth behind Madarame’s actions though, everything changed.”

He closed his eyes in anguish, placing a hand over the one on his shoulder.

Akira let him, just wanting to support him.

“I strove to fight back against the newfound ugliness I saw...To display my talent to those who mocked me...I needed to do whatever it took to validate my artistic ability…” He turned to face Akira fully. “In that search for meaning, darkness took hold of me,” he confessed shamefully, eyes downcast toward the rickety floors. “...Ultimately, I began to emulate that which I had so deeply despised in Madarame.”

He looked up at Akira. “You know, Boss told me something very interesting when I was staying with you that one night in Leblanc. He said…” He paused but continued, “He didn’t believe
Madarame took me in for my skill alone. I suppose now that I think about it, there would be no way to know whether or not I would have been talented, especially at the age of three. My mother may have been an amazing artist but that did not guarantee me to be…” His eyes searched his leader’s face, for reassurance, for solidity. “Akira, why do you think Madarame decided to take me in?” he whispered.

Akira regarded him for several moments. “…I think he cared about you,” he finally answered. “He had already gotten what he wanted by then, and you would’ve been too young to remember who painted 'Sayuri.' Maybe he really did think of himself as your father, even though he was distorted...He could’ve just left you in an orphanage like Airi was.”

Yusuke flinched and folded into himself. “He cared for me, hm..? Had his heart told him to? It truly is a mysterious beast…” He stayed silent for a while, mulling over the words in his head. “…Even after learning the ugliness of his true nature, a part of me still believes in my former mentor,” he confessed with a whisper. “I simply cannot come to terms with the stark duality presented to me…” He held out one hand. “The humble house and that loathsome Palace…” He held out his other hand. “The kind teacher and the fiendishly deceptive artist…”

With a sigh, he let them fall limply at his sides. “It seems even the workings of my own heart are inexplicable...What then of my search for pure beauty..?”

Akira frowned sympathetically. “You’re the only one who knows that answer. Why are you an artist?”

Yusuke blinked. “Why..? I-”

“Hello?”

They both tensed at the unexpected voice that called out into the house from the entrance.

“Is someone there? I’m coming in.”

Yusuke narrowed his eyes at the door of the room. “Hm? Could that be the police!!”

Suddenly, an older gentleman in a well-priced suit appeared in the doorway, his peppery hair perfectly coiffed back and his hands held behind his back. “Ah.” The man smiled genially. “I was wondering who could have been in here…”

Akira blinked. “You’re...the man from the exhibition we met.”

The man nodded. “Indeed.” He turned to Yusuke. “Thank you for our conversation back there. More importantly though, why are you here?” He looked around the barren and decrepit house with an incredulous frown. “I couldn’t help but notice the door was open on my way home from work. Are you perhaps still caught in your slump..?”

Taken aback, Yusuke could only stare at him with wide eyes. “How do you know about that..?”

The man raised a brow. “I know a great deal about you, Yusuke-kun. You’ve made a name for yourself by patterning your work after the beautifully detailed 'Sayuri,' but that painting at the exhibition was...quite different from that. Have you begun trying out new styles?”

Yusuke grimaced and looked away, not saying anything.

Noting his silence, the gentleman appraised him. “If you’d like, I can advise you.” He offered. “Materials, themes, etcetera. You seem as though you could use a helping hand right now.”
Unable to meet the man's eyes, Yusuke’s lips twisted. “I…”

“Most of your painting was done while living in this residence, correct? Your current lack of patron must be what is holding you back.” Reaching into his pocket, he took out a business card and held it out toward the artist. “Please, take my card. I’ve made a living investing in promising young artists like yourself, Yusuke-kun.”

Warily taking the card, Yusuke quickly read the details. “Director of the Japanese Art Support Foundation…Kawanabe Akiko? But…” He floundered from the unexpected offer. “Why have you chosen me? You criticized me so harshly back at the exhibition.”

Akira nodded in agreement, frowning at the older man. He had said Yusuke’s art lacked everything except skill.

“Because I feel you have talent.” The older man, Kawanabe, replied bluntly. “Now, my foundation can provide you an environment that will allow you to focus on developing your skills. If such a lifestyle interests you, we can talk further at a later date. As for today, I have business I must attend to.” He turned around and walked out of the room and into the hallway but stopped to look at Yusuke once more. “…But I hope to hear from you soon.”

He inclined his head before disappearing from view. They listened as the wooden floors creaked under his footsteps until they faded away out the door.

Yusuke frowned down at the card. “The Japanese Art Support Foundation…” He murmured. “My opportunity may have finally arrived…” He smiled slowly, turning to Akira. “And it was all because you opened that door for me.” He chuckled. “It seems good luck is simply a characteristic of yours. You have my thanks, brother.”

Akira snorted at being called brother but nodded. “I hope this all works out for you.”

Even though it seemed too good to be true. A support foundation had to get their funds from somewhere…

Yusuke breathed out and headed toward the front door. “…I’d like to think upon this more. I shall depart from here, if you do not mind.”

Akira shook his head. “Go ahead. Make sure to let Airi know.”

Yusuke chuckled. “Of course. She has been occupied with Futaba lately but she has yet to forget about feeding me as well.”

With a nod, Yusuke walked away from the atelier, heading in the opposite direction of Shibuya.

Akira watched him leave before turning back, heading to the subways.

Guess he could go and ask Hifumi for another “battle.”

Chapter End Notes

Yusuke rank rank 6
Hifumi rank 3
played/saw all of P5R and wow...what a waste of time lmao despite my feelings about it, PLEASE keep the comments section SPOILER FREE!

Do not debate me about P5R. Do not email me about P5R. So many people have actually PMed/ emailed me about this, I'm so tired of it. If you like P5R, i'm glad Atlus can still satisfy you. However, I do not like P5R, and feel that everything they added could've been DLC instead of hyping it up as if they're actually going to change things.

Again, please only comment things that pertain to the fic.
Chapter 182

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

---8/7, SUNDAY, DAYTIME, YONGENJAYA

Futaba hadn’t hid from her the last couple of times she went over, and Airi was ecstatic.

The younger girl was finally accepting her presence, even taking the chicken mushroom stew she made. Sojiro had made a comment on how he had actually seen Futaba in other parts of the house, even though it was only for a few minutes before she went back to bed.

Airi smiled to herself.

She was helping someone and was seeing them slowly blossom. It was a rewarding feeling even though she was worried about how slowly Futaba was taking in regaining her energy. Maybe it wasn’t her body anymore, maybe it was her mind trying to adjust to a distortion free soul. Either way, she’d just have to keep going.

She sighed happily and went back to cleaning the house.

Yusuke was out again with Akira, something about finally making headway with his art.

Slowly cleaning her way from bottom to top, she opened up the Study. She had ended up spending less time here now that Yusuke had made this his studio, only coming in to pay the bills on the laptop before leaving.

She glanced around curiously, noting if anything had changed.

The bookshelves were a little dusty, none of the books or photo albums having been touched by her or Yusuke. His art corner was a tidy mess; there were splatters of paint on the tarp beneath the easel, having dried recently. The art rack next to the window held a bunch of large canvases, some blank and some in progress.

She peered at the canvas on the easel, noting the soft light colors on one side and the harsher and darker shades on the other.

Was he making a contrasting piece?

Leaving it be, Airi began to clean the bookshelves with her duster, making sure all of the dust was gone. She gasped when she miscalculated her strength and knocked the shelving, causing one of the books to fall to the floor. “Oh no..!”

Bending down, she paused when she realized she had knocked a photo album down. It was open to a sleeve of photos of her and her parents at her first recital.

A small smile sat on her lips at the image of her and her first child sized cello.

She barely remembered it now. Her memory wasn’t the best after they had died. It didn’t help that she didn’t want to remember what life was like without them. She pushed all of them in the back of her mind once she was “broken” by the matron.
She turned the page, seeing another set of photos.

This time it was her at the ice rink, her mother holding her hand for her first time on the ice. She remembered she was so afraid of falling that she gripped her mother’s hand for dear life and refused to let go.

She turned the page again, biting her lip to hold back a grin. This was during their second trip to the ice rink where she skated all alone, trying to emulate the more experienced skaters.

“I think I twisted my ankle trying to do a spin…” She murmured nostalgically.

Her father wasn’t there this time, and now she knew it was because he had been busy with the beginnings of the project with Isshiki Wakaba. The only reason why she did well in ballet at the institute was because she had ice skated before.

Maybe she could go with Akira, or make it into a group thing. Considering how he would throw her into the air in battle, she would bet they would do well in pair skating. It required complete trust between the two skaters and she knew they had that.

Well, if Takao-senpai would stop insinuating that Akira was with Makoto.

She was still a little sore about that. She knew they didn’t have feelings for one another, that Akira really was her one and only as he promised her his heart, and Makoto was completely focused on school and the Phantom Thieves, but still...

Turning the page again, Airi blinked when she saw a photo of her and another little girl.

It was at a park on a sunny cloudless day. The younger her was dressed in a cute little chiffon dress and her pink hair was put up in a top bun. Her parents used to dress her up like a doll, though she couldn’t deny that her current wardrobe did reflect her childhood tastes.

Her eyes slid to the other girl in the photo.

She had medium length black hair with her bangs cut straight, with goggle glasses covering her eyes. The glare from the sun hid what color they were, but did nothing to tone down her neon green overalls. In their small hands were dandelions, freshly picked from the grass.

Frowning thoughtfully, Airi slid the photo out of the sleeve and turned it around. Blank.

She had hoped there was a name or something on it. Who was this girl she had hung out with? Her memory was faulty but she didn’t think it was so bad that she couldn’t even remember a childhood friend...

Placing the photo back, she flipped the page to find another photo of her and this girl, playing with dolls. While she had animal plushies, this other girl had action figures and robots.

Huh.

The photo was taken from behind the girl, so she couldn’t even see her face this time.

The next photo was also of her and the mystery girl, this time in her own house, back when the Study had been her bedroom. They seemed to be dancing, but while she had twirled, the other girl was doing the robot.

Who was she to have spent so much time with her..?
Frowning deeply now, Airi turned to the next page and paused.

This photo had her, the mystery girl, and Sojiro in it.

This must be one of the rare times he had babysat her while her parents had been busy with work. He was sat on her couch with a languid smile on his much younger face, absent of many of the age lines it had today. Young Airi was sat in front of the coffee table, sharing snacks with the mystery girl. The one occurring theme in all these photos was that the mystery girl always seemed to be following her, as if she was the older one.

Was she? So the mystery girl was younger than her? But not by much. There wasn’t a big enough age difference in their looks. Wait-

She paused.

Who took the photo? If Sojiro was here, then her parents were out. Was it the girl’s parent? She couldn’t remember any man other than her father and Sojiro, or any woman that wasn’t her mother, other than Isshiki-san...

Airi froze.

No. There was no way.

She quickly took out every photo she could find of her and the mystery girl who may not be a mystery after all. Lining them up on the floor, she quickly noted down everything she could in her head.

Slightly smaller than younger her, glasses, green and orange clothes, played with robots and action figures, was looked after with her by Sojiro-ojisan at least once…

“Futaba..?” She breathed out in shock, feeling like her whole world was shaken up once more.

Had she known Futaba when they were younger? But she didn’t remember anything about this girl. She had to have remembered something, right?

Falling back on her rear, Airi fell limp and her back hit a bookcase.

She knew Futaba as kids..?

Slowly tilting her head down to the photos once more, she dimly realized that they appeared to be the age of six. Meaning these all happened before her parents were murdered by Hisoka, maybe even right before earlier in the year. Was her memory really that bad?

She sat up straight.

Was that why Futaba had called her “Airi-nee”? Because she knew her, and had played with her, and followed her around like a little sister?

Airi choked out a sob, a hand covering her mouth to stifle the sound.

Had she unknowingly abandoned Futaba, too? While she had lost her parents, Futaba had lost her and then Isshiki-san?

Shaking her head, she took a deep breath.

No.
She wasn’t going to jump to any conclusions just yet. Last time she had done that, she almost got herself killed inside Futaba’s Palace. She should take these photos to Sojiro so that he can confirm this. He was the only adult left alive that could give her any answers.

Shakily getting back to her feet, she gathered the photos of her and Fu- the mystery girl in one pile and picked up the photo album. Placing it back in its slot on the shelf, she was about to head downstairs with Leblanc in mind when her phone rang.

Taking it out of her pocket, she blinked when she saw it was Ann. “Hello?”

“Airi! Are you free right now? I feel like I haven’t seen you in ages!”

She laughed slightly, distracted by what could be her most important finding this summer. “Yeah, it’s been a couple days, huh.”

“Mhm! So I’m thinking us girls should have a day out! Just you, me, and Makoto! What do you say?”

Airi blinked. “A girl’s day? Doing what?”

“Doing whatever! Just none of the boys and don’t you dare bring Akira with you!”

“Uh…”

She bit her lip. She really wanted to know if the mystery girl in her photos was Futaba, but...there was no rush. She could ask tomorrow.

“Sure. Where should I meet you?”

---

Airi bit her lip, slightly uncomfortable in the very crowded street of Harajuku.

Ann had said to meet her here in front of the famous Takeshita Street entrance. She rarely came to this side of the city, especially since she knew it was mostly a tourist trap.

She resisted the urge to fidget in her open toed sandals and white and blue chiffon mini dress, almost blending into the colorful street.

There were tons of shoppers out since it was such a sunny day, with most of them being tourists.

Airi sighed and looked down at her phone, noting it was already 3:40PM. Sojiro assured her on the phone he was taking care of Futaba today so she didn’t have to rush back, but it honestly just made her want to go and question the both of them.

“Summasen, miss?”

She looked up to see a tourist looking lost in front of her, a map in their hand. “Yes? Can I help you?” She answered in English.

The tourist sighed in relief. “Hello, I’m looking for the Omotesando Harajuku. Can you show me the way?”
Airi pointed to her left. “Go that way, and turn left. Just walk for ten minutes and you should see Omotesando.”

The tourist smiled. “Arigatou gozaimase!” They bowed and left in the direction she pointed them in.

She deflated a little from the encounter and exhaled quietly. It was strange to be helping tourists instead of stealing from them, but she was glad. It at least meant her English was good enough for conversations.

“That was great, Airi!”

She turned around and saw Ann and Makoto walk up to her, the latter looking uncomfortable in such a crowded location.

Ann grinned at her, placing a hand on her hip. “I was going to step in when I saw they were a foreigner, but you spoke to him so fluently!”

Airi smiled. “I do have the highest English scores in the class next to you. Was I really fluent?”

Makoto smiled at her. “It was. I could still hear an accent but you were understandable and clear with your pronunciation. Chouno-sensei must be proud.”

Ann rolled her eyes. “Ugh, all Chouno-sensei does is brag about living in California. It explains why her hair is so dry. Anyway!” She hooked arms with her fellow female thieves. “Enough about school! We’re here to have a girl’s day out!” She cheered, while Makoto and Airi smiled with sweatdrops. “Let’s go visit the clothing shops first! They’re probably having summer sales and I have to pick out a swimsuit since someone—” She turned to glare at Airi. “—Bought hers without us.”

Makoto tilted her head curiously. “Oh? Which one did you buy, Airi?”

Airi took her phone out from her purse and scrolled to the photo, turning it around in her hand to show it to her. “This one. It was really nice and on sale, too!”

Makoto appraised it with a nod. “That does look really nice on you. I’m...a little jealous.”

Airi blinked. “What for? We can get one for you now…”

Makoto looked down at herself with a red face. “Both of you have bigger...um, busts, than me.” She eyed them both with a little envy. “You’re both closer to being full grown women…”

Ann scrunched up her face. “What?! No. Boobs don’t mean anything except back pain.”

Airi nodded in agreement. “You should count yourself lucky. Finding a bra that fits is really difficult. A lot of dresses don’t fit me around the chest area, either.” She walked closer to hug the council president around the waist, her hands close to her small chest. “You’re perfect the way you are, Mako. If anything, I’m jealous of your butt.”

Face as red as a tomato, Makoto tensed up as stiff as a board. “Uh-Uh-Uh, Airi…” She stammered with embarrassment, squeaking when those hands went down to her hips. “Airi, ple-please! We’re in public!”

Ann rolled her eyes and rested her hands on her hips. “C’mon Airi, we have to go shopping! Do I need to tell Akira you’ve been fondling someone else?”
At that, Airi took her hands back in a flash. “Nope, you better not tell him anything or else,” She smiled angelically and walked ahead down Takeshita Street. “I’ll tell Ryuji you think he’s hot!” She walked off without waiting, not seeing Ann redden at her threat.

“Hey!” The model rushed after her, leaving Makoto to sigh at her two friends.

The three of them walked down the busy street together, checking out all the boutiques.

Ann stopped at a clothing shop geared for fashionable teens and they spent a while inside with Airi wincing at the price tags. She didn’t buy anything but Ann had purchased a few shirts and shorts as per her wardrobe. Makoto had only bought a pair of biker gloves, saying her old ones were getting too worn out.

Airi actually stopped at the official Calbee store and bought a few limited flavor editions for Yusuke, knowing he was running out of his stock at home.

At the end of the block, they finally entered into a swimsuit shop where Ann and Makoto picked out a few they liked to try on. Airi sat down on the bench outside of the dressing rooms to help them choose.

Ann came out in a white and black one piece with Airi immediately vetoed. “Nope, those colors don’t suit you. You’re way more colorful than that.”

Makoto came out, slightly hunched over herself, in a navy blue two piece that had thick straps over her shoulders.

“Ahh...maybe a lighter color?” Airi suggested.

It went on for a while until Ann decided on a tropical flower two piece while Makoto chose a pure white two piece with the bottom as a skirt.

Airi smiled as the day went on. Even though she hadn’t bought anything for herself, she had fun with her friends.

Stretching her arms up in the air with a satisfied sigh, Ann turned to them with a big smile. “Why don’t we have a sleepover at Airi’s place?”

Airi blinked. “Another one?”

Ann shook her head, her curly ponytails flying with the action. “Just us girls this time! Well, with Yusuke too since he lives there.”

Makoto frowned disapprovingly. “Ann, we shouldn’t impose ourselves on Airi so out of the blue.” She turned to the other girl. “Would it be all right? I don’t want to force you.”

Airi smiled and shook her head. “I don’t mind, but I don’t think we should cook since we’ve been out all day. Let’s get some takeout from one of the nearby restaurants. Um…” She tilted her head. “What do you do at a girl’s sleepover?”

Ann gasped and covered her mouth. “You don’t know?! Wait…” She deflated. “Now that I think about it, I don’t really know, either. I moved around too much to have been invited to a sleepover, and Shiho was always too exhausted after volleyball to do anything…” She puffed up. “Well, whatever! We’ll do whatever we want!”

Makoto smiled sympathetically. “When Sis and I were home alone while our father was out on a
late shift, we would put makeup on each other and dress each other up. Then we would tell stories until we fell asleep.” She looked down, the smile slowly falling. “It’s been a long time since she spent time with me like that…”

Ann looked over at her sorrowfully. “Makoto…” She took her hand with hers and her other hand took Airi’s. “We’re not her, but we’re still sisters, right? Or well, a mom and two sisters.” She held up their linked hands with a forced grin. “We have each other.”

Airi softened and nodded. “Yeah. Let’s have a nice girl’s only sleepover together.”

Makoto looked up at them both and smiled a small smile. “Let’s.”

Finishing up their shopping trip, they all traveled back to Yongenjaya to Airi’s house. Ordering food from a nearby international cuisine restaurant, Airi munched on her lamb gyro while Ann and Makoto both had spicy chicken salads, all of them sat in the dining table.

“So then Shiho and I would go around, looking for the best crepe store,” Ann continued her story from her first year at Shujin. “We both decided that the best one had to be the one on Central Street because they double stuff the cream and it’s close to the school!”

Makoto sweatdropped at her story. “That’s... nice.”

Ann nodded happily. “Yeah! Shiho and I would get one crepe each so that we could try out two flavors at once! I haven’t been back since I started taking my career seriously, but once in a while couldn’t hurt.”

Airi snickered. “It’s amazing you and Shiho-chan didn’t get fat last year since I know I saw you two there almost every day on the way to work.”

Ann pouted. “Hey! I know I used to eat sweets all the time but it wasn’t that bad!”

Makoto smiled sheepishly, finishing off her salad. “Yes it was. Our first meal together was crepes, remember? And you didn’t even let me have more than a few bites.”

Ann looked away with an embarrassed blush. “S-Still…” Shaking her head, she finished her salad and threw out the trash with a flourish. “I’m going to wash up. Wanna go together?”

Airi sweatdropped, finishing the last of her lamb gyro. “Is my bathroom big enough for all three of us?”

Ann nodded. “Of course. We’ll just take turns!”

They heard the front door open with a quiet “tadaima,” followed by the sound of someone taking off their shoes.

“Welcome home, Yusuke!” Airi called out to the hallway, throwing out her meal.

Yusuke walked in and paused when he caught sight of all of them. “Ann, Makoto... I was not expecting to see you both here tonight.” He looked around. “Does this mean Ryuji and Akira are here as well?”

Ann shook her head. “Nope! Girls only! You’re the only exception but that’s only because you live
He furrowed his brow. “I...see,” he answered after a moment, though his hesitation implied he didn’t really understand. “Aneki, I’ll be in the Study as usual. I have some things to think about.”

Airi turned around from the kitchen sink and really looked at him, taking in his conflicted frown, his creased brow, and the dark shade of his irises. “…All right. Knock on my door if you need anything.”

She knew not to bother him when he was like this, especially if he wasn’t going to share.

Yusuke disappeared up the stairs and into the Study and after a few moments, the three ladies followed after, heading into the bathroom.

Airi began drawing a bath for them while Ann stripped bare. After a moment of hesitation, Makoto began taking her clothes off as well, leaving them in a pile on the laundry basket.

Turning on the shower head, Ann doused herself in the tiled area. “Ahh, nothing like having a deep cleansing shower and bath after a long day shopping!” She hummed happily.

Once she finished stripping down as well, Airi sat down behind her with an italy towel. “Want me to scrub you off?”

Receiving an eager nod, the cellist began exfoliating the model’s back, making sure not to miss a single spot.

Makoto knelt behind her with another italy towel of her own. “Shall I?” She offered with a smile, beginning when she was given permission.

Airi smiled at how close they all were, scrubbing each other’s backs and bathing with each other.

After a tight squeeze in the bathtub, they congregated in Airi’s room where they dried each others’ hairs.

“Ann, your hair is so luscious and thick,” Makoto admired, running a comb through the model’s blonde curls. “Is it really all natural?”

Ann hummed happily, turning into goo in her black tank top and hot pink pajama shorts from the relaxing brushing. “Yup! Speaking of hair, what really surprised me was that your braid was just a headband! I always thought it was your real hair.”

Airi grinned, hair combed and dried. “Same. Why do you wear it anyway?”

Flustered, Makoto touched her hair where she usually wore the braided hairband, and sat on her leggings. “Sis bought it for me years ago. It was when I got a haircut that was just a tad too short. I remember crying about it because it made me look like a boy, so she bought it for me and said it would make it look like I have longer hair.”

Ann oohed and turned around on the bed to get a closer look at her brown locks. “But you’ve kept your hair short since I’ve known you! Why not grow it out?”

Makoto pursed her lips, crossing her arms over her light blue pajama shirt. “It’s easier to manage at this length, and it makes it much harder for an opponent to grab since there’s not enough to get a grip.”
Airi nodded understandingly, crossing her legs underneath her yellow shorts and black tank top. “That makes sense.”

Ann turned around to face her. “Hey Airi, you know it just occurred to me that I never asked you, but…” A sly grin slowly stretched on her face. “How have things been with Akira?”

Airi blinked at the question. “Uh, where is this coming from?”

Ann pouted. “Don’t tell me you’re embarrassed about it,” she complained. "You, the pervert in our group?"

She avoided her gaze, feeling the heat rise up in her cheeks. “Not embarrassed, it’s just a private topic!” she said defensively. "I didn’t expect you to ask."

Biting her lip, Makoto ducked her head to hide her red face. “Then, um...What is it that you do exactly in a relationship?”

Airi reached over to the corner of her bed and hugged her Jack Frost doll to herself. “Well...We’ve only been on one date so far which was at Odaiba. He paid for the bus fare and didn’t mind me taking him shopping,” She recounted her perfect date with a fond smile. “That’s when I bought my swimsuit. Of course, I didn’t let him see.”

Ann grinned teasingly and elbowed her. “Keeping it a surprise, huh? You’re going to blow him away.”

Airi beamed and hid her face in the doll. “I hope so...Akira would always give me kisses when I would least expect them, and he even did it when we were taking a picture! After that, we came back here and…” She blushed. “Well, I asked him if he wanted to write a wish together for Tanabata.”

Makoto gasped and covered her mouth, listening attentively. “You did?”

Airi nodded. “Mhm. He said yes and even wrote the wish himself.”

Ann leaned in closer with wide eyes. “What did you guys write?” She asked eagerly.

Airi smiled slyly. “That’s a secret.” She laughed at their disappointed groans. “Other than that, we haven’t gone on any other dates. We’ve been so busy with Futaba-chan’s Palace and me feeding her.”

Makoto sat up on the bed. “How is that going?” She asked worriedly. “Is she well?”

Airi bit her lip. “...Mostly,” She answered after a moment. “She was really wary of me in the beginning. Hell, she even had a panic attack because I got too close.”

She wasn’t going to mention being called “nee-chan” just yet. Not until she confirmed it herself. “She’s been eating the stews I’ve made, but she still has trouble staying awake for more than a few minutes. I think at this point it’s her mind that’s taking a while to adjust, so she spends it asleep.”

Makoto nodded slowly. “That makes sense. Changing her own distortion to make it her Persona must have been taxing.”

Ann tugged and squished the Morgana plush to herself. “Futaba-chan’s so strong,” she said admiringly. "She had a Palace and everything, and now she has a Persona.”
Airi smiled and nodded. “She is.”

They were quiet for a moment, the day’s activity catching up to them.

“So…” Ann began again, the other two turning to look at her. “How far have you and Akira gone? We already know he’s head over heels for you and vice versa.”

Airi bit her lip and looked away. “…Um,” She began sheepishly. “We may have gone farther.”

Makoto gasped and her face turned as red as a tomato. “R-Really..?” She asked with a whisper. “That’s a big step…”

Airi nodded. “Yeah. It wasn’t like we just did it out of the blue. We were, uh…” She laughed nervously. “We’ve been doing stuff for a while now. We had a lot of time without school taking up our schedules, so…”

Even though her face was red as well, Ann still had the gall to bump shoulders with her with a teasing grin. “Oh, is our fearless leader that good in bed?” she ribbed.

Airi grinned and made sure to lick her lips to prove her point. “Better. He rocked my world.” She grinned salaciously, snickering when Makoto hid her red face with her hands. “Don't be so shy, Makoto. You're the oldest among us, after all.”

“Please stop,” Makoto begged from behind her hands. “You don’t have to share anymore. I don’t want to think of either of you in that light.”

Snickering, Airi opened her mouth. “I especially love it when he uses his-”

“I don’t need to know!” Makoto shouted over her, covering her ears to avoid hearing anything else.

Ann and Airi burst out laughing at her reaction, holding their stomachs as tears gathered in their eyes.

Makoto scowled and hunched her shoulders as they laughed at her, embarrassment written all over her face. “I get it, I’m a prude,” She muttered.

Wiping a tear away, Ann pushed her playfully. “You’re not a prude; Airi here is just a pervert and now we know why if Akira’s been helping to fuel her fantasies.”

Airi grinned teasingly. “Not even. I just tease him about him going on dates with Yusuke or Ryuji until he snaps.”

Ann spun her head in her direction and sputtered. “Akira with Ryuji?! N-No way…” Her eyes darted to the side. “Right..?”

Airi smiled, amused. “It’ll never happen, but you have to admit, two handsome men like them getting together would be hot. Or Yusuke and Ryuji. They’re polar opposites..”

Pursing her lips, Ann looked away with a small frown. “I hope not…” She whispered timidly.

Softening, Airi reached out and hugged her. “I know. Ryuji is for you.”

Reddening, Ann pushed her away and scooted underneath the covers, hiding from both of them. “No! I’m an independent woman!”

Makoto sweatdropped. “But you told me that you like him-”
“Nope nope nope! Good night!”

Looking at the mound underneath the blanket and then each other, Makoto and Airi shrugged.

Making sure the bed had enough space for all three of them, Airi turned off the lights and got into bed. It was a slightly tight fit, but they did fit, making her thank herself for getting a bigger bed. For a while, silence covered the room while cicadas buzzed outside, the AC humming gently throughout the house.

“...Did you have sex with Akira on this bed?” Ann whispered.

“Where else would I have sex with him? At Leblanc?”

Makoto’s tortured whimper at the information caused them both to burst into giggles, and she sat up to smack her pillow at them.

Chapter End Notes

dun dun dun, Airi and Futaba knew each other as kids!

End Notes

Comments are loved and appreciated, thank you for reading!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!