Black Star
by HassouToby

Summary

"Tomorrow is broken. Tomorrow is nowhere."

A year has passed since the Phantom Thieves struck down a god and saved Tokyo from a terrible fate. But when people all over the globe begin to suffer from "Paranoia Syndrome," mysterious seizures which leave them contorted and unconscious, Akira Kurusu finds himself in the Velvet Room once more, demanding answers for the affliction. His investigation leads him to the Dead Sea, the rotted remnants of the cognitive world, where all things go to be forgotten - including someone the Thieves had thought to be long gone.

Meanwhile, Akira's comatose body is found in the waking world, and his terrified friends suspect the worst. Akira's confidants struggle to learn the truth behind Paranoia Syndrome, while he and Goro Akechi approach a fated confrontation in the decaying shell of the cognitive Tokyo. As the sickness continues to spread, the Phantom Thieves must reunite and destroy the evil festering beneath the Dead Sea's waters, before its malignant influence unravels civilization forever.

Notes

there's no banishing / of anything /
only con- / quering within /
make it enough / make it enough / or eat /
suffering without end
- Denis Johnson, "Minutes"

What are we coming to?
I just don't know anymore.
- Radiohead, "Black Star"
Chapter 1

In the city that was not the city the streets had no signs, only slates of blank metal hanging askew on their poles as if confused how they came to be there. All cupboards bare, all bulbs gone dark, all photographs reduced to mottled film nestled within unbroken frames. As though one day a great wind had blown through these ashen streets and scraped clean every trace of habitation in its wake.

And everywhere he went, there was water, ice-cold and dark as ink. Sometimes so shallow as to be barely noticeable, a thin scum of shine on the asphalt, but in other places it could come up to his knees and so he always watched his step. In the early days he’d once fallen into the deeper places and had spent ages clutching himself and shivering himself dry again. Impossible to keep warm here. The sky was the color of pig iron and the sun was no sun he’d ever known.

He kept above ground when possible but had to watch his step there as well. Whenever he stepped into one of those blinded and gutted buildings he would grip the doorframe and squeeze. Often it held fast but sometimes steel would bend like rubber or masonry would crumble like stale bread in his grip, and then he had to leave, and quickly, because the solidity too was drained away from everything here, it all bent and faded like a dream until it finally collapsed. Often he would be awakened from his huddled sleep by the distant thunder of a fallen building, its rubble breaking down into that black water until nothing remained.

He slouched through the streets and listened and watched. In places the shadows writhed and clotted and sometimes he would wait to see what arose from there, but now he kept moving, head tilted slightly like a dog’s, the water sounding off his uneven footfalls. At one point he froze in place and listened for that familiar sound, that sinister rattle, but heard only the hollow wind and the lapping water. Then he lowered his head and began to walk again.

Sadayo Kawakami gripped her chalk like an instrument of war.

She could hear the constant low susurrus of chatter behind her like the sound of the ocean as she worked, scratching neat white lines across the chalkboard. It was morning in Shujin Academy and the air outside was brisk, the sun tantalizingly bright. She glanced behind her and saw approximately a fifth of the class gazing longingly out the windows. On days like this it was easy to understand why Ushimaru was so fond of using his own chalk to demonstrate the finer points of ballistics.

It couldn’t be helped. It was November fifth, late enough for her students to recover from post-midterm trauma but too early for the threat of finals to really sink into their heads, and times like these were when the classrooms were at their rowdiest – not to mention she was dealing with first-years. Still, she soldiered on.

“All right, settle down,” she said, futility hanging off every word.

She turned back to her podium and leaned forward. The students in the front row, at least, shut up and straightened to attention. They were new to the school but had still heard the rumors. Ms. Kawakami stood about five-five in tall shoes and often looked like she was coming off a straight week with no sleep, but sometime last fall she’d shed her lethargic nature and become a firebrand of a teacher. Woe betide any student whom she decided was in need of guidance, because she would grab on to them like a beartrap until they fell in line.
“So to pick up where we left off,” she said, “while Shakespeare’s obviously been revered in the West, his translations have had a little more trouble in this part of the world. In particular, his blank verse and predilection for wordplay have posed difficult challenges for Japanese speakers. Still, there’s been a rich history of his works over here as well – Shoyo Tsubochi could be considered the forerunner in bringing the Bard’s plays to Japan, having translated the entirety of his canon in the late 1920’s, but other academics have further refined what he started. There’ve even been times when the cultural differences between East and West have led to deeper understanding of the works themselves. Tsubochi was fond of dipping into kabuki tradition in his adaptation of the plays, and for those of you who think all of this is too boring to handle, Akira Kurosawa drew from Macbeth as inspiration for his film Throne of Blood. I’d recommend that one, by the way. Excellent cinematography.

“I’m seeing a few intrigued faces here,” she said dryly, “Why so surprised? A teacher can have geeky interests too, you know.”

A ripple of giggles went through the room. She smiled and went on.

“Anyway, I’m sure Ms. Chouno will go into more detail about this, but the point I’m making is that opening yourself up to unfamiliar perspectives can really broaden your understandings of the world. You’re young now, but you still shouldn’t lock yourselves in too much to just one way of thinking. You might find that it can…hm.”

She leaned forward. “Miss Sakura? Miss Sakura.”

Several heads turned to a particular figure in the back row of the class – bespectacled, orange-haired, and perched on her seat like a spindly gargoyle. They couldn’t see what she was looking at on her phone, but she seemed much more interested in it than she was in Kawakami’s lecture.

Kawakami groaned internally. She’d had problem students before, but Futaba Sakura was in a class of her own, in multiple senses of the phrase. She wasn’t rude, or abusive, or even particularly anti-social – all of those things could have been dealt with via more traditional discipline. It was that she treated the world around her like a mildly amusing distraction, and had bewildering relationships with chairs, and despite her erratic attention span she showed academic proficiency that the Shujin faculty found impressive and then suspicious and then slightly unsettling. The girl didn’t just break the curve, she atomized it. Trying to rattle her with surprise questions or pop quizzes was guaranteed to backfire.

Still, Kawakami gave it a try.

“Miss Sakura,” she said. “Since you seem so interested in your phone, maybe you could entertain us by pulling up and reading one of Shakespeare’s more famous soliloquys. I’m thinking of a certain passage from Act 5, Scene 5 of Macbeth?” No response. “If you need another hint, perhaps one your classmates could-”

“She should have died hereafter,” Futaba recited, in monotone. “There would have been time for such a word. Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, life creeps along its petty pace from day to day, to the last syllable of recorded time, and all our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle! Life’s but a…” She trailed off, yawned, and continued. “Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets upon the stage and then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

“Well done,” said Kawakami, after a moment. “If you really want to impress me, though, then next time you can recite it without reading off your phone.”
“Oh, I wasn’t reading it. Was watching a video of a baby goat.” She grinned and held up the phone for her to see. “Look, he’s wearing a tiny sweater!”

More laughter from the class, louder this time. Kawakami admitted defeat.

“All right, all right,” she sighed. “Just…please, no phones during class.” Futaba dutifully put it away. “You won’t be expected to recite the plays chapter and verse during your finals, but keep in mind these prominent figures during their translation, and be sure to…”

She trailed off again. This time her expression was significantly more concerned. The other students followed her gaze.

The students had all cracked up at Futaba’s triumph, save one. Tsukiko Minami, second row from the back, had kept her head down for the last several minutes. At first Kawakami had just thought she’d been daydreaming – the girl wasn’t a bad student, but she was slightly spacy and had a reputation for nasty gossip – but now she saw Tsukiko clutching the edges of her desk hard enough to whiten the knuckles. Her skin, too, was pale, and sheened with sweat.


“Fine,” she said, between hoarse breaths. Her voice was faint, almost strangled. “Just…could everyone stop looking at me? There’s someone…looking at me…”

Her whole body had started to shake. The class began to mutter.

“Could someone take Tsukiko to the nurse, please?” Kawakami asked. “She isn’t feeling well.”

“Oh it,” said Futaba. She hopped off her seat and laid a hand on Tsukiko’s shoulder. “Hey, it’s cool, I’ve been there. It sucks when you’re in a crowd and you start to freak-”

Tsukiko spun round in her seat and gripped Futaba by the front of her blouse like someone drowning, eyes bulging, teeth bared. And everyone in the class saw Futaba’s skin go pale as the hands clasped her, because the world somehow swam in Futaba’s vision, it fogged around her like she’d just woken up from deep sleep, and in that moment she saw Tsukiko encircled by chains, dark and mottled chains that constricted face and limbs and chest, pulling tight enough so that her flesh dimpled and bruised through the links, so that Futaba thought she heard the wet creak of splintering bone.

“Please,” she whispered. “It hurts.”

Then the world snapped back into place, and it was just Tsukiko again, losing her grip, falling forward, and striking the ground headfirst.

The bell rang shortly thereafter, but no one heard it. It was drowned by the pandemonium of the class – chairs scraping and gouging the tiles as students stood with their phones held high like torches, Tsukiko’s own chair clattering to the floor, Kawakami crying for calm, for someone to call an ambulance. And Futaba herself was forgotten, huddled in the corner, knees pulled up to her chin. From where she sat the desks and chairs stood in parallel like prison bars, and through them, Tsukiko’s whitened, staring eye.

* * *

“And now, the news.

“Tsukiko Minami, age sixteen, was hospitalized this afternoon after falling unconscious during
classes at the prestigious high school, Shujin Academy. Paramedics described her as unresponsive, but in stable condition.

“Minami, described by classmates and faculty as a bright and outspoken girl, had suffered no apparent health issues prior to this incident, and school officials stated that classes will resume as normal while investigations continue. Her parents could not be reached for comment.

“Shujin Academy has been beleaguered by scandals over the past year, and some students anonymously expressed concerns that the school’s reputation would be further damaged by this most recent-”

*click*

> anon: Holy shit the vid of that Shujin girl hitting the floor is lighting the world on fire  
> anon: faaaaaaake  
> anon: lol, guess that’s one way to go home early  
> anon: Parents gonna sue  
> anon: forget sleeping beauty, i want to know more about that redhead, like does she dye it or  
> anon: shit’s fucked yo

*click*

“-widely known as one of the top high schools in Tokyo, had suffered a serious blow last April following the arrest of faculty member Suguru Kamoshida. Kamoshida, a former Olympic gold medalist who served as the school’s volleyball coach, confessed to the abuse and sexual harassment of numerous students under his charge, and further investigations suggested that the school administration had implicitly condoned his crimes. Several months later, the school’s principal, Kyuutarou Kobayakawa, was struck and killed by a truck while en route to the Tokyo police station, and later implicated in the massive scandal around former Prime Minister Masayoshi Shido.

“Shujin’s reputation has held fast in spite of these incidents, but the recent hospitalization of first-year student Tsukiko Minami has once again brought it into the spotlight. Several videos of Minami’s violent fit and collapse have already spread virally online, and school officials are frantically insisting that her condition was not caused by abuse or a hazardous health environment within the academy.

“The incident is not unprecedented. Several similar accounts of the so-called ‘Paranoia Syndrome’ collapses have circulated in recent months, though the prior occurrences were widely dismissed as unrelated or outright hoaxes. However, Shujin’s recent infamy appears to have brought rumors of this mysterious condition to the forefront once more-”

*click*

> anon: Dear Shujin: WTF. Love: Everyone  
> anon: that school is fukken cursed, i swear  
> anon: Isn’t Shujin where that big-chinned gym teacher kept creeping on all his students?  
> anon: that principal looked like a giant pile of pudding in a suit, I’m glad he’s dead  
> anon: PRAY FOR TSUKIKO  
> anon: so is no one going to mention how this is happening everywhere now?

*click*
“-previously explained as panic attacks or cardiac arrests. Other locations have included Stockholm, London, New York City, Los Angeles, and Shanghai, with several more originating within Japan itself.

“The World Health Organization recently dismissed these videos as a memetic hoax, insisting that no pathogen or psychological condition could reasonably manifest on a global scale in such a short time frame. However, several experts have expressed concerns about the incidents, and rumors regarding the videos have been prevalent on numerous online communities and message boards. These communities have widely referred to the illness as “Paranoia Syndrome,” due to the intense anxiety several victims apparently experienced shortly before losing consciousness, as well as the random and inexplicable nature of the sickness itself.

“While none of these rumors have yet been verified, the Paranoia Syndrome cases bear a strong resemblance to another illness that briefly plagued the nearby community of Tatsumi Port Island not ten years ago. The disease, which had variously been given such colorful monikers as ‘Apathy Syndrome,’ ‘the sleepwalking sickness,’ and ‘Midnight Fever,’ emerged with little warning and struck the residents of the city at random, causing severe lethargy and eventual coma. The victims later made a full recovery, and Apathy Syndrome was eventually ruled to be caused by chemical runoff from a Kirijo Group facility nearby. The corporation was heavily fined, and has since been downsized significantly.

“These latest incidents also call to mind the infamous ‘mental shutdowns’ which rocked Tokyo over a period of nearly three years—”

*click*

| * | * | * | * |

[Futaba Sakura has logged in]

FS: yooooooooo
FS: just me checkin in, it’s been a while
FS: entrance exams in like two months right, how’re you holding up
...
FS: ok guess you’re not there
FS: makes sense, you’re probably out with all your old friends
FS: mackin on the ladies with your sweet delinquent cred
FS: “hey there gurl i punched out the Prime Minister, wanna put your mouth on my mouth”
AK: Not really.
FS: omg why
FS: why would you reply JUST THEN
AK: Wanted to see where you were going with it.
AK: Was not disappointed.
FS: you are the absolute worst and i hate you forever. so how’ve you been
AK: Alright. Getting the stinkeye from some people still but it’s no biggie
AK: First few weeks at Shujin were way worse.
AK: How’s school been for you?
...
AK: Heard Kawakami was your homeroom teacher. Don’t embarrass her too much, she gave me a lot of slack last year.
...
AK: You there?
FS: could you call me?
AK: Oh sure, one sec

* * *

Before he even opened his eyes, he knew where he was by the sound.

He’d spent enough time in this room over the last year to notice several of its quirks, beyond the strangeness of its residents and the abundance of blue velvet décor. The air had an acrid tang to it, in his nose and on his tongue, like the dust from long-unused furniture. His skin would briefly crawl upon entry, as if trying to shiver and giving up, because while everything here was built from iron and stone the room appeared to have no chill, or any temperature at all. And then there was the sound – that one high note, relentless and somewhere far above. As if the Velvet Room were a waterglass, and some unseen finger was endlessly running over its rim.

Akira sat up from his stone cot with a grunt and a sigh. He ran a hand through his hair; this didn’t make it noticeably messier. Then, he blinked at his clothes – they weren’t the striped prison fatigues he’d worn on every trip through here in the past, but his old Shujin Academy uniform, immaculately clean and pressed. It was impossible to mistake those pants.

“Welcome, welcome. Please, come forward. The door is open.”

He turned his head. Through the prison cell’s bars was that sole oaken desk, and the blade-nosed, bug-eyed warden patiently tapping his fingers on its surface. His assistant at his side – that white-blond hair, that unlined face, those eyes that never blinked.

Akira pushed open the door. It swung with oiled soundlessness.

“Greetings,” said Lavenza.

“Here we are again,” said Igor. “Welcome to the Velvet Room.” He extended a hand. “And may I compliment you on your choice of attire? A bit nostalgic, but certainly fitting for one who has completed his rehabilitation.”

He walked up to the desk, hands in pockets. He vaguely remembered going back to his studies after hanging up the call with Futaba, and completely failing to concentrate. She’d been shaken. On the verge of tears. Then he had laid down his head.

“Indeed,” said Lavenza, and Akira started. “Dreams are but another doorway into this place.”

“And an invitation once given is never rescinded,” said Igor. “So, may I ask what brings you here?”

Chains. All over, pulling tight. Futaba’s voice cracking as she whispered, I could hear her bones.

“I could hear her bones.”

“I like to believe that my knowledge of the world is quite formidable, but you will have to be more specific.”

“There’ve been stories,” said Akira. “People are calling it Paranoia Syndrome. No one’s leaking black goo from their eyes and mouth, but it definitely reminds me of what we went through last year.” He tilted his head. “Mementos is gone. But this has something to do with the cognitive world, doesn’t it?”
“Recent events have been somewhat troubling,” Igor said, “but rest assured, you have no stake in them this time. Before, you were conscripted into a hopeless game, forced to take on responsibilities far beyond what should have been expected of you. But you rose to the occasion splendidly. You need not concern yourself with every inexplicable crisis that rears its head.”

“Futaba was crying.”

It was exceedingly difficult to stare down two people who never blinked. But after almost a full minute, Igor sighed, and relented.

“Lavenza, my dear,” he said. “If you will.”

She bowed. “Yes, master.”

She padded past Akira, to the prison’s exit. Akira kept his stare trained on Igor. He heard an iron door groan open and slam shut.

When the echo died away, Igor spoke again.

“Your suspicions are correct,” he said. “This bizarre malady does indeed have its roots in the sea of the unconscious – the ‘cognitive world,’ as you put it. The fortress of mankind’s indolence, Mementos, has crumbled, but something yet remains. Something always does.”

“Is this Yaldabaoth again?” Akira asked. “Because I’m pretty sure that I put a hole in his head.”

“The one who usurped the Velvet Room has perished. Of that, there is no doubt.”

“Then who-”

“These creatures which call themselves ‘gods’ are merely productions of mankind’s consciousness, erupting from the roiling Sea of Souls,” said Igor. “From time to time, they grow so fat and corrupt on these distorted desires that they wish to supplant the very beings who first brought them into existence. The Usurper was a product of man’s blind trust in society, his desire to be thoughtlessly, tranquilly led to a secure tomorrow. A common wish. A powerful wish. When an entity of such great influence perishes, its sudden absence is felt. You could say that it leaves behind a ‘hole’ in mankind’s cognition. And the cognitive world, much like the real one, abhors a vacuum.

“Those desires,” Igor mused. “Bereft of their vessel, floating free. They may themselves be usurped by a different entity altogether, empowering it far beyond its natural strength. It has happened before – the end of a so-called deity giving rise to a number of lesser ones, to perpetuate mayhem in the waking world. This latest development is not entirely unexpected, but I had not thought it would occur so quickly, or with such severity. Whatever has filled the hole the Usurper left behind may not be as powerful, but I believe it is no less malicious.”

“So something’s taken what’s left of Yaldabaoth’s power and started putting people into comas,” said Akira. “Any idea who?”

“I cannot say. Mementos is no more, and what remains of the cognitive world has become quite, quite obscure.” He laced his fingers again. “And yet, you seek to venture into that uncharted darkness, on this whimsical errand?”

“There’s nothing whimsical about it,” Akira said flatly. “If I can do something about it, then I will. I didn’t go through all of that craziness last year to just put my feet up and say that this is someone else’s problem.”
“If I recall, you had said that you would entrust the well-being of your world to the adults invested in its future.”

“Right, I had that talk with Sae Niijima. Does Sae have a Persona now?”

“She does not, but-”

“Then it has to be me,” said Akira. “I didn’t come here to get shown the door.”

Igor sighed and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, his rictus grin seemed a bit softer.

“This room exists between dream and reality, mind and matter,” he said. “It can act as a vector to many possible realms. It is indeed possible to venture to the dregs of the cognitive world from here. However, your living flesh poses a hindrance.”

“My what?”

“Your body cannot make the trip,” said Igor. “What stands before me now is not ‘you,’ but a cognitive representation of you – the essence of your being, standing in your image. That is what must make the journey to the cognitive world. In short, you will have to cast your very soul into that dark and treacherous sea.”

That endless, high tone. The sound made Akira’s eyes water.

“The hazards of this act will be immense,” Igor went on. “You will sustain injury no differently than you would had you entered Mementos normally, and you may be vulnerable to other sorts of attack, besides. Should you perish there, your soul will be forever lost. And even if you do not, your body in the waking world will remain incapacitated for the duration of your journey. No different than the victims of this ‘Paranoia Syndrome’ that have so concerned you.” He nodded as Akira’s eyes narrowed. “This would no doubt bring considerable distress to those you hold dear. So I say again – do not make this choice lightly.”

“I could always come back later. Before I fall asleep next time I’ll stick a note on my face saying not to worry, I’m just having an out-of-body experience.”

“That would be a prudent course of action, yes,” Igor chuckled. “But I’m afraid it is not possible in this case. The choice must be made now. This room will not remain open to you much longer.”

“Why? It’s mine, isn’t…” Akira trailed off, and his eyes widened. “Wait. Didn’t this place-”

“Correct. Your Velvet Room is no more. But this is not your Velvet Room.”

He remembered now. After he had retrieved his friends, caged and sunken in the mires of their depression, they’d left the room one more time to confront Yaldabaoth. And as they’d left the chamber had dissolved into countless motes of light like a horde of fireflies, even that high sweet sound fading away, leaving only Igor and Lavenza alone in a great dark void.

But things were different, now that he looked around. The cells lining the Velvet Room’s blue-stone panopticon were warped somehow, as if they’d been exposed to great heat, and they were filled with tarry, writhing shadow – Akira could see the darkness in the cells heave and surge like wax, and through the bars he thought he felt the stare of countless eyes.

“I do not blame you for failing to realize it,” said Igor. “The resemblance is uncanny. After all,” he pointed one long, thin finger upwards, “the fate of this room’s guest was bound quite tightly to your own.”
Akira looked up, and took a cautious step back at what he saw there.

The panopticon, those flat stone walls and those distorted shadowy cages, telescoped out into infinity; he saw the cells going on and on into the fathomless dark overhead. And suspended in the center of the room was an iron box, maybe six feet tall and two feet on a side, lashed into place by innumerable chains hammered into the walls. Barnacled with padlocks, bristling with barbed wire. It would barely fit someone Akira’s size, if that.

“He has been dormant for some time,” Igor said. “But I believe he will awaken soon. It was a fascinating act of serendipity that allowed you to cross into this territory. So great was your desire for answers that it must have brought you to me, wherever I may have been.” He lowered his hand. “But once he awakens, I am afraid my attention will be devoted to him exclusively. So, here and now, of your own free will, make your choice.”

The chained box rattled gently.

“There is no shame in walking away. That, too, is always a choice you can make.”

“No,” said Akira. “It isn’t.”

“That you believe such a thing,” Igor said, tilting his head, “says a great deal about you.”

He raised a hand. Behind him, Akira heard the exit creak open.

“Lavenza has arranged transportation,” he said. “She will attend to you while you are away.”

“I’ll just have to make it quick,” said Akira. “And think up a nice apology present for anyone I’ve worried.”

“No doubt your strength is considerable. But I advise you, do not act rashly. It is unventured territory into which you cast yourself.”

“I know. I’ll be careful.”

“Then farewell, and good luck.” Igor nodded. “It is my utmost hope that we will see each other again, when the seas have calmed.”

Akira turned and left for the exit. On the other side of that doorway was a wall of impenetrable black. He hesitated at the threshold. He glanced behind him, at Igor, and that bound and suffocating cage hanging over him like the blade of a guillotine.

Then he breathed deep, and stepped through.

The door slammed shut behind him and when he looked back again nothing was there. Darkness so deep it was almost solid in every direction. Except directly in front of him. There, he saw a bus. It was unmarked and ornate, that familiar deep blue with gold gilt crawling serpentine across its sides, the windows full of fog. Its engine was idling, and its headlights knifed through the dark.

The driver’s seat was empty, and cordoned off from the rest of the bus by a thick sheet of that same fogged glass. Akira stepped through a second doorway to the side and the barrier slid shut behind him.

The bus’s interior was unusual. Nearly empty, upholstered in thick blue plush, with curtains of that
same fabric running like pennants across its ceiling. That same, dusty smell. And in the center, two chairs and a small table, riveted to the floor. Lavenza was in the nearest chair, her grimoire on the table in front of her. She didn’t turn around at his arrival.

Akira took the other chair and sat down. Lavenza smiled, unblinking.

“It is good to see you again,” she said.

“Likewise.”

“Our driver will be with us momentarily.” A shadowy figure stepped onto the bus from behind the glass barrier. “Ah, there he is now.”

A moment later, the engine coughed into life. Akira felt its rumble beneath his feet.

“Well then.” She laid her fingers delicately on the book’s cover. “Shall we be off?”

“Yes. Let’s go.”

There was no scenery outside the windows, and their destination was unknown. But Akira felt movement, all the same.

* * *

The door to Akira’s bedroom opened a crack. On the other side, at approximately ankle-height, a deep blue eye glowed like a gemstone.

Morgana pushed open the door and walked in. It had actually been shut and locked; Akira kept doing this as if it could stop the cat from coming in whenever he wanted. It was a hilarious joke they shared.

“Hey,” he said. “Didn’t you hear your mom? Dinner’s ready.”

Akira’s bedroom was smaller than the dusty loft he’d occupied at Café Leblanc, and considerably messier – not because he was a slob, but because he’d insisted on displaying every single piece of bric-a-brac he’d accumulated during his stay at Tokyo. As a result, the room now resembled the aftermath of an explosion at a carnival rewards counter. The shelves were mobbed with figurines, mugs and plastic ramen bowls; pennants and posters hung from the walls and ceiling. There was nothing that could be done about the chocolate fountain.

Akira was sprawled out at his desk, head down, hands splayed, his glasses neatly resting on one of the parapets of notebooks by his side. He’d always been studious, but without the imminent threat of existential catastrophe hanging over his head he’d kicked it into overdrive. Morgana suspected, but never asked, that he was saving up leverage to move back to Tokyo once his studies were complete. He got on well with his parents, but that year he’d spent away was always hanging uncomfortably in the air within this house.

“She knows you’re studying so she’s not going to bother you,” Morgana said, “but it’s sushi night, Akira. I gotta get my scraps!” No response. “Geez, are you seriously out?”

He hopped onto the desk and poked Akira’s head with a paw. “Yep, out like a light. I know this sounds weird coming from me, but you don’t have time to be asleep right now.”

Still no answer.
Morgana narrowed his eyes, hunkered down, and pressed hard against Akira’s head with his own. When that still didn’t stir him, he growled and started headbutting.


And that was when Akira, who’d been pushed a little further across the desk with each headbutt, went off-balance and collapsed to the floor. His eyes hidden beneath that wild hair, arms limply tangled around him as if he was holding himself tight. His chair toppled to the ground with a flat clap like a gallows trapdoor springing open.

“Akira?”

Morgana crept to the edge of the desk and looked down. In the hallway outside, footsteps approached the room rapidly.

“…Akira?”

* * *

One day, he had decided to play a game.

He didn’t know when he’d started. He might have been eleven, maybe twelve. Tired of sleeping in so many beds, waking to so many dim and half-remembered rooms. Sometimes he would groggily reach out to open a door only to find a wall, or a shelf, or cold and empty space. He’d once tripped over a chair leg he hadn’t remembered and hit the ground with a soft thump, and lay there quietly until he’d fallen asleep again.

So he’d said to himself, “I know. When I wake up or fall asleep, I’ll just keep my eyes closed. And remember all the rooms I’ve been in.”

With his eyes squeezed tight the world was empty and filled with possibilities. Sometimes he would feel his bed turning in place, so that he was no longer sure which wall he was facing, where he would be with the sun rose. It was exhilarating, for a while.

When everything was empty there was room to move.

So now he kept his eyes shut as always, and imagined where he might be. But something was wrong. His clothes felt different, and icy metal bit into his bare skin. He ran his fingers across what should have been his mattress and felt only crosshatched bars. The walls felt the same, and were far too close. It felt like a cage.

Then he opened his eyes and found that’s where he was.

The cage was bright as chrome, and suspended from the ceiling by a long chain. It jangled gently as he sat up. All around him were walls of blue stone festooned with fabric of deeper blue, and set in those walls were prison cells. The shadows in those cells were much too dark; their movement was amoebic in the murk. He thought he could glimpse eyes in those masses of shadow. Their stare made his skin crawl.

He knew it was a dream even if the sensations were much too real, and when he looked down the dream turned stranger still. Far below him was a desk and at the desk sat a man, spindly-limbed and balding, his face a grotesque avian thing with bloodshot eyes and a nose that extended like a scythe. He was flanked by two young girls in what looked like childish parodies of prison warden uniforms, hats and shorts and blouses, in the same deep blue as the blue that engulfed this room. One girl held a clipboard. The other held a baton.
The man tapped the desk. The girl tapped her clipboard. The girl tapped her baton against the floor. The three of them moved as one, the sounds in perfect unison. The taps regular as clockwork and the dusty air and the staring eyes and that sweet whine from somewhere high overhead, all of it merging and squirming somewhere within him.

He swallowed hard and laced his fingers around the bars of the cage.

“Hello?” he said.

At once, the taps stopped. As one, the three looked up to face him.

“Welcome,” said the man. His rictus grin was unmoving and his voice was an unearthly, tectonic rumble, as though something far larger were speaking through him.

“You are a slave,” said the girl with the clipboard, matter-of-factly, as though remarking on the weather.

The other girl grinned and swung up her baton.

“Want emancipation?”

* * *

He awoke.

He no longer slept deeply enough for dreams to startle him – one minute his eyes were shut and then they were open, pupils wide and glaring at nothing. Part of him was always listening for that sound. The rattle and drag of chains.

He was in an ashen apartment, the photographs blanked as usual, the wallpaper dry as papyrus and peeling away in strips. He’d slept leaning against the wall. He no longer trusted the furniture in this place; it decayed even more rapidly than the buildings themselves. He groaned and rubbed his head, running his finger across the long crack in his helmet. This damage, at least, had not grown worse with time – the blood had dried and flaked away ages ago, and that was all.

He gathered and holstered his weapons and stepped out the apartment and down the stairs. His feet splashed in shallow water when he reached the lobby and at once he stopped and tilted his head again, listening for the sound. Nothing. The stranger was somewhere else, for now.

Hard to determine his location, here. This monochrome waste, this un-Tokyo, was losing its shape more by the day, though of course there was no way of marking time; the landmarks were all breaking down to join the rest of the refuse in this endless dark water. Too cramped for Shibuya, at least the busy part of the district. Maybe Bunkyō. He thought that if he could get his bearings and get to the Scramble he could find Yongen-Jaya again. That seemed a good way to pass the time.

He picked up his feet and started to walk. The city murmured with falling masonry. The water shifted like an eavesdropper in the passing alleys. And before him, flanked by the silhouettes of the rotting buildings, was the sun – round and lusterless and black as a bloodless wound, hanging over all in the iron-grey sky.
Café Leblanc’s basic menu of coffee and curry hadn’t changed since the day of its establishment, and over the years the smell of it had seemingly insinuated itself right into the building’s planks – anyone who stepped inside would be greeted by the jingle of the bell overheard and that spicy aroma on the air, thick as woodsmoke. You could sink into that scent like a warm pillow. It went some way to explaining how Sojiro maintained such a dedicated clientele, despite making absolutely no effort whatsoever to attract customers.

It had been some time since Makoto had come to the café, so when she stepped in and saw Sojiro at the counter she had to resist the urge to shut her eyes and inhale deep. Sae tried her best, but her coffee usually fell somewhere between “tolerable” and “tire fire in a mug.”

“Afternoon,” said Sojiro, raising his cup. “Long time no see.”

He was still skinny as ever and his goatee was still neatly trimmed. His glasses glinted in the dying sunlight that leaked through the open door. He hadn’t changed much in the last year, despite all he’d been through – a few more crow’s feet, maybe. He was one of those people who didn’t age so much as harden up.

“Closer to evening, really.” She shut the door behind her before too much of the heat went out. “It’s getting dark earlier and earlier.”

“It tends to do that, yeah.”

“Am I the last one in?”

“You are, but not by much. Haru just got here about fifteen minutes ago. University’s really keeping you busy, huh?”

“It’s nothing I’m not used to,” said Makoto. “And Sae’s been way less stressed. That helps.”

“Mm. I bet.” He sipped his coffee.

The same slightly faded upholstery, the same dingy CRT in the corner. Makoto gripped the chair nearest the exit and gave it a quick shake; its one leg was as loose as the day she’d first come here. Leblanc was less of a business and more Sojiro’s private fortress against the march of time. Sometimes she thought the whole of Tokyo could blow over and this place would remain standing.

“So how’s Futaba?” she asked quietly.

“Better. She was shaken up pretty bad at first, but last night she got in touch with Akira and that perked her up some. Wouldn’t have minded if he’d given me a call, while he was at it. Haven’t heard from him in a bit.”

“Well, I’m glad that they stay in touch.”

“Yeah. The kid’s a smartass but he has a way with people, I’ll give him that.” He set down his cup. “Should get him far in life. Either that or he’ll just get his teeth punched in. Maybe both.”

She glanced at the TV and narrowed her eyes. The news was on, the screen currently dominated by a still shot of Tsukiko Minami splayed out on the classroom floor. Sojiro followed her gaze, then growled and snapped the TV off.
“Ghoulish shit,” he muttered. “Pardon my language.”

“It’s fine.”

“They’ve got one thing right, at least. That poor girl’s only getting so much attention because of Shujin. Once the media sinks their teeth into a nice scandal you’ve got to break their damn jaws before they’ll let go.” He jabbed a thumb at the ceiling. “Anyway, you’re not here to listen to me complain. Everyone’s up in the loft. Don’t worry about the noise, I’m closed for the evening.”

“Thanks, Mr. Sakura.”

“It’s Boss. We’ve been over this.”

She smiled. “Right.”

“I’m just gonna wash a few dishes and then head out. Lock up when you’re done.”

She dropped her bag in one of the booths and climbed the stairs. She was prepared for the inevitable noise but still cringed at Ryuji’s greeting:

“Whooo! Hey hey, look who finally showed up!”

“Keep it down, you idiot!”

“What? Boss said it was okay!”

“That doesn’t mean you go yelling your head off every time someone comes up the-”

“I rather like it when he shouts, honestly. It’s nostalgic!”

“Yes, I believe we have all established at this point that restraint is not one of Sakamoto’s intrinsic qualities.”

“The hell? When’d you learn how to dunk on people, Yusuke?”

“Inari consults with me often. Under my tutelage, he has studied the art of the dunk. He is a slow learner but an eager one.”

“Not at all. We do speak, but only because Futaba occasionally texts me late at night asking me to draw her favorite video game protagonists in romantic situations. It’s a fine diversion, but-”

“One more word and I’ll drop you where you stand.”

“Nice to see all of you, too,” Makoto said dryly.

The group was sprawled out around Akira’s former bedroom, which, aside from the absence of knickknacks, didn’t look much different than the day he’d left – his crummy secondhand CRT and game consoles were still here, and his desk drawers still contained most of the tools he’d used to fashion his lockpicks during their Phantom Thief days. Futaba was perched at the edge of the bed, Yusuke standing primly in the corner, Haru sitting crosslegged on the desk chair; Ann and Ryuji were on opposite ends of the sofa, still quietly bickering. Out of all of them, only Ryuji had noticeably changed – he’d started to let the dye grow out of his hair, and the blackening roots now gave his scalp the appearance of a bumblebee’s backside.

Makoto leaned up against the stairs’ railing. “How long’s it been since we all got together like this, anyway? Last April?”
“Nah, not that long,” said Ryuji. “Was it that long?”

“It wasn’t that long.” Ann said. “There was Yusuke’s exhibition, and that buffet Haru invited us to…”

“Oh geez, how did I forget that? Okumura VIP’s! Try givin’ us the stink-eye now, you richie-rich douchebags.”

“I’ll make sure to invite you all again if there’s another one,” said Haru. “I’m afraid that upper management is a bit too stuffy for my taste.”

Futaba raised a finger. “Before we go any further, I just want to make it clear that I am a grown-ass woman and do not need anyone to pat me on the head and ask if I’m okay.” Everyone turned to look at her. “But. It’s nice you’re all here.”

“The pleasure’s all mine,” said Makoto. “It’s been too long since I’ve stopped by, anyway.”

“Indeed. The Sayuri’s gaze has grown lonesome without our patronage.”

“I know that I’d be upset if I was in your shoes, Futaba,” Ann said quietly. “I could hear the commotion all the way from our classroom.”

“Hell, everyone could. I thought there’d been a bomb threat, or something,” Ryuji said. “Would’ve kinda preferred that, honestly.”

“And what you said before, about those chains,” Yusuke said. “Most disquieting.”

Futaba shook her head. “I’m, like, seventy-five percent of the way to convincing myself I was seeing things. We all saw the cognitive world fall apart, after all. Maybe it was just a trauma flashback, or something. At least that what I want to think.”

“Yeah, no kidding. We shot a friggin’ god in the head and suddenly it’s like, whoops, sorry, guess it didn’t take!” Ryuji sprawled out in his seat. “Just gotta hope she wakes up soon.”

“I’m poking around online for similar cases in the meantime, but this Paranoia Syndrome thing’s a lot of smoke and no fire so far. All the other video clips are just people falling over, basically. And I don’t see any chains on them.”

Makoto thought of the TV downstairs, frozen on Tsukiko’s contorted body. “Maybe we should change the subject.”

“Hear, hear,” said Ann. “We need to turn this into a positive experience. Let’s go somewhere! Let’s do something!”

“But what, though? Ain’t like we can just rent out Destinyland to ourselves for another night—”

“I could make that happen, if you’d like,” Haru said brightly.

“For real?”

“Sure!” She smiled. “People owe me favors.”

No one pried any further. One thing they’d all learned about Haru was that she was a very sweet girl with a habit of making innocuous statements that had a lot of unsettling questions coiled underneath.
In the silence, they heard the clatter of crockery as Sojiro finished washing up. He then apparently took a phone call:

“This is Sojiro...oh, how’s it going? What? No, no, it’s fine. Closed up shop over an hour ago...”

“Let’s file Destinyland away as plan B,” said Makoto. “It’s getting too cold, anyway.”

“If we could find the time in our schedules, a hot springs resort may be appropriate for the season,” Yusuke said. “Perhaps somewhere in the mountains. A bit of time away from city life does wonders to revitalize the spirit.”

“Not to mention all those landscapes you’d be painting, right?” Ann said.

“Well, yes, of course.”

“If that’s too far off then my rec is Akihabara,” Futaba said, rocking on her heels.

“Don’t you go there all the time anyway, Futaba?” Haru asked.

“Yeah, but it’s better with friends!”

Makoto shook her head. “Maybe someone should be writing all this down-”

“What!!?”

All of them started. Sojiro’s shout had been loud enough to make their hearts skip a beat. And in the intervening silence, they still heard him speaking, a fierce and panicked mutter.

“Sojiro?” Futaba clambered off the bed and down the stairs. “Sojiro, what is it?”

Ryuji looked askance at the stairway. “Sheesh. Wonder what that’s about.”

“I hope it’s nothing serious.” Haru looked worried, as well. “Futaba was having such a nice evening.”

“It’s not just here, either,” said Ann. “Everyone’s seemed really on edge lately. It’s that Paranoia Syndrome stuff. Like, I know Futaba said it wasn’t anything to worry about, but if what she saw was real, then shouldn’t we be thinking of a way to stop it?”

Makoto sighed. “Mementos is gone, Morgana isn’t here, and we don’t even have the Meta-Nav anymore. Where would we start?”

“I get what you’re saying, but-”

“No, no, I know where you’re coming from. But the fact is, we gave up that life willingly. It’s just not our problem anymore.”

Everyone flinched again as the voices downstairs spiked, Futaba crying, “Why won’t you tell me what’s wrong?”

“Ohh, I really don’t like hearing them fight,” Ann whispered.

“What could they be talking about?” Haru fidgeted with the front of her sweater. “I almost want to go down there myself, but-”

She was cut off by a sound that made all their hair stand on end. Somewhere between a gasp and
wail, rising high and then cut short. There was no hope in it.

“Boss?” Makoto called, after a long moment. “Mr. Sakura?”

She backed away from the banister as the staircase started to creak. Sojiro walked up like someone condemned, Futaba close behind. Her face was ashen, her hands shaking.

Sojiro stood before them. He couldn’t seem to look any of them in the eye.

“Sorry about the commotion,” he said. “That was Akira’s parents calling. They, uh… just out of curiosity, did Akira mention any health problems he might’ve been having before he went home? Headaches, anything like that? He didn’t tell me anything, but maybe one of you-”

“No,” said Makoto. “He was fine.” She heard herself speaking but her face felt numb. She could see where this conversation was going, clear as the light of an oncoming train.

“Yeah. Thought so. His folks were just curious, because… well, last night they found him unconscious in his room.” A pause. “He won’t wake up.” A longer pause. “I’m sorry.”

The café had gone quiet enough for them to hear the distant rumble of the trains outside. Futaba had retreated to the room’s far corner. No one seemed to blink.

It was Yusuke who finally broke the silence:

“I believe that this has now become our problem.”

* * *

Here was a bus stop, trapped in the mouth of the evening.

The few people who remained here at this hour bore heavy luggage and spoke little; they stared at their phones and bathed their faces in that cold glow. On some of the screens Tsukiko Minami’s body blinked past, linked and noted and then half-forgotten. The hiss of the passing cars overlapped and chorused until it sounded like halfheard conversation. Senseless gossip, chattering into places unknown.

Eventually a bus trundled beetlelike up to the travelers and they gathered their things and stomped up the steps; as they passed through the door they turned indistinct, shadows glimpsed through the windowglass. No one noticed the other, smaller shadow darting between their ankles. By the time the driver looked into his rear-view mirror the figure had moved down the aisle and leapt into the baggage compartments overhead with liquid speed. Two deep blue eyes stared out of that murk, watching the pattern of light on the ground move and pulse as the bus continued through the night.

* * *

“Our destination is fast approaching,” said Lavenza.

“I wouldn’t mind a change of scenery,” Akira replied.

“You may reconsider that statement once you arrive.”

He wasn’t so sure. The bus was downright palatial and this had to be one of the most comfortable chairs he’d ever sat in, but there wasn’t much of a view and his traveling companion had still not visibly blinked or emoted once since he’d sat down. He hadn’t been tremendously fond of Justine and Caroline – even as they’d warmed towards him, all their interactions really just boiled down to
two different flavors of abuse, and he’d always been mortally afraid of what would happen if he ever got their names mixed up – but now that he’d spent more time around their “true” form, he found Lavenza’s lacquered calm and animatronic mannerisms nearly as disconcerting.

“Is there anything you can tell me about where I’m headed?” Akira asked. “Usually I make a point of gathering more intel before a heist, but, considering the circumstances…”

“I fear that my insight is far more limited than that of my master. I can only tell you that it is a realm of unending decay. Where even ruin itself falls and perishes.”

“Ah. Cheerful.”

“I would disagree with that assessment, but your aesthetics are your own.”

She also had a touch-and-go understanding of sarcasm.

“Under ordinary circumstances, you would be condemning yourself to an early death by venturing there on such a vague errand,” Lavenza continued. “Even the mind cannot withstand the deleterious influence of this realm. Your Personas would weaken and regress, and you would be left unable to defeat this new threat on your own. However.” She laid her hand on her grimoire. “The influence of this Velvet Room shall protect you. Think of it as a door, open the merest crack. A bit of light and air to guide you through the suffocating darkness.”

“I see.” He crossed his arms. “I’m grateful. Not just for this, either. For everything you’ve done.”

“You banished the Usurper and restored my broken form. No recompense can be too great.”

“Will I be able to come back here?”

“Dreams shall remain your entryway,” she said. “You may not actually need to sleep in your current state, but I suspect you will do so anyway, out of habit. When that time comes, if you have need, this room shall await you.”

“And my Personas?”

She smiled. “I thought you would never ask.”

The book between them glowed softly. Akira thought he heard whispering between its pages.

“My master has granted me dispensation to arm you as you see fit,” said Lavenza. “Shall we begin?”

That chained box in the center of the Velvet Room. Coated with so many layers of locks and wire that it resembled a grotesque cocoon.

“Yes,” said Akira. “There’s one in particular that I think I’ll need.”

“Very well. As it happens, there is a saying that my sister is fond of. I have often wished for the opportunity to use it myself.”

Lavenza gripped the book’s cover and flung it open and the interior blazed blue, casting off sparks that hung still and undying in the dusty air like paper lanterns, and the rustle of paper formed yet more whispers that itched behind his pate and inside his teeth; the light lay on Lavenza’s face like paint, no lines on her skin into which to nestle itself, her eyes staring wide into the flames, reflecting them in those glassy pupils, so that it looked as though her own head was aflame within.
“Your fate,” she intoned, “is in the cards.”

*              *              *

Here was a bus stop, trapped in a time that never was.

Akira had finished his business with Lavenza and then sank into the plush of his seat, letting the engine’s rumble lull him to sleep. Now he was on a hard bench, and the air bit with a damp and unpleasant chill. He flexed the stiffness out of his arms and stopped when he saw his hands – those familiar bloodred gloves. He reached to his face and felt the curvature of the domino mask there.

He was on a city street rendered gray and anonymous as a cinderblock wall. The glass overhang of the bus stop was gutted, leaving only a bare metal frame that sagged as if it had passed through a furnace. All the billboards bare, every storefront empty. He recognized the claustrophobic huddle of architecture as Tokyo’s, but this was like Tokyo after someone had come along and taken away everything essential about it, leaving nothing but bleak geometry.

He stood up and heard splashing underneath, then quizzically raised one shoe. The entire street was one giant puddle.

It was the same on the next block, and the next. The familiar weight of his knife and his pistol was nestled in his coat but he kept the weapons holstered and his hands in his pockets, ambling along, head slightly cocked, waiting for the telltale splash of a footstep or the prickle on the back of his neck from any unseen staring eye. None came. No one was here. In some corners and eaves the shadows roiled in a way that was oddly organic, but beyond that, this place was a great gray waste.

“Suffocating darkness,” he said. “Guess she wasn’t exaggerating.”

There was a sprawled shape in one of the alleys. An outline of limbs. He approached it and then stopped at what he saw there.

Human legs and arms welded onto a cracked and stained ATM, the plastic watermarked and almost caved in with rot, the flesh of its limbs varicosed and sloughing off the bone. He recognized these automatons from Junya Kaneshiro’s warped cognition, but they’d been much more numerous back then, and even the “dead” ones hadn’t been in such poor shape. This one was almost dissolving into the water around it. He prodded it with his toe; the plastic had a sponginess that made his stomach turn.

Then, behind him, a monstrous rumble.

Akira whirled on his heel and drew his gun but there was nothing at the mouth of the alley, and as he heard the sound double in on itself he realized that it was coming from a long ways away, echoing across the whole of the city. The groan and the clatter, and vibrations that made the water underfoot shudder.

He returned to the street and looked up and for the first time noticed the black sun overhead, leering down at him. The wind moaned around his ears; it sounded like a taunt.

He touched his mask again. “Are all of you with me?”

No answer, from inside his head or otherwise, but the street briefly lit up as the lip of his mask burned blue. The echoes of that distant avalanche had just begun to die.

Akira nodded, and started off in the direction of that sound.
The woman knelt before him, sobbing, head bowed, tarry dark running down her skin like grease. Her sobs were strangely warped, as if heard through a malfunctioning speaker. She paid no notice to the water soaking through her skirt, or the pistol barrel pressed against her scalp.

“I couldn’t help myself,” she wept, in that fuzzed and distorted voice. “I thought when he grew up it would get easier but it just got worse. My husband walked out. My sister died. All we had was each other. I couldn’t let my little boy leave.”

His visor was still half-broken since that day. An eye the color of rust glared down at her.

“I belittled his dreams…tore up his university applications… I was even going to tie him up in his room so he couldn’t leave home. What sort of mother am I? He should be able to depend on me…” She buried her face in her hands; between her fingers shone that dull golden glow.

It was always the confessions he’d found most tedious. There was something in Shadows that craved recrimination. They would burst from the dark like sores and boast about whatever peccadillo had warped them so, and no matter what he said in response, they took it as an excuse to mutate and attack. So it always went, even in this wasteland. Those patches of surging darkness birthed Shadows; he would often find them standing motionless near such spots, or even clambering out with a sound like tearing meat as they wrenched themselves free of the black waters.

He’d found this woman standing in this abandoned shop like a mannequin, her ingot eyes the only splotch of color visible. She had snarled that he had no idea what it was like to raise a child, the difficulties it entailed. When he’d merely stood and stared she had changed and attacked and he had immediately cut her down. He’d effortlessly navigated entire labyrinths carved from distorted hearts. These fledgling Shadows were nothing in comparison.

The pistol grinded against the woman’s skin as she sobbed and heaved.

“I’m scared of being alone,” she said. “I’m so scared. Of everything.”

He lowered his gun and walked away.

He’d felt nothing when assassinating people within the cognitive world, even at the beginning. They’d fallen to their knees and confessed just as the woman had confessed and he’d shot them and watched them dissolve and then gone on his way. At first he thought it was because of the abstraction of it all – there was no blood or brain or spasmodic twitch, the Shadows just fell apart like a skin of ash – but even when he was able to see the aftermath of the mental collapse, the victims spewing blackness from their pores and clawing from their throats, he still felt nothing. He would just turn off the TV and read or exercise or sit quietly and stare at the wall, waiting for the phone to ring, his own mind as placid and thoughtless as a dial tone.

Here it was the same but reversed. He marked his time by hunting these Shadows, cutting them down, and then walking off as they begged empty air for forgiveness. At first he told himself that he might have been making amends for something, but on a deeper level he knew that rehabilitation meant little if he still felt nothing about it. Mostly it was just for something to do. He no longer killed the Shadows because there wasn’t any purpose in it anymore.

During his early days down here he’d stumbled across the ship, broken and half-submerged, and choked down the urge to turn his head to the sky and scream his throat raw. All of it had been for nothing.
He stepped out into the street and glanced behind him; the Shadow had already gone on its way, a single bright point of light fading like an afterimage. He was in Akihabara now, that much was certain – this was one part of the city that not even the wasteland could make completely unrecognizable. No other part of Tokyo had this many vending machines, even if their guts had been emptied and their glass panels turned smudgy and blind. If he wanted to get to the Scramble he wasn’t going in the right direction.

He turned slowly on the spot, trying to get his bearings, then stopped. His footfalls were echoing oddly. There was some other harmonic buried underneath. Then he listened closer, and felt his throat close up.

The jangle of chains, getting closer.

He hadn’t been caught off-guard like this before. Not in the middle of the street. The first time he’d heard that sound he’d been squatting in a third-floor apartment, and had seen the stranger from a window. Its shape had been fogged and vague from the constant pall in the air but it had still looked threatening enough so that he’d been ready to kill it then and there. But there had been something about it that had put a coldness in him. Even his Personas had hesitated. Then he’d witnessed what it did next, and that had given him reason enough to keep quiet and keep to high ground whenever possible.

His heart jackhammered in his chest but he tried to stay calm. Thrashing about would just alert it. He wanted to pick a direction and run but that rattle was as maddeningly vague as everything else here, it was everywhere at once and coming closer, coming closer.

He finally broke out into a run and ducked into one of the shops and dove behind the counter, huddling in the shadows. To his right was another one of those patches of living dark but nothing climbed out of it. The smallest of mercies.

He pulled his knees up to his chin and squeezed his eyes shut and waited. The sound of chains approached at that same methodical pace. Jangling like cowboy spurs in some old Western. High noon beneath the black sun.

Then the noise stopped. Only the wind remained. It stayed quiet for so long that he began to relax again.

Then an animal shriek of metal on metal and the counter to his side fissured as a length of that mottled chain smashed through and whipsawed tentacular across the floor, sending up that freezing water in spumes, and he clapped his hands over his mouth and cringed against the chill at the questing chain soaked him but didn’t touch him, instead it touched that patch of writhing shadow and tethered itself, snapped taut, and in the streets outside was a clatter and crash and high-tension groan as countless other chains quested through this dead city’s alleys and shops and did the same, and as the chain beside him tightened he heard that tearing-gristle sound yet again and a young girl was ripped from the waters, golden-eyed and soaked with greasy dark, the chain coiled around her chest and her arms and laying atop her skull like a circlet and pulling tight enough so that her whole head seemed distended and she seized madly at the edge of the counter and held out her hand and screamed for help but he kept his head buried between his legs and his hands clapped to the sides of his helmet and wouldn’t look, couldn’t look, didn’t look.

She was torn out and away and the screams were undying. Cries of pain and cries for help and so many of them in languages he didn’t know. A sampling of Shadows from all the world over and wasn’t it strange how agony could be expressed so differently from place to place. The din chorused, and climaxed, and then there was a final sound like a backed-up drain, and then nothing but his ringing ears and the empty streets outside.
He still didn’t move for a long time. He stayed beneath the counter, soaked to the bone, his hands still uselessly clutching his helmet. His head ached immensely, a silver spike just above the temple. And even thought his eyes were shut he could still see it – a single light in the dark, that shard of glimmer, rising up, tumbling down, and he thought the shame he felt was not his own.
Chapter 3

That evening in Leblanc had been cut short by Sojiro’s bad news; he’d said his piece and shuffled out of the café looking twenty years older, and the group’s conversation had turned hushed and terse. Futaba had huddled on Akira’s cot, clutching a pillow to her chest. From the moment she’d come upstairs to when Makoto finally escorted her home, she never said a word.

The rest of them, the former Phantom Thieves, laid what plans they could with what they had to work with. There was now little doubt among them that Paranoia Syndrome was both real and unnatural, if only because they couldn’t imagine Akira, with his unshakable calm and steady leadership and terrible sense of humor, simply keeling over after all they’d been through. A stroke, a bad fall, an allergic reaction – all of these things were too banal to bring him down, and more importantly, they couldn’t be helped or fixed. So it was a certain amount of desperation that drove their plans. A kind of willfully ignorant hope.

And if there was hope, they knew it lay in Akira himself – or, more specifically, in the wide-ranging web of contacts he’d made across Tokyo during his brief stay there. All of them had swapped stories about tagging along with Akira to some restaurant or shopping mall only to see him get stopped and casually chatted up by a doctor or a Shogi champion or a grade-schooler or their own homeroom teacher, and he’d always reacted to these encounters with the exact same unbearably laid-back attitude; Ryuji had once said he’d half-expected to see Akira grabbing ice cream with the Prime Minister, though this was before the office had been filled by a cueball-headed psychopath in designer sunglasses.

Still, they had those memories. And while Akira had never been much of a talker, he’d casually mentioned enough about these other people for them to pool their knowledge into something coherent. Paranoia Syndrome was a malignant rumor, an urban legend with teeth and claws, and anyone who knew anything concrete about it wouldn’t be likely to share their knowledge. But they had Akira’s name, and told themselves that it would be the magic key that would unlock these strangers’ minds and have them spill forth what they knew. On that cold evening, with the café gone dark and city air gone heavy, they took that desperate, ignorant hope, and they placed it in Akira Kurusu’s confidants.

*               *               *

MN: Are we all here?
FS: here
RS: yo
AT: present!
YK: I am here.
HO: Sorry still busy, will catch up soon as I can
MN: It’s okay, Haru.
MN: So, to pick up where we left off.
MN: In Shinjuku there’s a bar called Crossroads. It’s frequented by a journalist named Ichiko Ohya. Apparently she was responsible for the majority of the Thieves’ positive press before things started getting out of hand with Mr. Okumura.
RS: how’d you learn about this place? red light district doesn’t seem your speed
MN: I stopped by a few times with Akira, long story. He also worked there part time.
AT: akira worked in a bar!?
RS: jfc is there anywhere that guy DIDN’T work part time
RS: i swear i saw him behind two different counters on the same day once, thought i was going nuts
MN: Back on topic.
MN: I checked out the magazine Ohya writes for and it’s not exactly reputable, but that might work in our favor. Tabloids cover strange subjects.
MN: And Ohya herself has a history of investigating stories other people ignore. She’d questioned Shujin students about Kaneshiro’s activities before we stole his heart. She was even looking into Shido himself for a while.
AT: damn, you go girl
MN: Are you referring to me or to Ohya?
AT: YES!!!!!! (*^▽^*) /
AT: sorry sorry, serious face now
MN: Either way, I also know the bartender there so I’ll check in with her. If Ohya still frequents Crossroads it’s a good place to start.
YK: Best of luck, Makoto. One of my sordid duties for Madarame was to act as his proxy whenever he was not in the mood to humor the press. From these experiences, I can say that journalists are a dogged bunch, and reluctant to divulge their secrets.
MN: We’ll see.

* * *

As it happened, Ichiko Ohya hadn’t been at Crossroads the night that Makoto stopped in, but Lala Escargot had been happy to lend a hand. Heavy-rouged and purple-haired, the proprietress of the Crossroads Bar was built like a battleship under her kimono and spoke like someone gargling vinegar-soaked gravel, but she had a keen eye and a flawless memory for faces, and remembered Makoto’s fondly. She’d given Makoto the dates and times Ohya stopped in without even asking for an explanation.

Now Makoto stepped through the door and into Crossroads, which brooded under its violet light. The bar was mirror-bright, the air was spiced with lilac; while the place itself seemed sketchy, Lala herself kept it pristine. It was also empty, save for Ohya herself, staring down at the bartop as if she was preparing to kiss her reflection. Lala had said that the place was usually underpopulated when Ohya came around – a paparazzi with a ruthless ear for gossip and a memory that didn’t falter no matter how much booze she basted it in was a bad choice of company for this part of town – but she didn’t mind that much, because the woman also drank as much as her next three best customers combined.

“Don’t ever marry a writer, honey,” Lala had said to Makoto. “They all drink like fish.”

Makoto witnessed the evidence – Ichiko Ohya, a scraggly young woman dressed like a raver five years her junior and holding onto the bar like a ship’s captain in a strong gale. In her immediate vicinity the smell of lilac changed to the acrid whiff of cheap-to-middling bourbon. Makoto was almost impressed; it wasn’t even that late in the evening and already Ohya was so deep in her cups that she could probably dissolve iron by breathing on it.

Lala Escargot’s bulky frame glided across the bar to meet her – the woman was hefty but she moved like someone on ball bearings.

“Welcome,” she said. “How’ve you been, sweetie?”

Makoto smiled and opened her mouth to respond, but then Ohya’s head swiveled towards her. After a moment, she got both her eyes staring in approximately the same direction.
“Heeeey, it’s you!” she said cheerfully. “Hey there, you. ‘s been a long time. ‘s been too long a time.” She turned to Lala. “Who th’hell is she?”

“Makoto Nijima,” Makoto said. “I’d like to speak with you a moment, Ms. Ohya. If you have the time.”

“Makoto here is the one who got rid of Tsukasa for us,” Lala said. “You remember him, right, Ichi? Fifth-rate host? That blonde punk who looked like something the eighties shit out.”

“Ohhh, that guy. I hated that guy. Hated him. Haaaaaated him.” She seemed loathe to let go of the word.

“She caught him trying that dropped-bottle trick on one of her friends and practically had him pissing himself in the middle of the street.” She winked at Makoto. “After that, well, girls quit seeing him so much. He disappeared a few months later. Given his type, my guess is that he had a couple of debts that caught up to him.”

“Ha! Disco Dick Shits a Brick! Host with the Most Found Floating on the Coast! There’s…there’s a headline for, for the ages. God, I hated that guy. Hated, hated that guy. But, but, but y’know what?” She slumped toward Makoto and her voice turned rough, conspiratorial. “That means…I really like you.”

She erupted in a fit of cackling laughter that nearly sent her off her stool. Lala shrugged apologetically at Makoto.

“Sorry, sweetie,” she said. “Ichi here goes from zero to shitfaced in under an hour.”

“I swear to drunk I’m not God!”

“Maybe you ought to come back another night,” she added crisply.

“No,” said Makoto. “I’ll take my chances.”

She pulled up the stool besides Ohya and sat down. Ohya glanced at her, drained what was left of her glass, and in one surprisingly smooth movement slid it over to Lala and rapped the table. Lala rolled her eyes and went to refill it.


“I would like some information, if you can provide it,” Makoto said. “I know that you often pursue stories other people avoid. You were sniffing around Shujin, during that mafia incident.”

“Ohhhh yeah! Kane, Kanewhosisface. Hated that guy. Hated-”

“With that in mind, there’s a certain rumor I’ve been investigating. And I have a hunch that you might have been looking into it, as well.”

Lala discreetly set down Ohya’s glass, stepped away from the bar, and began to polish her other glasses, the default state of any bartender with nothing better to do. Still, Makoto saw that she kept one eye on the door, ready to divert anyone else who walked in.

Ohya grinned and picked up her drink. “Well. Ask away, an’ ye shall receive.”

“What do you know about Paranoia Syndrome?”
And just like that, Ohya’s smile was gone. Her face twisted into something almost like a snarl, her upper lip peeling back from her teeth like a dog’s.

“Ahh, hell,” she said. “An’ here I thought you’d ask me about somethin’ worth a shit.”

“So you don’t know anything?”

“You wasted a train ride, princess.”

“Please.” Makoto’s voice tightened. “Even something you’ve overheard can be useful. There has to be.”

“Hey, Lala! Give the princess a drink on me an’ get her outta here, will you?”

“She’s a minor, Ichi.” Lala didn’t look up from the glass she polished. “We’ve been over this.”

“Well then just get ‘er out! She’s, she’s ruining my buzz!”

Makoto laid her palms flat on the table. “Ms. Ohya. If I understand right, last year you repeatedly interviewed a student from Shujin Academy. Akira Kurusu. Is that correct?”

“Oh! Ohh, is that a threat?”

“No, I-”

“That was a, a threatening tone a’ voice she just used on me! Lala, you hear that?” She waved her glass in Lala’s direction, splattering amber droplets on the bar. “Yeah, I pumped a minor for info. So what? Ain’t no law against it an’ anyway he came to me, so you can jus’ stick that up your ass and drag it out the door.”

“Ms. Ohya, you-”

“I’ve been threatened by professionals, little girl, an’ you ain’t even a gifted amateur.”

“Listen to me, goddammit!” she shouted, and that got Ohya’s eyes to focus again. Lala’s rag stopped mid-polish. Ohya held her glass up like she wasn’t sure whether to drain it or throw it in Makoto’s face.

“I’m a friend of his,” she said, quieter. “We received some bad news from his family earlier this week. He fell unconscious in his room. He’s still comatose.”

A long, significant silence followed. Both Ohya’s and Lala’s eyes went wide.

Finally, Ohya set down her glass. It chattered briefly against the bartop. When she spoke again, much of the slur had gone from her voice.

“Lala. Is the back table reserved tonight?”

“Not anymore, it isn’t. I’ll shout if anyone comes asking.”

“All right. You – Niijima, was it?”

“Yes.”

“Go to the booth in the back and wait for me. Gonna take my drink along.”
The last table in Crossroads was a C-shaped booth in plush purple velvet. Barely a cigarette burn to be seen – Lala really did run a tight ship. Makoto sat down and watched Ohya navigate her way over. She was still clearly drunk, taking small, deliberate steps, and she settled into the seat besides Makoto with obvious relief.

“Okay,” she said. “So I’ll ask this first. You’re really friends?”

“Close friends, yes.”

“They’ve got a phrase for that, last I checked. Might be out of date, don’t know, I don’t listen much to kids these days. But I think it was…partners-in-crime?”

Her eyes were bloodshot but her stare had turned downright intimidating. Makoto could feel it going right through her head, carrying away her secrets.

“You could say that,” she replied. “I never got too intimate with him, though. He could be a real… heartbreaker.”

The corner of Ohya’s mouth twitched. “Nice work with that bald piece of shit.”

“Thank you.”

“So, then. Paranoia Syndrome, was it?” She took a delicate sip from her glass. “Yeah. I poked around a little bit, back when the rumors were just picking up. This would’ve been sometime in September, I think. The first couple of phone clips had gone up online and everyone was pooh-poohing them, but I got a kind of tickle in the back of my head. That tickle usually hasn’t steered me wrong.”

“What did you find out?”

“It’s more what I didn’t find out, really. Here’s a question for you. Assuming that it’s real, how many cases of Paranoia Syndrome would you say there have been worldwide?”

She thought for a moment. “Well, I have it on good authority that there’s been a certain amount of skepticism, or outright suppression of those stories so far. It’s only the video of Tsukiko Minami’s collapse that’s really picked up steam. There have been only a handful of substantiated clips posted before then, so the actual number would be higher. Dozens, possibly?”

“That’s a smart bet.” She took another, deeper drink. “But not my estimate. Try hundreds.”

Makoto’s mouth hung open. She had to struggle to get the words out.

“But… hundreds? That’s impossible! We’d have definitely heard about it if—”

“Oh, you’d have heard about it, huh? You’d have heard about a disease that puts people in comas like someone just hit their Off switch, that doesn’t have any cure or any obvious physical symptoms, and that hits absolutely anyone completely at random? How much trouble do you think a story like that would have spreading around?”

“I assume that you found out,” Makoto said grimly.

“I’m used to getting an editor’s boot on my neck when I go where I’m not wanted. But this was on a whole other level. Every bit of info I could dig up got scrubbed no matter the source. Every lead I had disappeared without a trace within hours. And no one ever tried to threaten me personally, which worried me the most. Shido liked to pair his coverups with a little bit of violence, you
know? Because in the end he was small-time enough so that he still needed to find anyone inconveniencing him and shut 'em up for good. But this was concerted on a massive scale. Like higher-ups all the world over had people dedicated to stamping rumors of Paranoia Syndrome out as soon as they started to pick up steam.” Ohya waved a hand dismissively. “My guess is that hospitals all over are having an awful lot of trouble treating these people. These comas have no symptoms, they can be written off as anything. All those grieving relatives, wanting answers, getting none. You’re probably not the first bunch that lost someone close to them and went on the warpath over it. I’m surprised it’s taken this long for the rumors to boil over.”

“Do you think that someone in government could have been responsible for it? For Paranoia Syndrome itself, not just the coverup. Like Shido with the mental shutdowns?”

“You know, I really don’t,” she said. “Because no one’s trying to lay blame yet, see? My hunch, and it’s just a hunch, is that some important people began to notice these Syndrome victims a while after it really kicked off – maybe some politician’s mistress keeled over, who the hell knows – and ever since they clued into it, everyone’s been in this big panicky rush trying to suppress the news and find a culprit. They don’t want to point fingers until they’re absolutely sure they’ve got the right scapegoat. But they can’t, because they can’t find the cause for it, so all they can do is keep quietly burying the truth.” She smiled ruefully. “But the truth gets out. It always does.”

“So you think it’s real.”

“Yeah, I do.” She drained the rest of her glass and slammed it on the table. “God. That poor kid.”

“We’re looking into it,” Makoto said. “This has become our concern now, as well.”

“Yeah? You gonna dig into it like I did? Cure the world? Reform society all over again?”

“If we have to.”

“I had a partner,” Ohya said quietly. “She got a little too close to Shido and wound up in a hospital bed of her own. Mental shutdown, that old story. Our mutual friend Kurusu helped me find her. I thought that, maybe once Shido was exposed and this country got some of its senses back, she’d get better.” She stared at the wall. “She didn’t. Some things you can’t fix, kid. The sickness runs too deep. All you can do is pull yourself together and soldier on.”

Makoto clenched her fists and her knuckles crackled like cellophane. Ohya glanced over at her and seemed to shrink back in her seat. There was something animal in Makoto’s eyes.

“You haven’t seen what we can do,” she said. “If the sickness runs deep, we’ll rip it out all the same.”

Ohya blinked, then smirked.

“Man, you kids. So full of hope. Saddest thing I ever saw.” She flicked out a card between her fingers like a magic trick and slid it across the table. “Maybe give me a call when you’re done. I’ll blow this story right off its hinges.”

Makoto pocketed the card and nodded. “Thank you for your time, Ms. Ohya.”

“Ichiko. And when that little punk Kurusu wakes up, tell him to get in touch sometime.”

Makoto stood up, bowed to her and to Lala, and stepped out of the bar and into the night.

After the door swung shut, Ohya pulled herself up and hobbled back to the bar. She slumped in
“Slow night,” she said.

“Yeah. Real slow. Looks like my reservations all canceled. There’s a bad vibration in the air.”

“Get me a soda or something. I’ve gotta take the edge off.”

“Coming up.” She turned, then stopped. “You really think those kids can do anything?”

“Who the hell knows.” She shook her head, then chuckled. “But if someone really is responsible for all of this craziness, then I think that Nijima girl is gonna take ‘em apart.”

* * * *

**YK:** As it happens, my business will also take place in Shinjuku.  
**YK:** I often sojourn to the planetarium to seek inspiration in the tranquility of the starry skies. During one such trip with Akira, the subject of astrology was raised, and he mentioned to me that he also finds comfort in prognostication. In particular, he would pay regular visits to a certain fortune teller based at a small booth in the Red Light District.  
**YK:** He would consult her often before major operations and claimed that her skills were formidable. Kurusu is often prone to understatement, so coming from him that is high praise indeed.  
**YK:** Our current predicament is unorthodox, so an unorthodox perspective may aid us greatly in determining its source.  
**RS:** dude holy shit that took you like fifteen seconds  
**RS:** do you have robot thumbs or something  
**YK:** My manual dexterity is not the subject of discussion here.  
**RS:** and fortune telling? seems kinda farfetched  
**AT:** …………………  
**AT:** ryuji, last year you fought monsters with a pirate skeleton that lived in your brain  
**RS:** yeah i know but fortune telling is  
**RS:** it’s like  
**RS:** actually n/m there’s no coming back from that  
**AT:** good boy!  
**YK:** I will inform you all of the fruit of my investigations when next we rendezvous.  
**RS:** imma pour one out for captain kidd tonight  
**RS:** miss you bro  

* * * *

Chihaya Mifune’s fortune-telling booth was set up at one of the busiest thoroughfares in Shinjuku. This was not an accident. Most passersby took one glance at that little table and the New Age reject sitting serenely behind it and dismissed it as a marketing gimmick, a calculated move to snatch customers out of the endless passing throng. They weren’t incorrect – even if Mifune had broken loose of the ADP’s corrupt grip, a girl still had to get paid – but mostly she stayed where she was for the people-watching.

If she let her gaze focus just so, then she could see them, coalescing out of the air like a Magic Eye picture – those gossamer threads that filigreed everyone around her, the snarled warp and weft of their fates. As a girl she’d suffered no end of persecution for trying to describe these strings to people, and now she kept quiet about it even to her best customers, but she never tired of the sight.
The threads of fate knotted from one person to the next; they slipped loose or waved their loose ends as if bidding goodbye to chance encounters that would never take place again. Sometimes she thought she could reach out to these people’s lives and strum them like guitars.

But instead she had the Tarot. Through those cards she could weave this tangled mass into something briefly coherent. It was more than enough for her purposes.

She sat serenely in place, heedless to the growing chill, her breath coming out in small white puffs. It was mid-afternoon, and the setting sun turned the streets a sweltering orange, the shadows growing long. She watched the movement of that light, until she felt a bothersome sensation on her left cheek. A faint itch, like insect legs on her skin. She turned and nearly jumped out of her chair.

Squatting behind her booth was a young man, dark-haired and dark-eyed and almost unhealthily thin, his long limbs looking as though they would snap just from bearing up his meager weight. He wore a Kosei school uniform, stained bloody by the sunlight, and his stare was intense.

“Please face forward,” he said. “You have a beautiful profile.”

“Oh!” She turned back, feeling heat rise in her cheeks. “Er…thank you?”

“Think nothing of it.”

An awkward minute passed.

“Erm, I beg your pardon, but are you here to have your fortune told? It’s just…you may be scaring off potential customers…”

“Ah, yes. My apologies.” The boy stood up and stepped over and sat down opposite her. All of his movements were strangely graceful, the limbs collapsing like a folding fan. He subjected her to another several seconds of that laser-point stare before apparently remembering to introduce himself.

“My name is Yusuke Kitagawa,” he said. “I believe we share a common acquaintance. Did you happen to do business with a Shujin student by the name of Akira Kurusu?”

Her face lit up. “Are you a friend of Akira’s? That’s wonderful! Is he well?”

“It was my understanding that you often consulted the fortunes of people you knew to satisfy your own curiosity.” The boy’s severe expression did not so much as flicker. “Have you done this for Akira recently?”

“Oh, no. You’re right that it’s a bad habit of mine, but lately the cards have…anyway, it’s irresponsible of me.” She nervously smoothed her skirts, tried to smile.

“Then I would like to request a fortune of my own. Please, could you look into Akira’s future? I am a bit short on funds at the moment, but if you accept barter, I have several interesting pieces that could-”

“Please say no more. If you’re a friend of his then this is free of charge.”

“You are far too kind.”

She nodded and shuffled her cards, then held them suspended over the table. An odd electricity filled the air.
“Hmm…hmm…”

She held that long, low hum, a tone that Yusuke felt in his teeth. Then she pulled out the cards and laid them in that familiar configuration, two east, two west, one north, one south, one center.

As she reached out to the first card, Yusuke did not look down to see what she had drawn. Instead, he watched her face. He watched her smile broaden a bit as she flipped over the first card, then drain away. Her eyes widened. She grew paler. By the time she reached out to the center card her hand was trembling and her pallor was that of someone already dead.

She flipped over the final card and let out a long, shuddering breath.

“Well?” said Yusuke. “What do you see?”


“I find many of the decks too pastoral for my taste, but the Visconti-Sforza deck has a certain antiquarian appeal owing to its deliberately weathered coloration. The baroque style and subversive history of the Thoth Tarot also possesses an illicit thrill. Of course, there are too many independent decks to name. I’ve always rather wondered if there might not be an art show where they could be—”

“I, er, meant the symbolism of the cards themselves. Not the artwork.”

“Oh. I know nothing of that, my apologies.”

“Then see here.”

Mifune placed her finger on the top card like a divining rod. It slid around the cards’ layout as she spoke.

“Here we have the Trickster – your friend Kurusu’s patron card. He travels in the shadow of the Tower, a cataclysm whose echo still reverberates. Lashed to his side, reversed Justice – a broken, poisoned morality. Death and the Hanged Man, both reversed. Stasis without rest, stagnation without enlightenment. The Devil, lying in wait to ensnare the unwary. Judgement, but for whom? And here, hanging over everything…” She touched the center card. “The reversed Star.”

“What is the significance of that card?”

“The Star is inextricably linked to the Tower – a great disaster that strikes at the very foundations of a person, a thunderclap of truth tearing open their world. After they escape the wreckage of the Tower’s collapse, the Star is supposed to lead them to a brighter future. But if the Star is reversed? The revelation brought about by the Tower is a distorted one. The answer at which you arrive only mires you in grief. Instead of progress, paralysis. Instead of the light of hope, the blackness of despair.”

She leaned back and tried to smile again. “I’m sorry. I know my language tends toward the dramatic.”

“It is a dire fate,” said Yusuke. “Only fitting that it be accompanied by dire words.”

She wondered if the boy was making fun of her. But something in Yusuke’s rigid posture and grim expression suggested that he had a very limited sense of humor.
“The reversed Star is an ill omen at the best of times,” she said, “but for it to hold dominion over so many wicked influences is…well. Akira’s future shows him lost in a very dark place, with evil on every side. I fear deeply for his safety. Is he in some sort of trouble at the moment?”

“I’m afraid he is. And his current state is not dissimilar from what you have foretold.” He looked down at his lap, those fine thin fingers knotting together. “And yet it confirms a further suspicion of mine. That his predicament is far more than it appears on the surface.”

“Can I tell you a secret?” she asked. Yusuke nodded. “It’s not only Akira whose future has darkened. That’s why I stopped peering into everyone’s fates on my own. After that incident last Christmas, the cards had nothing but good news. But over the last several months all of my predictions have grown steadily more foreboding. It’s almost as if fate is being corrupted, somehow.”

“Corrupting fate? What could do such a thing?”

“I don’t know.” Her lips thinned. “Something truly unspeakable.”

The cards transfixed them both. Around them the chatter of the crowd continued, growing more raucous as Shinjuku slid into the evening. Then Mifune looked up, and spoke with steel in her voice.

“We mustn’t lose hope. No fate is irreversible. Akira taught me that himself.”

“Indeed. Rest assured that my friends and I will salvage this, no matter the cost.”

“Please let me know if there’s anything else I can do.”

“You have set us on the right path. The value of that alone is immeasurable.”

Yusuke stood, his scarecrow-thin silhouette blotting out the neon lights around them. Ever since she had first laid eyes on him, his expression had barely changed.

“My thanks,” he said. “Should we meet again, I would like to draw you. If that would be acceptable.”

She felt the blush rise again in her face. “Um. Certainly. I wouldn’t m-mind that at all.”

He nodded. “Until that day comes, then.”

He walked away and she watched the crowd swallow him.

Mifune thought briefly of consulting her own future after this encounter, but decided against it – even if she did somehow draw the Lovers, the boy had been so eccentric that she didn’t know if that would be a good fortune or a bad one. Instead she settled back in her seat, tried to quiet the unease that had taken root in her chest. But now even that shimmering weave of fate seemed distorted. As her vision swam, those delicate, beautiful threads turned menacing and coarse. Coiling around these people like chains.

* * *

RS: my candidate’s a no-brainer at least
RS: drumroll please
RS: munehsa iwai, the totally not-at-all spooky dude who sold us all our guns
MN: I’ve met him. His bark is worse than his bite.
MN: Not certain why you would consider him a good source of information, though.
RS: that’s where our boy akira comes in
RS: he told me that iwai’s got underground contacts. tats and tantos, you get me?
RS: dunno how he found that out, but……
FS: he worked at the store part-time.
RS: are you KIDDING ME
RS: ugh, whatevs
RS: either way a guy tapped into channels like that’s a pretty good bet on knowing stuff outta the mainstream
HO: Ooh, ooh! I want to talk to him!
RS: so i’ll just stop by and wait what
RS: what
RS: how
HO: Hi, everyone! I ducked into the ladies’ room
MN: Good to have you, Haru.
AT: hi haru!!!
HO: Hi hi!
RS: ok can we back up a sec about the whole haru meeting the scary airsoft man thing
HO: Is that not okay??
RS: no it’s cool, i mean, it’s just that you ain’t one of his regular customers and he’s kind of a huge dick to newbies, so
HO: I should be fine. I actually wanted to see him last year, but then the Thieves broke up and there wasn’t any reason to go anymore. Now I finally have my chance!
HO: ゚( ・_・) ゚
RS: well if you think you can handle it then that’s okay i guess
AT: it’s okay, ryuji
AT: *pat pat*

* * * *

The airsoft shop “Untouchable” was a little forbidding at the best of times, but only the most serious of enthusiasts braved its depths during the colder months. Sales generally dipped in winter and the dry air meant that the guns had to be constantly monitored for static buildup, and this put Munehisa Iwai in a foul mood that rarely broke before the weather did. And no one wanted to cross Iwai. His Yakuza ties were one of the worst-kept secrets in Shibuya.

He sat behind the counter now, a newspaper in his grip and a lollipop between his lips. When the bell over the door jingled, he lowered the paper just enough to lance the newcomer with his glare.

It was a young girl with a bright smile and a pillowy fluff of hair, wearing a fur-trimmed coat that looked like it cost more than half the pieces in his shop. She stood expectantly in front of the counter with her hands folded at the waist. Among all these imitation instruments of death, she stood out like Iwai at a dance recital.

He raised the paper again.

“Excuse me,” said the girl. “Are you Mr. Iwai?”

“Yep.”

“If it’s not too much trouble, I’d like to ask you a few questions.”
“Nope.” He turned the page. “Leave.”

Time passed. He lowered the paper. The girl hadn’t budged.

“You got a hearing problem, kid?”

“I just need to speak to you for a minute or two.”

“Sweetheart, you don’t wanna know the things I do to solicitors.”

“Oh, I’m not selling anything! Although…no, this isn’t the time. But I believe you would be able to assist me and my friends with something important. I would just-”

“You know what this place is?”

She peered around the room, crowded with glinting gunbarrels, Kevlar samples, anonymous twists of metal and wire that made up the guts of any respectable weapon. The jagged craze of metal leered down at her like it wanted to eat her up. Her haircut bobbed in place a bit as she turned back to him, still with that smile, which Iwai was beginning to find very irritating.

“It looks like a very respectable shop,” she said.

“It’s a specialty shop. Know what that means? It means I get to pick and choose my clientele. And you, little girl, ain’t my clientele.” He smacked the paper down on the counter and leaned forward. “So get out before I grab you by the scruff of that coat and throw your ass outside like a stray cat.”

She said nothing, though that smile did seem to stiffen. Instead she turned to a rack beside Iwai’s counter, and her face somehow lit up even further. Iwai nearly bit through his lollipop as she reached out to the display pieces.

“Hey, don’t touch! That ain’t for-”

“My goodness! Is this a GP-25 Kostyor? It looks so much bigger than in the photographs!” The oily black grenade launcher had a barrel so big she could have stuck one of her tiny fists inside of it, but she hoisted it up with no apparent effort. “I don’t have much use for the underslung models, but I’ve always appreciated the rustic simplicity of Soviet design. Americans have more cutting-edge tech but they can get a little excessively *tactical*, if you know what I mean.”

The lollipop in Iwai’s mouth drooped. “I, uh…”

“Though I have to admit, the mounting gear on this particular model looks far too busy. A bit like it already exploded halfway, don’t you think?” She gave the gun a disappointed little tut-tut sound and replaced it on the rack. “You wouldn’t happen to have any China Lake replicas, would you? I appreciate the drum clips of most of your stock but they move the center of gravity too low for my liking. The pump-action design should help my accuracy. Though not too much! I’m afraid I’m useless without a decent blast radius, ha ha.”

Iwai’s face was that of a man lost at sea, with angry black clouds on the horizon.

“We, er, ain’t got any China Lakes at the moment. I could place an order, maybe, but. Um.” He cleared his throat. “Nothing right now. No.”

“That’s a shame.” She gently placed her knuckles on his counter and leaned forward, still smiling. “We don’t have to talk about that, though. We can talk about something else.”
In those soft brown eyes Iwai saw the gleam of cities on fire.

“What’d you have in mind?” he said. Somehow he kept his voice from squeaking.

“I’m a close friend of Akira Kurusu. I believe he used to work here?”

That made Iwai perk up. “Kurusu? Shit, why didn’t you just say that in the first place? Uh, pardon my language. How’s he doing?”

“He’s not well.” The smile was gone. “He’s not well at all.”

Iwai stared. For a moment there was only the drone of the ventilators overhead, filling the silence between them. Then he gripped the lollipop stick between his teeth and sat to attention, the brim of his hat pulled low.

“Tell me everything,” he said.

Haru did. As she talked, Iwai’s face remained stony. Maybe his jaw set a little tighter, maybe his knuckles whitened, but that was all. When she finished, his lollipop twitched as if nodding in agreement.

“Paranoia Syndrome, huh.” He cursed again under his breath. “And what makes you think I’d know anything about it?”

“I believe the answer to that would be obvious.”

“You’re a to-the-point kind of lady, huh. I can respect that. But I ain’t got much that’d be of use.”

“Please, try me.”

He gnawed his candy as he pondered. “If you’re wonderin’ if this sickness was because of something the Yakuza did, then you’re wrong. Matter of fact, I heard it down the grapevine that a couple of Clan members were among the first to collapse. Not anyone I knew, mind you. This’d be over Kabukichō someplace. But it damn near kicked off a war. These guys who went down, they weren’t nobodies. Everyone took it for an assassination, at first.”

“What changed their minds?”

“Few guys from other clans went down a couple weeks later. This was all in late September, early October. None of this shit made the news, I tell you what. Pardon my language.” He sighed. “After that, everyone just hit this kinda cautious stalemate, waiting for what’d happen next. Well, looks like we’re findin’ out. This Paranoia Syndrome thing is cuttin’ people down the world over. But it’s weird how it bumped off a half-dozen Yakuza guys in Japan so early, considerin’ how rare other cases have been. Bit of a statistical anomaly, ya think?”

“It does seem unusual. But we know so little about the sickness that everything surrounding it is strange. Hence why I came to you.”

“There’s not much else I can tell you. But you’d better keep an eye out for trouble, little miss. Because if this goes on much longer, there’s going to be a whole world of it rollin’ in.”

Her brow furrowed. “More than there already is?”

“I mean, let’s look at recent history. Whenever a buncha civvies get hurt or freaked out and can’t understand why, it’s usually terrorists or cartels or somethin’ that take the blame. But I seriously
doubt that any organizations like that are responsible for this unless they found themselves a damn genie in a bottle. The civilians blame the crooks, the crooks blame the government, and the governments blame each other. And that,” he said, voice darkening, “is when you really oughta worry, because when nations get pissed, missiles start to fly.”

“Do you really think it might come to that?”

“Well, I’m just an old ex-crook running a hobby shop, what do I know. But I got a real bad feeling about this Paranoia Syndrome business. No one knows anything about it and it keeps gettin’ worse by the day.” He sighed again and hung his head. “And now Kurusu’s down with it? Man, I got a son his age. Sometimes I wonder what the fuck kind of world I’m tryin’ to raise him into. Pardon my language.”

“No, I understand what you mean.” She gathered her coat around herself and shivered. “Even before Akira fell ill, I’ve felt apprehensive. In a way, as awful as it sounds, I’m almost grateful for what’s happened.” Her eyes narrowed. “It gives me a target.”

“Yeah, uh, speakin’ of which. I’ll see if I can put in a rush order for a China Lake. Give you a decent price, too.”

“I would appreciate that. It may come in useful.”

“Somethin’ I never quite understood. You kids know these things are just glorified toys, right? Why’re you actin’ like they’re real?”

“Let’s just say…the power of make-believe.” She smiled again. “Have a good evening, Mr. Iwai.”

“Don’t think I ever caught your name, Miss…”

“Okumura. Haru Okumura. I’m a small business owner, like yourself.” She waved. “Maybe we can talk shop again sometime.”

With that, she mercifully turned and left. Iwai sat in the empty shop, twirling his lollipop between his fingers, trying hard to place where he’d heard that name before. It didn’t click until later that night, and when it did, he nearly choked on his dinner.

* * * * *

“And now, the news.

“Authorities have expressed disapproval of the ever-increasing number of ‘Paranoia Syndrome’ videos circulating online, saying that the rumors of this mysterious sickness have served only to increase public unrest. After the video of Shujin student Tsukiko Minami’s collapse became a viral sensation, similar clips have spread rapidly across the Internet. All of them show people in various states of distress before apparently falling unconscious.

“Paranoia Syndrome began as an online rumor in response to several incidents worldwide where people inexplicably passed out and remained comatose, with no other obvious physical symptoms. The World Health Organization continues to deny that the sickness exists, arguing that the number of victims has been wildly overstated by so-called ‘copycat’ videos staged to mimic the intense anxiety and subsequent loss of consciousness displayed by Tsukiko Minami prior to her hospitalization. A representative from the National Public Safety Commission also condemned the Minami video as a ‘gross display of voyeurism’ offensive to Minami and her family, and called for it to be taken down wherever possible.
“Minami’s relatives have declined comment.

“While medical professionals have thus far remained silent on the veracity of Paranoia Syndrome or the number of its victims, online communities have decried the government’s response, with several petitions circulating to, among other things, conduct a census of coma patients throughout Japan—"

*click*

> anon: oh look at that, a government cover-up. what a shock
> anon: lolololol do people seriously believe this shit
> anon: If I were Tsukiko’s parents I’d be SO PISSED OFF right now.
> anon: my homeroom teacher’s been out sick for a while……
> anon: KEEP CIRCULATING THE TAPES
> anon: swear to god i saw a guy go down in the subway just the other night, people were losing it
> anon: How’s it looking in the States right now?

*click*

“-response to public outcry, a spokesperson for the Minister of Health, Labor, and Welfare issued a public statement regarding the ‘Paranoia Syndrome’ rumors circulating throughout Japan. While the veracity of the rumors themselves were neither confirmed nor denied, a number of advisories were issued in regards to safety and preparedness.

“Paranoia Syndrome is allegedly preceded by the following symptoms: excessive sweating, sudden chill, heart palpitations, and a feeling of ‘being watched.’ The symptoms emerge without warning, and loss of consciousness follows minutes afterward. If you experience these symptoms, do not panic. Move away from crowded areas or thoroughfares, call for help, and await medical assistance.

“The Minister also requested that further recording of these incidents cease, out of respect for the victims as well as—”

*click*

> anon: wait, they’re fucking ADMITTING it now!?!?!!
> anon: HOLY SHIT
> anon: Government’s so spineless they’ve got to play along with a stupid meme.
> anon: they seriously don’t want news of this getting out anymore, what the hell is going on
> anon: keep recording everything or the terrorists win
> anon: guys i’m actually kind of freaking out
> anon: It’s the flu, or something. It’s got to be.
> anon: WHERE ARE THE PHANTOM THIEVES WHEN YOU NEED THEM

*click*

> anon: Tomorrow, it could be you.
RS: so if haru’s gonna chat up iwai then that leaves me with
RS: uh
RS: kinda drawin a blank actually
MN: How about Yuuki Mishima? He was the Phan-Site’s former administrator, so there is a
connection.
RS: NOT MISHIMA
FS: ugh not the npc
HO: Aww, but he’s so nice!
RS: i mean don’t get me wrong, we’re bros and all, but now that the phansite’s gone he doesn’t
really know any more than the average guy and he will FLIP THE FUCK OUT if i tell him what
happened to akira
MN: I suppose you’re right. He always did seem a bit high-strung.
RS: yeah the dude’s studying for entrance exams, he doesn’t need this shit in his life
AT: that’s awfully considerate of you, ryuji
YK: I agree with him. We are choosing these people based on their close bond with Akira, so it is
quite likely that enlisting their aid will bring them significant distress as well. We should be
cautious as to whom we approach and how we deliver the news.
RS: i think i’ll just walk around town for a few nights, get a feel for things
RS: maybe ask people off the street if they’ve seen anything weird, i dunno
HO: Ryuji, are you sure you wouldn’t rather meet with Mr. Iwai? I can take a rain check, it’s fine
RS: nah it’s cool
RS: need to stretch my legs anyway, clear my head a little
MN: I understand. We’re all shaken up right now.
FS: can we please move on already?

* * *

Bad vibrations in the Tokyo air. On its surface the city remained the same mad jumble of color and
light as it always had, unsleeping and unrelenting, the streets packed with bodies and their endless
halfheard conversation, the glint of phone screens reflected off ten thousand panes of glass, the
silhouettes glimpsed through lit windows ten or fifteen or twenty stories up, the air spiced with
street food and smog. Lit billboard mascots leered down from skyscrapers like infantilized
renditions of hungry gods; at the Scramble the crowd’s chatter was enough to make one’s skull
rumble and the 109 loomed over all like some dark and forbidding idol. In this familiar chaos it
would be easy to miss how more and more people wore surgical masks, or how the people
browsing their phones often bore an expression that could only be described as fascinated terror, or
how everyone simultaneously flinched and turned their heads whenever some unseen voice cried
out above the city’s usual volume. Everywhere, a gnawing anxiety.

Ryuji stood in the station square, leaned up against the closed lottery booth, trying to look
nonchalant. Nearby was a loose group of about two dozen people. Most of them were wearing
masks. None of them would look up from their phones. He sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

“The hell’s goin’ on?” he muttered. “That video at Shujin wasn’t even a week ago.”

He wanted to break something.
Ryuji took his friends’ ribbing in stride, but in truth he was all too aware of his shortcomings – bad grades, big mouth, terrible posture, even worse temper. That last one bothered him the most; he couldn’t seem to keep a lid on it. Last year, when Haru’s father had dropped dead on live TV and the public’s accusing finger had pointed squarely at him and the rest of the Phantom Thieves, he’d nearly smashed Akira’s couch in half in his fury at being so easily duped. During his time with the Thieves he’d vented out his bottomless frustrations on Shadows’ faces, but when the cognitive world disappeared that stopped being an option. So he’d decided to man up, let his hair begin the slow and painful journey back to its natural color, and find a healthier way to keep himself in check.

Running helped. Whenever something pissed him off he’d lace up his shoes and burn out his tension alongside the calories. But now he thought he could run his soles down to melted rubber and still not change anything. He wanted to put his fist through a plate-glass window just to break this weird spell hanging over the city streets. A loud and frightful noise to drag everyone out of their own heads and into the world.

He decided to get dinner instead.

It was dusk and the beef bowl shop on Central Street was packed, but Ryuji managed to squeeze into a stool at the counter. Grease hung in the air like candlesmoke and the smell was already making him drool. He ordered a large beef bowl and when it arrived he broke his chopsticks with the air of a samurai unsheathing his blade. Two minutes later, the bowl was already half-empty.

“My, my. That’s one impressive appetite you’ve got.”

Ryuji gulped down his latest mouthful and glanced over. The comment had come from the man sitting beside him – middle-aged, paunchy, dressed in a suit rumpled from long hours of use. He looked like a gently deflated balloon, but his expression was good-humored enough.

“Uh, yeah,” he said. “Sorry if I, like, sprayed you or something.”

“Haha. Not at all. I was actually a little impressed. When you get to be my age you can’t pack it away like that without suffering later.” The man’s own small bowl was empty. “You wouldn’t happen to be an athlete, would you? If you don’t mind my asking.”

Ryuji blinked. “Yeah, good catch. I’m runnin’ track right now.”

The man didn’t look like much but he had a good voice, deep and sonorous. Ryuji thought he’d heard it somewhere before but couldn’t quite place it.

“Ah, a runner. I thought as much, with your build.” The man smiled. “At it happens, I was running for a long time, as well. For office, that is.”

The silence that followed was palpable.

“Um…right.” Ryuji tried, unconvincingly, to laugh. “Good one.”

“It’s okay. I know that was awful.”

“Oh, thank God.” Now his laugh was sincere. “I mean, I didn’t wanna say anything, but-”

“No, no, it’s impossible to mistake the face of someone who’s heard a really terrible pun. Like you just passed an onion under their nose. It’s a cruel pleasure of mine, I’m afraid.”

“You’re kind of a weirdo, old-timer.”
“Guilty as charged.”

They laughed again, this time loud enough to make some of the other patrons peek up from their bowls. Ryuji didn’t particularly care; this was a relief after the last few days stalking through the pervasive wrongness that had curled around the city streets. Then his eyes widened and he pointed his chopsticks at the man.

“Hey, now I remember! You’re that guy who kept givin’ speeches at the square last year!”

His eyes twinkled. “Ah, so you heard those, did you? Yoshida Toranosuke, your humble servant.”

“Yeah, I’m not really into, like, politics, but I hung around and listened to ‘em once or twice. It was weird to hear a guy your age actin’ like he, you know, gave a shit about people.”

“Oof. Bit damning of my generation, don’t you think?”

“Hey, I call ‘em like I see ‘em.”

“Don’t be ashamed of that. It’s a valuable quality.” Toranosuke sighed and steepled his fingers on the counter. “As it happened, I finally won re-election last winter, though I don’t know if you can really call it ‘re-election’ after a twenty-year hiatus. Either way, I’m back in the Diet now.”

“Congratulations, man. Seriously.”

“Thank you very much. Of course, with the way things are in that place, sometimes I wish I was back on my soapbox in the snow.”

“Yeah, I bet.” Ryuji clicked his chopsticks together a few times, then leaned in and lowered his voice. “Hey. You mind if I ask you somethin’? Like, off the record?”

“We’re not exactly on the record to begin with here, so ask away.”

“Is anyone in the Diet talkin’ about that Paranoia Syndrome thing going around lately? It’s, uh, got me and my friends kinda nervous. Like, all the Ministers keep sayin’ it’s fake and all but after that video clip from Shujin it’s been blowin’ up left and right.”

“Ah, yes. Only fair that you’d be worried, being from Shujin.”

“How’d you-” He stopped and glanced down; he’d forgotten he was still in uniform. “Oh yeah. The pants.”

“In truth, you can already see a bit of movement away from outright denial, where the government is concerned,” said Toranosuke. “Public statements that have gone from ‘it’s not real’ to ‘here’s what you should do if it is real,’ that sort of thing. But behind closed doors it seems like everyone is chiefly concerned with quelling public unrest. Because that would make their jobs less comfortable, you see.”

“Tch. Some things never change.”

“In my opinion we need to move away from these half-measures and into a full address and investigation of the rumors, but unfortunately my influence is still quite limited. I’d might as well be trying to shout over a typhoon right now, for all the good it would do.”

“Ain’t that a kick in the ass,” Ryuji said darkly. “You spend twenty years tryin’ to get back into the government and they still don’t give a shit.”
“I try to stay optimistic. There’s no such thing as a permanent victory, after all. Just a series of little ones, with ever-increasing setbacks. You learn to find triumph in the struggle.” He looked at Ryuji.

“But honestly, even I don’t know how your generation handles this constant intransigence from people in power. Everyone seems so obsessed with hoarding what little they have that they don’t even spare a thought to leaving anything for the rest of you. My colleagues and I spend our days endlessly talking about this or that, but the simple question of what the future holds for those who come after us? Not a whisper. It seems downright unspeakable.”

“You ain’t the only one feelin’ that way, seems like. Tokyo’s been weird lately. Kinda like…I dunno, that jittery feeling you get right before a real big thunderstorm rolls in.”

“That storm has been building for a while. This particular incident with Ms. Minami may well have pushed it over the edge. Still, we’ll batten down. It’s all we can do, at this point.” He smiled again.

“I must say, it’s encouraging to see a young man like you taking such an interest in these things. Have you ever considered running for office?”

“Wha- me? Me? No. God, no. Hell no.” His words were vehement but he felt himself grinning all the same. “I mean, I’ll be happy to vote for you and all next time elections roll around but…yeah, no.”

“Haha. Don’t dismiss it so easily. You never know what tomorrow might bring.” Toranosuke’s face turned wistful. “Why, just last year there was a young man who helped greatly with my campaign. He was a Shujin student, too.”

The grin drained from Ryuji’s face. Toranosuke didn’t seem to notice.

“He’d also been dealt a bad hand. Much worse than he deserved, at his age. But, he powered through it. I can only hope his future’s looking bright, because God knows he fought for it.” He glanced at Ryuji again. “He’s moved away now, but I think he might have been in your class. Akira-”

“-Kurusu, right,” Ryuji blurted out, and internally screamed curses at his useless, flapping jaw.

“We were…I mean, I guess we didn’t know each other that good, but we kept in touch, yeah. On and off. Texting and stuff.”

He was a horrible liar, he could practically hear every word clunk as it fell off his tongue, and Toranosuke’s gaze had suddenly become very sharp.

“I see,” he said, slowly. “Has he been well?”

“We kinda fell outta touch after he went home.” Another lie, and by the way Toranosuke’s eyebrow rose Ryuji knew he’d seen through it immediately.

“Well, I hope he got back in touch with his old friends, at least.” Behind those eyes another gear clicked into place. “If you don’t mind my asking, is there any reason in particular why you wanted to know about Paranoia-”

Ryuji’s stool scraped across the floor.

“Sorry, man,” he said. “I gotta get home. My ma’s going to worry.”

“Oh. Hmm. Very sorry to keep you, then. I do tend to ramble on.”

“No, no, it’s fine, it’s cool. Good luck with the politics, and stuff.”
He fumbled out his money and placed it next to his half-eaten bowl and practically dashed out of the shop. As he pushed open the door and glanced behind him he saw Toranosuke slumped over the counter, face buried in his hands.

The night air was freezing but he swallowed it in gulps as he hustled down Central Street and went around a corner stopped in front of one of the vending machines. That glass panel with its cheery assortment of soft drinks still held a ghost of his reflection in the deepening night. He could make out those ridiculous yellow streaks in his hair as he laid his head against the cool glass and hissed air through his teeth. Then he clenched his jaw tight and kicked the machine. Then he kicked it again. Then that still didn’t seem to be enough so he balled his fist and slammed it against the machine’s side, again and again, hard enough for the cans to rattle and chatter like a pocketful of change.

Then he stopped, because if he kept going he would either break his hand or get someone to call the cops and this evening had been lousy enough already. He kept leaning against the machine, taking ragged breaths, and then giggled, high and jagged.

He and Akira had brought down a god in full view of the city, and now Akira was comatose and he couldn’t even fumble his way through a conversation.

He thought that he’d might as well just break his leg again and bring things full circle.

Then he perked his head up. Distant shouting, further down the street, over the city’s usual noise. Even from here he could hear the panic laced through it.

He exited the alley and took off running and for those brief seconds he exulted in that feeling – the rhythmic slap of his feet against the pavement and the winter air burning in his lungs, the rush of blood in his ears muffling that growing commotion. Then he turned a corner and skidded to a halt. Clustered around a storefront was a small mob of people, phones held high, camera flashes popping off. Through the mad tangle of their legs Ryuji could make out a hand, sprawled and limp and reaching out in his direction like someone drowning. Its owner had fallen unconscious. The crowd pushed ever closer, their senseless babble unspooling into the dark.

He gulped air and wiped sweat off his brow. No paramedics in sight yet.

“What is this?” he asked, as if expecting someone to answer. “What’s happening to this city?”

* * *

AT: futaba has a point, we’re getting off track
AT: my turn!!! (≥V≤*)
FS: i’m glad you’re having so much fun with this.
RS: cmon futaba don’t be like that
AT: no, she’s right. sorry, everyone
AT: anyway i’ll go see dr takemi, surprised no one else called dibs yet
AT: i ran into her a few times around town anyway so she knows my face
AT: plus, you know, DOCTOR, so she’ll deffo have something worth talking about
MN: I’m unfamiliar with that name. Who is Dr. Takemi, again?
AT: you know her, makoto, she sold us our drugs
MN: …I beg your pardon?
RS: omfg takamaki
RS: phrasing
RS: PHRASING
AT: sorry, sorry! i mean she’s the one who sold us all that medicine we used in the palaces!
MN: Oh, I see.
RS: holy SHIT
RS: had a vision of makoto climbing up to my bedroom window with a goddamn knife in her teeth
MN: Don’t be silly, Ryuuji. If you were dealing in illegal substances I’d just report you to the police.
YK: Ann, you may run into unanticipated difficulty when attempting to meet Dr. Takemi. If Paranoia Syndrome is as dire as we suspect, her schedule could have grown rather full.
RS: yeah and doctors are a pain in the ass to get ahold of in the first place
AT: it’s okay, i’ll figure something out
AT: after all the business we gave her she owes us anyway
RS: yeah she charged an arm and a leg for some of that stuff
RS: wonder how akira got such a sweet deal on it
HO: I think he worked at her clinic part-time
RS: !
RS: (ノ─益─ノ)ノ_velocity

* * *

Yusuke was right, as it turned out. Ann stopped by Tae Takemi’s private clinic for several days, but every time the place was closed up tight; she’d questioned a few of the older residents nearby and eventually learned that Takemi had been called back to work at her old hospital. Then she’d gone to said hospital and found that going through its waiting room was akin to moonwalking through a minefield. Paranoia Syndrome had brought every hypochondriac in the city out in force and the exhausted receptionists had little time or patience to spare for a completely healthy foreign-looking girl wishing to meet one of their most renowned doctors without an appointment. Ann had been stymied, rebuffed, given dirty looks. And all the while, the clock was ticking.

Most people would have given up hope, but Ann wasn’t most people. Ann prided herself on her unconventional problem-solving skills. Most people wouldn’t show up to a nude shoot wearing seventeen blouses and eight pairs of pants. Most people wouldn’t spontaneously adopt an unholy parody of an upper-class accent to schmooze a pervy one-percenter. And most people, if they’d tried to get an appointment with Tae Takemi, wouldn’t go borrow a blank Phantom Thieves calling card from their spacy artist friend, scribble their phone number and a brief message — *We need to talk* — and then slip it under the door of Takemi’s clinic.

And sure enough, the day after her little note was delivered, she received a text from an unfamiliar number:

> Shinjuku, Fukunaga, 2 p.m.
> Give my name to the front.
> Don’t be late.

She had fist-pumped. She wouldn’t deny it.

Ann had first encountered Takemi after dragging Akira to Meiji Shrine. She had no idea why the woman had been there, but she’d caught Ann’s eye and Ann liked to think the feeling was reciprocated. Two girls with abnormal hair colors, standing out from the throng. Plus, Ann had thought the doctor’s goth-chic fashion sense was out of this world. So she let herself feel a little tingle of anticipation as she headed for the Fukunaga café in Shinjuku. If nothing else, it helped push away the mental image of Akira lying in a hospital bed, his heart monitor beeping off the
seconds.

The café was small but mobbed, its line extending out the door, but she dropped Takemi’s name and was beckoned in. And Takemi herself wasn’t hard to find – blue hair and spiderweb motifs weren’t any less incongruous this year. She was parked at a corner table, tucking into a parfait about the size of a man’s forearm. As Ann sat down she thought, briefly, that the woman had maybe gone a little too heavy on eyeshadow, but otherwise she looked decent for someone so busy.

Takemi didn’t look up at her.

“So, here you are.” She swallowed her latest mouthful and spooned out more.

Ann nodded. “Doctor. I don’t know if you remember me, but we met at-”

“You’re Takamaki. Saw you clinging to Kurusu’s arm a few times. You two an item?” Ann’s eyes widened; she began to sputter as Takemi waved a hand. “Don’t answer that, sweetie, I really don’t care. You’re not all that bright, are you?”

“Excuse me?”

With her free hand, Takemi produced the calling card. “Your personal number. Didn’t even bother to disguise your handwriting. You know all the misery I could bring down on you if I showed this to the police?”

“But you didn’t,” Ann said, her voice hardening up. “And if you didn’t before, then you won’t now. If you were close to Akira then I assume you’re aware of who we were and what we did, Doctor, so maybe we should just cut to the chase.”

That got Takemi’s eye to flick up at her. She shrugged and put away the calling card.

“Fair enough. So why’d you call me out? I take it you’re not going to steal my heart.”

“You’ve been hard to find. I understand that you’re working longer hours than usual.”

“You understand correctly.” She spooned out more of the dessert.

“Is it because of Paranoia Syndrome?”

“Ooh, that rings a bell.” Takemi sucked the ice cream off her spoon with a certain amount of aggression. “Would you happen to be referring to that mystery sickness that no one can diagnose? The one that the government decided to get on the news about and publicly associate with the vaguest symptoms imaginable? Yeah, funny story, turns out that when you tell the public that they can go comatose from shivering a little or feeling too anxious, then hospital visits quadruple overnight. I know! I was surprised, too.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

“Not as sorry as I am, trust me.”

“But that’s why I tried to get in touch.” Ann glanced around the café – crowded but low-ceilinged, the quarters too tight, and too many people side-eyeing these strange women hunched in the corner – and leaned in close. “Is there anything confidential you can tell me about Paranoia Syndrome? Anything at all.”

Takemi dug out the last spoonful of her parfait. “What, you think it might have something to do
with all that supernatural stuff you kids were up to last year? That’d be a load off.” She swallowed it down. “But, sorry to say, I’m just slaving away ‘cause of the volume. No big insights from me. Next time Kurusu asks you to be his messenger girl, tell him that I know every allergy he’s ever had and that he’d better—”

“Doctor, Akira’s been in a coma for almost a week. That’s why I’m asking.”

Takemi’s grip tightened on her spoon; her eyes went so wide that Ann could make out every bloodshot vein in the whites. There were a lot of veins. And that’s when Ann realized that Takemi wasn’t wearing too much eyeshadow; in fact, she wasn’t wearing any eyeshadow at all. Those bruised pits under her eyes were all-natural.

She dropped the spoon in the parfait glass and the rattle made Ann flinch. Then Takemi leaned forward too, so close their foreheads were almost touching, and when she spoke again her teeth were clenched and her voice was rimed with ice.

“Little girl,” she said, “you had better not be fucking with me.”

Ann matched her tone. “Do you think I went to all this trouble for a joke?”

They stared each other down. Finally Takemi relented, and looked away, and covered her face with one hand. Around her fingers emerged a sound caught halfway between a laugh and a sob.

“God. I owe my career to that idiot kid.” Ann, concerned, reached out, but Takemi held up a finger – one minute – and took several deep breaths. When she lowered her hand again her eyes were wet but her features were softer.

“Okay, Takamaki. Cards on the table. Yeah, I was brought in on a consulting role for some of those Paranoia Syndrome patients. I could tell you a thing or two. But it’s not going to help you, and you really, really don’t want to hear it.”

“How about you let me be the judge of that.”

“Fine. Just remember you asked for it.”

Ann did another quick glance around the café. A few curious faces, but no one who looked like they’d be eavesdropping.

“So, first thing,” said Takemi. “What do you know about comas?”

“Uh…they’re basically when you go to sleep and can’t wake up, right? Some brain thing?”

“Yes,” she said dryly. “Some brain thing. I’m not a neurologist myself, but it’s not really like falling asleep. Several key areas of the brain exhibit less activity, in particular the ones responsible for detecting outside stimuli. That’s usually how comas are diagnosed – if somebody isn’t conscious but still noticeably responds to movement, pressure, that kind of thing, then what you’ve probably got is a vegetable.” Ann winced. “Yeah, I’m being blunt. Sue me. I’m not in a good mood, in case you didn’t notice.”

“So what are you getting at?” she said. “These people…they’re not actually brain-dead, are they?”

“From what I’ve seen over the last few weeks, no, they’re not. But their brains don’t exhibit the signs of typical coma patients. They’re unresponsive, but still showing behavior you might associate with REM sleep – dreaming, in other words. Their muscles are unusually tense. Their cardiac patterns are mostly regular but can turn alarmingly erratic on a minute’s notice. And…”
she bit her lip. “I’m still not sure if I should be telling you this.”

“You’ve come this far, Doctor,” said Ann. “Little late to stop now.”

“Alright.” She gripped the table, speaking even quieter. “Like I said, not a neurologist. But in the Paranoia Syndrome patients, there are parts of the brain showing way higher activity than any coma patient’s should. Mainly the thalamus, the limbic system, and the somatosensory cortex.”

“And…what do those do?”

“Oh, all kinds of things. Our brains are multi-taskers. But for the purposes of this conversation? They’re the parts that make you feel pain.”

Ann’s blood went cold.

“So, have you pieced it all together yet?”

Futaba telling them about what she saw when Tsukiko Minami collapsed. Chains pulling so tight her skeleton groaned.

“From what I can tell, those people aren’t just unconscious. They’re in agony.”

Her collapse broadcasted on phones and televisions worldwide. That terrified, tormented face. *Please. It hurts.*

“So if you’re wondering why I’ve been a little bitchy,” Takemi went on, “think about what I’ve learned, and then think about the news you just dropped in my lap.”

“But. It can’t…are you sure? Everyone? *Everyone*?”

“If you mean ‘is every victim exhibiting these symptoms,’ then no, of course I’m not sure. This has afflicted people worldwide, after all. And as a matter of fact, one of the earliest patients I examined didn’t show the pain-region stimulation at all, so it could even vary from person to person.” She shook her head. “But that doesn’t bring me a whole lot of comfort. Our hospitals can’t be the only ones buckling under the strain right now. This idiotic party line, that Paranoia Syndrome’s being exaggerated, won’t last much longer, and I wouldn’t be surprised if there have already been casualties – that constant pain response is hell on the heart, it’d explain the erratic cardiac periods. Eventually older patients’ tickers will stop ticking completely from the strain. When people learn about how many victims there really are, it’ll be bad. If they learn about these symptoms? It’ll be *apocalyptic.*”

Ann was feeling lightheaded. “I think I should go.”

“It’s a lot to take in, isn’t it?” Takemi asked, not unkindly. “None of the medicine I’ve thrown at this sickness is making a dent, so if you really think that you and your little friends can do something, you should hurry. Because you’re running out of time.”

“We will. And thank you. We…none of us had any idea that it could-”

“Don’t blame yourself too much. People always have trouble seeing the bigger picture. I’m not surprised you only decided to pay attention to this when it brought down one of your friends.”

“We will bring Akira back. Him and everyone else. I swear.”

“Hmm.” Takemi fished out her spoon and gave it a quick, almost celebratory tap on the parfait
glass. “I’ll hold you to that. In the meantime, you’ve got my number now. You need anything, give me a ring.”

She tried, feebly, to smile. “No appointment necessary?”

“This is the first time I’ve gotten to sit down for more than an hour all week. I can’t make any promises.” Takemi smiled back, and flashed the calling card once more. “But for what it’s worth, I’m a little more hopeful now than I was this morning.”

Ann nodded and left. But when she stepped out into the afternoon sun, the light seemed too bright, oddly brittle, the city turned into a fractured stained-glass tableau. As if everything was seamed with cracks that, until just now, she’d forced herself not to notice.

Visions of Akira in some sterile white hospital room. Face peaceful but screaming in pain underneath. Heart monitor coldly counting off the seconds. And Takemi’s words echoed: *You’re running out of time.*

* * *

**FS:** i’ll keep looking around online, i guess
**FS:** hospital records, old news reports, etc etc
**FS:** if we assume there’s been some kind of cover-up i can use that too, try and look for the empty places where information should be but isn’t
**MN:** That sounds like a plan, Futaba.
**FS:** and since everyone’s been having a grand old emoji-filled time here i’d just like to remind you all
**FS:** that akira is comatose and alone
**FS:** and might be dying for all we know
**FS:** and that we don’t know how to help him
**FS:** or even how to start.
**FS:** there, reminder made.
**HO:** Futaba…
**YK:** We are all fully aware of how serious this is. But we cannot allow ourselves to despair before we’ve even begun.
**RS:** yeah futaba, just think about how akira would be acting if one of us had come down with this paranoia syndrome thing
**RS:** he’d be so chill about it that it’d drive the rest of us nuts
**AT:** god, we’d be all
**AT:** “akira the whole world is going to literally explode in twelve hours, you sure you don’t want to go to the palace”
**AT:** and he’d be all
**AT:** “nah it’s cool it’s fine this is fine everything’s fine”
**AT:** and then he’d save the day anyway
**RS:** basically that
**MN:** All of us are upset over what’s happened. Akira is a lot more than just our leader, after all.
**MN:** So I think it’s about time we proved how much he really means to us. If there’s any way to fix this, then we’ll fix it.
**HO:** I’m going to give it my all!
**RS:** same
**AT:** ditto!
FS: okay okay okay, sorry
FS: i flew off the handle i guess
FS: i’m just gonna go to bed
YK: Futaba, are you going to be all right?
FS: no.
FS: i’m not.

[Futaba Sakura is now offline.]

*             *             *

She often viewed the world through layers of abstraction. It was a coping mechanism, of sorts – after so much time shut up in her room the real world had been too much all at once, it needed some kind of buffer, a smear of concealing grease between herself and all that color and noise. In a way it wasn’t too different from what happened in the Palaces. She’d distort the world into something more recognizable, something she could control.

Video game mechanics usually did the trick. Experience points, leveling up, key items, status effects, party members, they all applied to her daily routine well enough and when she talked about it out loud people seemed to find it the good kind of funny instead of the uncomfortable kind. As time went on she weaned herself off the habit but still found herself slipping back into it when things got stressful. But right now, video games didn’t seem to adequately capture what was going on inside her. This was an issue of hardware, not software.

Open up the case and there was nothing too serious. Power supply – adequate. CPU – nominal. RAM – please, she had more memory than she knew what to do with. But right now everything seemed to be on standby. An issue with fully booting up. Questions asked of her in Ms. Kawakami’s class had decreased by one hundred percent; she’d been dimly aware of this even as she’d sat quietly in the back of the room, legs pulled up to her chin, the class muttering about her, about Tsukiko, about paranoia this and that. All their voices oddly muffled. A sound card issue? It was possible. This system already had a history of motherboard problems.

When Kawakami called her into the guidance office after school she’d shown up without protest. The office was empty except for the two of them; the monuments of paperwork scattered across the teachers’ desks ruffled softly in the ventilators’ breeze. Ms. Chouno’s desk had a novelty huludancer figurine on the corner that waggled its hips as Futaba passed by; she hated it immediately.

“Hi, Futaba,” said Kawakami. She was smiling but even Futaba could see that it took visible effort. After Tsukiko’s collapse, the class had been understandably distracted, and this wasn’t even the first media circus she’d had to endure that year.

“Good afternoon, Ms. Kawakami.” Volume playback functional.

“Please, take a seat.”

A metal folding chair was set up beside Kawakami’s. Futaba perched on it in her usual way and faced forward. Kawakami spent several seconds worriedly plucking the hem of her skirt before she spoke.

“I’m sorry I didn’t ask you to come sooner,” she said. “After what happened with Tsukiko I should’ve met with you right away.”

“It’s all right.”
“It really isn’t. No one should have to go through what you did that afternoon. Or Tsukiko herself, for that matter.” She sighed, brushed a stray springcoil of hair away from one eye. “Futaba, I’m going to be blunt. You might have been out of school for a while before you came to Shujin, but you’re fitting in really well and your grades are…well, ‘bulletproof’ wouldn’t be overstating it. No one’s going to blame you if you decide to take a little time off. How’s your father?”

“Sojiro? He’s fine, I think.” After getting the call from Akira’s parents she hadn’t seen him making coffee as much. Whether at the bar or the café, he was always glued to the TV news, his face stony. He gave her space. He was familiar with her specifications.

“Maybe you should spend a little quality time with him instead of sitting around here. I can ask – or demand, really – that Chouno and the rest share their notes when you come back, so you don’t miss anything.” Her eyes lit up; she seemed to arrive at a bright idea. “Or, I know. Why not get back in touch with Akira? This is usually a slow period for classes, so I’m sure he’d be happy to take a weekend and-”

“Oh, sorry, I didn’t tell you. Akira’s in a coma.”

Kawakami froze. Her smile stayed where it was but the rest of her face seemed to run away from it. Futaba’s voice remained calm. CPU cycles minimal; temperatures low.

“I know that you two were pretty close. Akira kept telling me how much you helped him out in class.” And I have about six hours of footage of you coming into the café and calling him “Master,” she didn’t add, because normal people weren’t supposed to know things like that. “Sorry. I guess I made you upset.”

Kawakami’s mouth opened and shut for several more seconds. Futaba stared and said nothing. Possible audio input malfunction? No, the ventilators thrummed as always.

“God, Futaba, forget about me,” she said at last. Her eyes were overbright. “Why didn’t you say anything? You shouldn’t be coming to school like this, you and Akira are practically family!”

“I mean, it only just happened.” The ventilator hummed and hummed but she seemed to be heating up anyway. Internal fan malfunction, possibly. “A little bit after Tsukiko. I’d just talked to him about it and…oh.”

She raised her head, glasses glinting. Internal diagnostics running.

“Futaba?” Kawakami asked. “What is it?”

Diagnostic complete. Slowly, she unfolded her legs and sat normally, staring through Kawakami. When she spoke her voice was distant and low.

“I figured out why I’ve been feeling like this,” she explained. “You know how my mom committed suicide and everyone said it was my fault? Oh, I guess maybe you didn’t, you’re crying harder. Anyway, I thought this wasn’t as bad, but I just realized, it happened when I told Akira about Paranoia Syndrome. So maybe he only caught it because I told him about it. Stranger things have h-happened, you, you know? So it might be my f-f-fault.”

Stuttering now. Glasses fogging. Glitches in both audio and visual output. This room was much too warm.

“I mean,” she started to hiccup, “I thought I’d g-gotten over it, but now I’m feeling the same way I did before. So I’m s-sorry if, if I’ve been disruptive to the class. I just need a little more time to figure this out, because I, I, I don’t understand why this k-keeps happening to me, and, a-a-and…”
Kawakami reached out and hugged Futaba close as her words dissolved completely. The hulu dancer waggled incessantly as she wailed into her teacher’s sweater. Full audio failure. Catastrophic system error. And as Kawakami tried to soothe her she just cried harder because none of it was working, there was no machine and this wasn’t a game, all she had was the truth and the truth was that Akira wouldn’t wake up and she didn’t know what to do.

* * *

The Tokyo metro at the cusp of its closing. The midnight trains ready to depart. At this time of night the lights felt false and the shadows full and tangible as silk. What travelers remained were often furtive and silent, and here as everywhere else more and more of them wore masks against sicknesses unknown.

The lights thrummed over a rank of escalators standing empty and still. At the top of these paralyzed steps a pair of deep blue eyes stared and stared.

“I knew it,” he said. “There’s something here.”

Shortly afterwards the entrances to the metro were sealed, the underground turned into a cage. The lights snapped off and left only shadows behind. Morgana was long gone.
Chapter 5

The drowned lay at his feet.

Akira recognized these bodies from the masquerade aboard Shido’s deranged cruiser of a Palace, but just barely. Their finery had been reduced to strips of molded cloth, their flesh worn mannequin-smooth and sloughing away into the waters much like the ATM amalgamates he’d seen earlier. They protruded from the water like pale burial mounds. Not many, five or six altogether, and the ship itself was nowhere to be seen. As if they’d been borne to this street by an unseen tide, now calmed.

He was beginning to suspect he’d overestimated himself.

It didn’t help that he wasn’t very familiar with Tokyo to begin with. He’d gotten acquainted with most of its hotspots during his year away from home, but even after his year had been up he’d still been likely to get turned around in the Metro nine times out of ten, and his luck above ground hadn’t been much better. He’d made do with his phone’s GPS and whatever landmarks he could find. But now his phone was a paperweight and the landmarks were all wiped bare. It was like trying to navigate the city based on a burnt photograph of itself.

He stepped around the bodies and continued on.

He chased echoes. That rumble he’d heard upon first arriving had turned out to be a collapsing building; he’d stepped up to the rubble and found that the hunks of concrete and rebar had gained an unpleasant puttylike feel, yielding like flesh beneath his gloved hands. Those rumbles echoed in the distance every so often, and sometimes he heard other sounds, a metallic screech like a train passing in the night. By the time he caught up to the sound, its source was already gone. And in every direction, the same inky water and the same blind buildings and the dead and leering eye of that black sun nailed in place overhead. Akira didn’t like looking at it. It made him nauseous, something like vertigo. And even though it was useless for telling time, he already felt like he’d been here much too long.

“I was expecting a Palace,” he said. “Or something like it, anyway. Even Mementos had a beginning and an end. Not to sound like Futaba, but I was all set for a dungeon crawler and wound up with an open world instead.”

A foolish presumption.

The voice did not travel through air but thundered inside Akira’s head – his own voice but distorted and deepened, amused, faintly taunting.

“I rushed in, I’ll admit it. Figured that I could just take care of whatever’s causing so much trouble down here and get Lavenza to chauffeur me out again. Should’ve known it’d be a lot harder without Morgana or Futaba to point me in the right direction.” He stopped walking and looked up. “You’re no help, either.”

Arsène’s chuckle reverberated within him.

He was perched on a bent lightpost with his wings folded around him like some baroque bird of prey, his hat a scratch of deeper darkness in the decaying city’s gloom, his clothes and cravat almost blinding in this murky air. From between the folds of his waistcoat licked tongues of thin black flame. Akira had brought him along out of sentimentality more than anything, but after the
hollow silence of this place had started to wear on him, he’d found another use for the Persona. Arsène might have been weaker than most of Akira’s other Personas, but he was also much more sociable.

**Feeling regrets, now? Are these waters too deep for you to tread? In that room, you chose this fate of your own free will.**

“A choice between helping someone and doing nothing isn’t a choice at all.”

**Then you continue on your path, thought it may yet invite damnation. The Trickster’s spirit endures.**

“I guess I haven’t changed much since we last met,” he said. “What about you? Aren’t you supposed to be about fifty feet taller? And also the Devil?”

**Ah, Satanael. The First to Fall, avatar of Rebellion. It was a magnificent feat, to channel such a ferocious entity.** Red light flared and danced inside Arsène’s frozen face. **However, even with my fetters shattered, I remain the mask closest to your own heart.**

“It’s fine. Satanael would stand out too much, anyway. Glad to see you again.”

**The pleasure is mine. Though I must point out that by conversing with me in such a manner, you are, in every practical sense, talking to yourself.**

“True,” he said. “But I’m doing it with style.”

The city rolled out before him. He saw the broken fragments of a fallen sky-bank, castle parapets crudely rendered to resemble lascivious curves, science-fiction contrivances of inscrutable design glittering like handfuls of junk jewelry in side alleys. Fragments of old Palaces scattered throughout the larger ruin like teeth from a broken jaw. As he walked through the streets he saw Arsène on lightposts, on windowsills, in the curve of a broken windowpane. The Persona never visibly moved but Akira sometimes a second warped shadow falling in pace with his own, or a second set of ripples from the soundless steps of those knife-point heels. He seemed to delight existing in the corner of Akira’s eye.

Then he stopped again. Outside a moldering shopfront was a gold-eyed silhouette in shabby suit and tie. His outline flickered and his mouth moved incessantly but no sound came out that Akira could hear, as though he were a refugee from a silent movie, stepping out from one black-and-white world into another. Akira’s eyes narrowed at the sight of him.

“Shadows, even here.” He tugged on his gloves. “I’m not surprised.”

**Oh? And yet Mementos was unmade. The distorted desires of the populace faded into the ether. You would think the manifestation of these sad specters would have ceased, as well.**

“No, I wouldn’t. But you know that already.”

**Amusingly contradictory, is it not? You need your desires to remain human, though they ever plot to drag you to ruin. There is no banishing of such a thing.** Footsteps splashed behind him; Arsène’s shape fell over the Shadow like a curtain. **Will you choose to fight, nonetheless?**

“What did I just say?” He drew his knife. “Now be quiet and fall in line.”

It didn’t take long. The Shadow had been just a fledging, the cause of his corruption banal – a
salaryman on the verge of unemployment, his terror turning him drunken and mean. Akira talked him through it as best he could, but his words always felt hollow whenever he was trying to soothe these people. His teammates always spoke with much more conviction.

“Goodbye,” he said, as the sobbing Shadow dimmed to a single point of light. “Try to hold on.”

The light condensed, dimmed, faded. The Treasure it left behind was formless and so gossamer-delicate that it crumbled like mothwings in Akira’s fingers.

He turned back to the silent, sodden street. The crepuscular sentinels of the buildings bent low as if in judgement.

“Arsène,” he said. “Cards on the table. What is this place?”

My knowledge, as ever, cannot exceed your own.

“You still came from the cognitive world. There has to be something you know about it that I don’t.”

Not at all. You were told of this realm’s nature prior to entry. Do you not recognize it? The roiling Sea of Souls?

With a chuckle and a gout of black embers Arsène emerged before him, looming large, his talons restlessly scraping across one another. Akira barely came up to his waist, courtesy of those enormous heels, but the look on his face was more exasperated than intimidated.

“You’re saying that this is the collective unconscious? Where you and all the other Personas came from?”

All Personas. All Shadows. All Palaces and distortions and every conjuration of mankind’s fabulous, deranged imagining. From these waters does all cognition arise, and to the water does it all return. Lost, forgotten, and broken things, fading from sight and mind. The seas drink of it all, until it crumbles among the dark and becomes no more.

“No wonder everything here’s so mashed together, then. The Palaces, Mementos…”

From time to time, humanity’s warped cognition erects a structure so mighty that it pierces the upper layer of this realm and brushes against the waking world. Mementos was merely the latest incarnation of such a place. All have fallen, and returned to whence they came. But the Phantom Thieves’ banishment of such a tremendous distortion has choked the land. Its gullet is full to bursting in its attempt to consume so much abandoned thought. Arsène spread his arms wide. In time, this too will fade, and the waters shall be tranquil until man rouses them anew. But for now, witness what remains. This vast and putrescent Dead Sea.

“There,” Akira said flatly. “You did know something I didn’t.”

Haha. Not at all. Your mind, too, is linked to this realm. Deep in your consciousness, you know of what I speak. Just as you sense the fathomless menace that has infected this place to the core. With infinite gentleness, he extended his talons and plucked at Akira’s coat. Why else would you arrive in this garb?

“So whatever’s haunting this place knows I’m here. It sees me as a threat.” Akira cracked his knuckles. “It’s not wrong.”
Haunting. Hunting. It does not seek you but it shall find. I sense it polluting the waters with every footfall.

“So I’ll just have to catch it first.” He sighed and shoved his hands in his pockets. “Problem is, I don’t have any idea where to go. Wouldn’t mind hitting up Yongen-Jaya again, or something. It can’t be any more depressing than everything else here.”

Aha. There, I believe, I can be of some assistance.

Arsène bent low and his wings spread and beat the ground with such force that Akira’s coat blew back and even the endless puddle was momentarily swept back, exposing the cracked and soaked asphalt beneath. He took to the skies, high above the buildings, and Akira looked up and saw him silhouetted against the sun like a bloodstain. He looked this way and that, and then pointed the way forward. Akira smirked.

“Looks like you’re pulling your weight after all.”

As he started down the street, he thought he heard a noise – a low jangle, like the clink of keys or chains. When he glanced behind him the streets were empty and still, and they remained that way as he continued forward.

* * *

He awoke to darkness and the smell of iron.

At first he thought he was still dreaming, caught in the grip of sleep paralysis, because his limbs wouldn’t move no matter how he flexed them; his body was all twisted up like a slumbering dog’s and his every attempt to untangle himself resulted in an elbow or knee meeting hard resistance. And even for the dead city, it was dark here. He couldn’t see his fingers in front of his face. He groaned, thinking his helmet had somehow gotten twisted ‘round during his sleep, and managed to reach up to his head to fix it. His fingers brushed only bare skin.

Helmet gone. His armor gone. A chill sinking through thin fabric. All of it too vivid for a dream. And under that iron smell, another scent – distant and dusty and hauntingly familiar.

His breath began to hitch in his throat as he struggled to get his feet under him and stand up. His palms pressed against hard metal on all sides. So little space in here that he felt like he was being crushed. His chest tightened with the anticipation of it. As if the air itself was coiling tight around his ribs, constricting them to fracture. He smashed against the walls of the box and heard only a jangle of chains.

“A fascinating paradox occurs to me.”

He cried out wordlessly at that voice – it sounded like it was coming from somewhere far below and yet right beside him, whispering into his ear. High and lilting. It sounded pleased to see him.

“To form a relationship with another is to limit your own self. We bend and twist our personalities to best suit the sentiments of those we hold dear. Their wills and hopes, their desires and fears – each a separate cage, each requiring a different limitation upon yourself. Perhaps that is why such relationships are referred to as 'bonds.'”

He turned around in the dark and saw a hole – a mere slit in one wall, barely enough to put his fingers through. He peered through it and squinted against the searing light, and when his eyes adjusted he saw walls of sheer blue stone, cells filled with squirming, staring shadow.
“However,” the voice continued, “these very same relationships are what permit humans to grow, are they not? Through that mutual bond, that shared captivity, you take upon each other’s aspects, and broaden your world.” It chuckled. “One might even say that the ‘true’ self, unaltered and unchained, is the real prisoner.”

Those endless cells. Those judging eyes. He’d never wanted to come here again.

“To illustrate, let us observe yourself. In one sense, you are completely unhindered, without bonds, free as someone could possibly be. And yet…my, my. It would seem that your world has grown quite small indeed.”

His throat opened up but he still couldn’t bring himself to speak. He scrabbled desperately at the hole and he felt his blood pumping hot behind his eyes and through that narrow ray of light he saw the prisoner’s fatigues draping from his wrists.

“It appears that you are still too agitated for a proper introduction,” said the voice. “No matter. You shall return here again. For an invitation once given is never rescinded.”

Goro Akechi screamed himself awake.

* * *

He roused kicking his legs out and clutching his chest like someone caught midway through a heart attack, fingers still clawed in front of him trying to scratch through a door that was no longer there. When he realized where he was he sat crosslegged on the hard floor and clutched at the sides of his helmet, taking deep breaths, waiting for his heartbeat to calm.

“Don’t go crazy,” he said. “Don’t go crazy. Don’t go crazy, don’t go crazy, don’t go crazy…”

Akechi had persevered. He was a survivor. Even now he’d learned to deal with most things – the constant gnawing hunger pangs (he didn’t seem to starve or thirst any more, but his gut and his throat often disagreed), the aches in his joints (sleeping always on hard floors or in corners, the dampness in the air seeping into his bones) or his irritatingly mis-matched vision (the visor on his helmet was still broken). But since the stranger had arrived, the anticipation of those scraping, clinking chains was starting to unravel him. Not even Shido had required him to maintain this level of constant paranoia.

If he lost his mind down here, he’d inevitably join those rotted cognitive bodies littering the landscape. Or worse. But if even sleep could no longer provide an escape from his anxiety, that was a bad sign.

He sucked in air one more time, then exhaled and stood up.

Café Leblanc’s attic wasn’t any more inviting than the rest of this place. The furniture remained but everything decorative had already been digested – the TV, the boxes, Akira’s bewildering array of displayed junk. Downstairs, Sojiro Sakura’s dizzying collection of coffee beans had vanished without a trace. He almost appreciated that. It made him feel like less of a trespasser.

His gun and his sword were resting on the couch. He holstered them and walked downstairs and stepped outside.

Yongen-Jaya hadn’t originally been part of this place. When he’d first arrived it had just been the ruins of the Palaces and most of Shibuya – that last part was probably due to Kaneshiro’s Palace, flying high over the district until the Phantom Thieves had brought it crashing down. He’d likewise chalked up the endless water to the ruins of Shido’s Palace, that country-devouring sea draining out
here as if through a spigot. But then the rest of Tokyo had appeared overnight – he’d stepped outside after one of his restless attempts to sleep and found that the skyline had suddenly become a lot more complex – and a while after that, that black sun had appeared, pinned unceasingly in place. He’d stumbled across the stranger around the same time. He thought that was why he got that feeling of queasy vertigo whenever he looked at the sun too long. Like he was always falling forward.

Yongen-Jaya was ravaged but at least it was familiar. He’d hunted down his own apartment once, out of curiosity, and found it bare as anywhere else. Though in that particular case it wouldn’t have been much of a change. Akechi had never invited anyone over, but if he had, the guest might have spent their entire stay with a feeling of vague, crawling unease – it was clean, the furniture was of good quality, there might have been a few case files or a laptop or a coffee mug on a table, but beyond that they would have seen no signs of actual habitation at all. No paintings, books, knickknacks, mementos, or photographs. Akechi had lived in what was essentially a display room.

He hadn’t thought much of it, personally. He just hadn’t seen the point in anything else. But the rest of the world being like this was maddening.

The pawnshop – now little more than a splintered shed. The bathhouse – drained and cracked, the faucets all run dry, the tubs holding only more of that cold dark water. The clinic – posters scrubbed clean, lobby turned bare, the examination room reduced to a table bearing a few patches of mold. The Sakura house – off-limits. Akechi stood in the middle of the street, staring at nothing, waiting for the sensation of that cramped and horrible box to leave his head completely.

It didn’t. Instead he was struck with a sudden bright pain, that silver spike through his temple, and he cried out and clutched his head. These migraines were one more burden he’d had to bear since arriving here; they came and went without warning, and they were always accompanied by hallucinations of a distant light, a small glint always bobbing up and down like a will-o’-the-wisp. It often stuck around for a while even after the pain faded.

There it was now, pulsing beside the movie theater. Akechi squinted at it, and when the headache abated, he approached. The light receded and vanished.

This theater was ancient, marked for demolition until the Phantom Thieves had saved it – he hadn’t been around for that one, it had taken place before he’d slipped into their team, but if he had been there he would have liked to ask some leading questions about why the so-called defenders of justice were suddenly concerned about real estate. Either way, Japan didn’t see many like it anymore. The theaters were small, their slopes shallow, the projectors still using actual film. There was even a cellar level for specialized rooms showing vintage films. All of it sodden and scraped bare now, but deep darkness festered in such places. He thought he might find a few Shadows there, at least.

He pulled at the front door and it opened soundlessly. The posters in the lobby were reduced to gutted glass; the concessions stand was unmanned. The carpet squished underfoot as he made his way to the theaters, pushing open the heavy metal doors. They opened and closed with a loud clack that would have probably driven any actual theater-goers mad. No pity for late arrivals.

Nothing. Just the ranks of seats, their red fabric gone stained and threadbare, and the blank white projector screens staring blindly. Akechi left, prepared to start searching for the basement entrance – and then stopped.

In the lobby. Squishing footsteps. Someone else here.

Akechi’s pulse jumped but he didn’t hear chains. This was someone else. No telling who, possibly
the Shadows themselves had decided to start roaming. It wouldn’t be the most unusual thing he’d seen.

He crept back to the lobby, slipping his pistol out of his holster. The footsteps wandered back and forth; their owner was apparently a curious one. They were examining the décor. Akechi pressed himself against the corner and flicked the safety off his gun. At that soft *click*, the footsteps stopped.

Too observant. This was no Shadow.

The footsteps resumed again. Coming closer now. A rustle of cloth. A weapon had been drawn. Akechi’s heartbeat was calm. This, at least, was his element.

He counted down the seconds. He placed his finger on the trigger. Then he spun around the corner, gun raised high, and found himself staring into the barrel of Akira’s pistol.

The two of them locked eyes. Somewhere, water dripped. Akechi’s one visible eye was pinned wide.

After a long moment, Akira lowered his gun.

“Hey, Akechi,” he said.

“Hello, Joker,” Akechi replied. And then he shot him.
Akechi’s aim was flawless. The bullet struck Akira’s forehead, just above the eye. It then pinged off his bare skin with a sound like a surprised piano chord, and buried itself harmlessly in the adjacent wall.

The silence that followed was somewhat meditative.

Akira sighed and holstered his gun. “I saw that coming.”

Akechi’s face had, very briefly, lit up in triumph when he’d pulled the trigger. Now it had curdled into something difficult to describe. A mix between incredulity and dread, like someone who’d just uncovered a lit stick of dynamite too late to get away from the bang.

“Don’t know why you’re surprised,” Akira said. “When has trying to kill me ever worked out for you?”

In lieu of a response, Akechi shot him again, this time in the chest. The bullet once again ricocheted off.

“When you decided to…well, go your own way after we met in Shido’s Palace, I kept wondering if we’d meet again,” Akira said. “I spent some time mixing up a Persona just in case. Want to say hi?”

His mask burned blue and before Akechi loomed a mammoth form, limbs thick as tree trunks, eyes a pair of cobalt slits peering through a gold mask nearly the half the size of Akechi himself. Intimidating as he was, the giant man didn’t appear hostile; he merely stood in place with his massive hammer clasped in both hands, tilting his head at Akechi as one might look at a small and mildly amusing dog. The air around him seemed alive with latent electricity. Strands of Akechi’s hair stood on end right through the fractures in his helmet.

Akechi shot at him, more out of reflex than anything. The result was predictable; this bullet bounced right up into the ceiling. Then the man dissolved into embers and there was only Akira, looking at him with the same faintly pitying expression.

“Thor here probably wasn’t the best candidate for what I wanted to do, but, come on, you’ve got Loki and all. I couldn’t resist the symbolism.” He shrugged. “Anyway. I’m not going to hurt you, and as long as I’ve got this mask, you can’t hurt me. So put away the gun. Let’s talk. I think we both have a lot of explaining to do.”

Slowly, Akechi holstered his pistol. Akira grinned.

“Cool. So, you want to sit down somewhere, or-”

Before he could finish Akechi snarled and went for his blade, that thin length of cruelly serrated steel, and then rushed at Akira and swung right at his neck. It bounced off like he’d just struck a concrete pillar. Akira’s smile disappeared.

“Seriously, man? Didn’t you hear what I just-”

“Shut up!”

His words were slurred as if he could barely force them out through his anger, and he took one wild
swing after another to no avail. The blade clanged off Akira’s unmoving body like a ringing bell.

“Wipe that goddamn look off your face!” Akechi shouted. “Talk? Talk with you!? Why aren’t you dead? Why won’t you die!? You and your idiot friends are the reason I’m here to begin with!”

Akira raised his hand and the blade smacked harmlessly into his palm, and then he gripped it tight and shoved hard. Akechi was forced back into the wall with his sword in Akira’s hands, those red eyes mere inches away, and while Akira’s voice was still calm his teeth were bared as he spoke:

“You know, it really pisses me off how you never listen when other people talk. My ‘idiot friends’ were ready to bring you with us before you locked them out, remember?”

“Let go!”

“Are you the one responsible? Mental shutdowns, psychotic breakdowns, now you’re putting people into comas too?”

“I said, let me go!”

The visor on his helmet burst into flame and Akira cringed and staggered back, squinting against that sudden light. When his vision cleared, Loki was there – that angular silhouette with its rippling zebra-stripe skin, faceless but with the impression of a vicious smile underneath its blank visage.

With one hand it took up the great gold blade Laevateinn and soundlessly pointed it at Akira; Akechi and his own sawtooth sword followed suit.


In the bowels of Shido’s Palace, when Akechi had called out Loki and used the Persona’s psychosis-inducing powers on his own mind, he’d been something like this – limbs limp, voice guttural, his eyes bulging so far out of his skull it looked like they might burst from the pressure of his own rage-drugged blood. But this time he’d gone berserk without even having to use Loki’s eldritch pick-me-up. Something had slipped loose inside his head.

If what he’d said was true, then he’d been in this place ever since the Phantom Thieves had left him behind in that engine room. Meanwhile, Akira had been here for hardly any time at all and he’d already started talking to himself, stylishly or not. He couldn’t blame Akechi for losing his senses, ineffectually homicidal though he may be. Negotiating his way out of this didn’t seem likely. Nothing to do now but play along and hope Akechi got it out of his system.

“All right,” he said, and spread his arms out. “Hit me with your best shot, Detective.”

The air whistled as both Akechi and Loki rushed and swung but Akira wasn’t there, he’d already hopped around and away, giving the Persona a little wave with one red-gloved hand; Akechi snarled again and turned and swung but Akira dodged, and dodged again when Loki gripped his own blade in both hands and brought it down hard enough to gash the ground and make the whole lobby shake. Gold and silver, black and red, the swords flashed and sliced but missed their target every time, the Phantom Thief elusive as ever, infuriatingly casual, here leaning back just enough for a blade to miss his nose by a hair’s breadth, here skipping around another wild chop with hands in pockets and a smirk on his face. It was like trying to cut fog. And with every missed hit, Akechi’s already-clumsy attacks went wilder. By the time Akira had taken the fight past the lobby and into the hall, casually pushing open a door to one theater and ducking inside, Akechi had started to swing his weapon less like a sword and more like a baseball bat.
In the theater the empty ranks of seats quietly watched as Akira weaved in and out of the glinting blades. Finally, he ran out of room. He stood with his back to the empty white screen, empty-handed, straight-faced, and without a single scraggly hair out of place.

“Nowhere…else…to run,” Akechi panted.

“Yep. You got me.”

He swung his blade up. “Loki!”

The Persona blurred forward and, with one mighty swing, bisected the projector screen and smashed the ground with such force that the impact kicked up a thick and fungal-smelling dust from the moldered carpet and ceiling; it hung in the air and stuck to Akechi’s face like lint. When the air cleared, Akira was nowhere to be seen. And there was a sound behind him. Applause.

He turned and there was Akira, second row from the front, clapping his heart out.

“Fantastic show,” was his verdict. “The stakes were low and I didn’t care for the star, but the passion on display? Undeniable.” He stopped clapping. “Then again, I’m not much of a critic. Ready to stop?”

Akechi’s eye twitched.

This time he couldn’t even work out Loki’s name when he called forth the Persona; he just raised his head and unleashed a guttural scream into the ceiling, and there was Loki, back to his usual insouciant slouch upon Laevateinn’s hilt, one clawed hand raised high. In his palm a coruscating sphere of prismatic light appeared, and pulsed, and grew, filling the theater with a live-wire sizzle like a swarm of angry wasps. Akira straightened up in his chair. This was probably the one attack that not even Thor could completely defend against. It was also likely to bring the entire building down on them.

“Damn it.” He brought his hand up to his mask. “You’re not making this easy, are-”

And then, both the light and the Persona bearing it flickered like a candle-flame, and vanished.

Akira blinked and then relaxed, little by little.

“Hey, you finally calmed down. Perfect timing, too, if Loki had fired that one off then we probably both would’ve been…Akechi?”

He was pressed against the bisected screen, his skin gone nearly as white as the screen itself, his jaw agape, his one visible pupil dilated pinprick-tight. He didn’t answer Akira; all that came out of his throat was a thin creak.

Behind Akira, the theater door clanged shut.

Someone was there.

He turned around and saw an outline slumped in front of the theater’s entrance, a shape turned fuzzy and indistinct by the gloomy air. It stood there like it was enjoying the show.

He turned back to Akechi. “Is that a Shadow?”

Akechi was still riveted where he stood but his head made a jerky little shake. Could have been a “no.” Could have been an errant twitch. His movements sludgy as if in a dream, Akira stood and
As its features became clearer the first thing he noticed was its height – the top of its head barely came up to his chest. The second was its filth. It was dressed somewhat like a Phantom Thief, coated and masked, but in the sorriest state imaginable, its clothes layers of sepia rags so numerous and torn that it was difficult to tell where one garment began and the next ended, its “mask” a jaundiced cloth draped over its head like a soiled doily. Through a single long tear in that fabric stared an eye dark and lusterless as an oil stain. Its feet were bare and its hands were ungloved and the skin of both was so pale it was almost blue, and shriveled from endless wet. Around its wrists were a pair of thick and rusted manacles joined by a length of chain. It clinked and jingled softly as the figure swayed in place.

“Hi there,” Akira said, and found to his surprise that his voice was shaking. “Did you get lost here, too? What’s your name?”

The figure jerked as if Akira had just roused it from sleep. That single eye lanced through him. And with that gaze came a chill that ran even deeper than Akira’s bones; even his Personas seemed to cringe away from it. He glanced behind him again, at Akechi’s shivering, terrified form.

“Shit.”

The pistol came out, leveled at the figure’s head. Akira fought to keep his hand steady.

“Paranoia Syndrome,” he said. “It’s because of you, isn’t it?”

No answer from behind that mask at first. But just as Akira was about to fire off a warning shot, he heard its voice – possibly male but hard to tell, a thin and toneless rasp like a dead leaf blown across concrete.

The stranger said, “Come, Iago.”

Akira raised his arm against the burst of light and greasy flame, and when he lowered it the sight of the apparition before him made him take a few hasty steps back. It resembled a nobleman but one grotesquely decayed, its flesh the fishbelly-white of the long drowned, its finery drained of dye and hanging off in strips barnacled by clumps of mold. Instead of a face it wore a marble mask, its blank and gentle smile worn nearly smooth by age and streaked with black rot. In one hand it clutched a saber, notched and rusted, borne aloft like a torch. In the other arm it held a book, a great grimoire with no visible title, the cover rippled and streaked black and blue and green like it had lain at the bottom of a sewer for a hundred years. The only real color about the Persona was from its cravat, which was a searing caution-tape yellow, the fabric holding a nauseating membranous sheen.

And then there were the chains.

The Persona’s body was festooned with them; they draped it like seaweed, seemingly bursting right through its flesh and shredding its clothes on the way. They clattered in chorus, trailing the floor, their links ancient and slicked with rust and slime. Akira glanced at his feet and saw the chains already drawing closer. They lengthened with every second.

The stranger and the Persona had their blank gazes fixed on some vague spot behind Akira. Neither of them appeared to be paying him any attention at all. Still, he couldn’t pull the trigger. His arms felt locked in place.

Suddenly arms grabbed him by the waist and threw him back, and then he was on the floor with
Akechi sprawled atop him; a second later a length of chain bullwhipped across the room with a piercing whistle like someone blowing over a bottle-top. The chain passed over his head and struck a glancing blow to the adjacent seat, and the chair was ripped right out of its moorings and went flying into the far wall.

His and Akechi’s heartbeats thundered right through their clothes as Akechi gripped him again and rolled, and as the world twisted around him he saw the Persona’s rotted sword cleave the ground where they’d lain – and the cleft continued, the ground several feet forward tore open as though the edge extended further than the blade, and just as Akira opened his mouth to say that it was fine, Thor could handle this sword as well as he could handle the others, he felt a monstrous burning sting around his ankle as one of the chains wrapped round him and cinched tight and hurled him straight into the back of the theater and through the broken screen. Akira burst through the projector and slammed into the hard planks beyond, then thumped back to the ground, sprawled, aching, struggling for breath.

That chain had gone through Thor’s protection as if it hadn’t even been there. And its touch was cold. So cold it burned. It had only gripped him for a moment and the pain was still like a ring of squirming fire beneath his skin. He could barely make it to his feet.

He staggered out from behind the screen and back into the theater and stood agape at what he saw.

He’d only been taken out of the action for a few seconds but already the theater was a nightmare of chains. The walls and floor and ceiling were alive with their centipedal writhing; the links clacked and chittered like a forest of locusts. Iago, that twisted Persona, twitched and jerked spasmodically as the endless chains grew longer and longer – they erupted from his body like pus from innumerable wounds.

Akechi and Loki stood alone in that nest, blades drawn and bearing down on Iago’s saber, but as Akira watched Iago effortlessly flung their weapons away and then darted forward and hacked Loki clean in two. Akechi’s Persona burst into flame and Akechi cried out and clutched his head, his blade falling into the mass of chains; one of them held it up and snapped it in half with casual ease. The stranger, Iago’s master, reacted to none of it. He stood with head bowed as if he’d fallen asleep on his feet.

Akechi turned and made a desperate lurching run for the back of the theater and the chains came alive around him. They encircled his waist, his limbs, his neck, and snapped taut, and pulled hard, and Akechi fell forward and grabbed at once of the seats and reached out a hand, grasping, drowning, and he let out an animal shriek that made Akira’s hair stand on end:

“Help me! Please help me!”

Akira’s mask burned blue.

“Ravage them,” he growled. “Yoshitsune.”

That old familiar feeling, the sensation of a piece of himself breaking loose and walking free. The Persona manifested before him and took a calm step forward, pale and dark-haired and clad in that rusty armor, and when he swung his blade it was little more than a glimmer, a shard of fragmented moonlight. Yoshitsune swung once, and disappeared, and all the chains froze stiff as the air filled with a silky sharpening. Iago flourished his sword and the blade burst with sparks as he deflected the attack, but all his chains burst apart, as if the warrior’s single blow had made the very air grow razored fangs and bite down hard.

Then, with quiet, balletic grace, the walls started to slide apart. Then the ceiling. Akira looked up
and saw a chunk of masonry about to fall on him.

“Oh, hell. I overdid it.”

That was when Akechi grabbed him again and cried Loki’s name, and the Persona emerged and hacked away the floor beneath them both. They fell into darkness, as the theater above collapsed.

Akechi and Akira struck wet and carpeted ground, the hole they’d left behind filling with rubble. The dark here was absolute. Akira squeezed his eyes shut and opened them again and it made no difference in what he saw.

“Good call,” he said, wriggling out of Akechi’s grip. “Forgot this old place had a-”

Akechi’s hand clamped tight over his mouth. Akira almost shouted before he realized why he’d been silenced. Overhead, the chains clinked. The sound grew closer.

He remembered an old trick of his. He let his eyes focus just so, and the shadows in the room fell away. Through his third eye he could see that the basement theater was even smaller than the one above, low-ceilinged and with only a dozen seats. And he saw the chains forcing their way in, through the hole Loki had cut; he turned around and saw more of them dangling from the fissure Iago had cut when he’d tried to bisect the two of them on the ground.

Akira gave Akechi a gentle nudge. After a moment, Akechi took the hint and let Akira lead him through the dark. They padded over to the seats and Akira squatted in one with his legs pulled up, an awkward imitation of Futaba. Akechi quickly patted him down, feeling out his posture, then nodded and followed suit. The chains draped across the ground. They slithered over where Akira and Akechi’s feet would have been, had they made the fatal mistake of sitting down normally. Fishing line, spider’s thread, in search of something warm and alive.

After what felt like years, the jangle overhead stopped. Then the chains retracted all at once, fast enough to kick up sparks as they scraped across each other, their friction sounding off a cheated screech. Above, the theater door opened, then closed.

The two of them stayed like that, silent and unmoving, for some time afterward.

“I think we can relax now,” Akira said, eventually.

“The walls,” Akechi croaked.

“The what?”

“Check the walls. If they’re strong enough. Don’t know if this room will hold.”

The city’s buildings, collapsing on themselves. “Oh. Sure. One sec.”

“I’d do it myself, but-”

“No, stay put. Those chains must’ve hurt like hell.”

He rose from his seat and experimentally ran his hand across the perimeter of the theater, applying occasional pressure, seeing if the wall would give. It held steady and he sighed in relief and let his eyes unfocus again. Trying to maintain his night vision for too long was like tensing a muscle.

“I think we’re good,” he said.

“Glad to hear it.” Akira heard creaking leather as Akechi finally got down from the chair. “I want
to apologize. For my earlier behavior. I’ve been...I reacted poorly.”

“Don’t worry about it. Have you really been stuck here ever since we last ran into each other?”

“I’m not even certain where ‘here’ is.”

“It’s the Sea of Souls, apparently. You know, where all the Shadows and Personas and everything come from. But every time we destroyed a Palace it fell down here, and eventually we got rid of Mementos, and that was so huge that it’s still...digesting, or something. So everything’s all mixed up and full of rubble. Arsène calls it the Dead Sea.”

“Who?”

“Arsène. My Persona. My original one, I mean. He’s chatty.”

“...I see,” Akechi said. “I may regret asking, but what day is it? In the real world?”

Akira hesitated, but he had a feeling that even in total darkness, Akechi would catch him in a lie.

“It’s November,” he said. “Not sure about the date. I’ve been here for a little while, too.”

“Oh.” No clear emotion. “That sounds about right. And how did you arrive?”

“I took the bus.” Expectant silence. “It’s a long story. You?”

“It’s a long story. I don’t suppose this ‘bus’ of yours is idling outside, waiting to carry you back?”

“It actually might be, sort of. But I don’t think it’s going to let me leave until that creep with the chains is taken care of. What the hell is that thing? It even had a Persona.”

“I think it’s a ‘who’ and not a ‘what’ but beyond that your guess is as good as mine,” Akechi said. “He hasn’t been here as long as me but he’s become more...active, of late. He hunts Shadows, I think. Rips them out of the water and then disappears with them.” His voice turned distant. “You might have heard it. The screams...they carry quite a long way.”

“People in the real world have been going into comas. Not just Japan, either. It’s happening all over. They’re calling it Paranoia Syndrome, for some reason.”

“It’s a bit of a garish name, but I understand why you’d see a connection. Damage to a person’s Shadow is mirrored on their psyche in the real world, as you know. And the Shadows here no longer appear to be tied to any one geographical location. Many of them don’t speak Japanese. Our pursuer’s little hunting trips may very well be the cause of a worldwide epidemic.”

“So that settles it.” He leaned against the wall, staring into the solid dark. “Just have to get the drop on that guy and beat him down. Want to help out?”

“You’re proposing an alliance?”

“It’s not like you have anything better to do.”

Akechi laughed a little. “It’s good to see that recent events haven’t put too much of a strain on our friendship.”

Akira didn’t answer.

“An entire year lost,” Akechi mused. “But there might be a silver lining to that, hm? It’s unlikely
that the authorities would be looking for me too closely, after all this time. Once I escape from here I should be able to slip out of public view with relative ease. I won’t ask for your assistance in that regard, of course. You’ve probably participated in quite enough illegal activity already.” Still no comment. “Kurusu? Are you there?”

When Akira finally spoke, his voice was toneless and level and flat as a mirror.

“You killed Futaba’s mother,” he said. “You killed Haru’s father. You were probably planning to kill Makoto’s sister.”

Now it was Akechi’s turn to say nothing.

“Futaba and I did a little research on Shido’s rise to power,” Akira went on. “People definitely had a habit of dropping dead around him. Considering what I know now, I’d say you’ve murdered at least a couple dozen people over the last few years. And that’s not counting the psychotic breakdowns. Or the injuries and casualties sustained by incidents like that subway crash. Or the families of the people you’ve hurt. And on. And on. And on.” He waited for some retort from Akechi, but none came. “I’ve got no problem partnering up while we’re stuck together. But we’re not friends. And I won’t let you just walk away from everything you’ve done.”

For a time, the only sound was the distant drip of water.

“Of course,” Akechi said hoarsely. “That’s fair. I haven’t been thinking clearly, as of late. Forget I said anything.”

Akira stayed put against the wall. And after a moment, Akechi started talking again, but now his voice was cheerful, forced, uncomfortably brittle.

“I would at least appreciate a bite to eat before turning myself in, to be completely honest. I don’t seem to need food down here but the body still misses it, haha. There, th-there was an excellent kaiseki I had in Shibuya sometime back in…w-when was it? October. It must have been October. I had to pass on the saké, bit underage for that, but the other courses were divine, the beef especially, even in Tokyo you don’t often get wagyu that tender. Line was terrible, of course, but I didn’t mind that so much. It’s a good opportunity for people-watching. And on long lines I, I got plenty of attention. Ace Detective and all, ha ha. They…no one would really talk to me, but I heard them talking about me, which I suppose is the next best thing, right? Right?”

Akira said nothing, because he couldn’t think of anything to say. And then he heard Akechi’s breath hitch and break. He was crying.

This was someone who would have cheerfully decapitated him not an hour ago. But Akira imagined the sight of him, hunched over in that ridiculous armor and weeping in the dark, and felt the same way he felt when Akechi had finally admitted defeat in that engine room. Something between disgust and pity.

“Hey. Akechi.”

He sniffled. “What is it?”

“What happened to you back in that Palace? We were all set to come back for you even after you locked us out. But then you disappeared from Futaba’s radar. Were you just hiding from us?”

“No. No, it wasn’t that. I’m not sure what happened exactly, but…I think I actually died for a while.” He sniffed again. “I think you saved me, in the end.”
“You mean, like, figuratively, or…?”

“Yes. I mean, no. I mean, it’s difficult to explain. Why do you ask?”

“Like I said. We would have come back for you.” He paused. “I’m sorry it took so long.”

“It’s fine,” Akechi replied, quietly. “I should get some rest. Before I stick my foot back in my mouth.”

“Good idea. Maybe I could try getting some sleep, too.”

Akira picked his way back to the chairs and settled in. The cushion was unpleasantly damp.

“Kurusu? I realize this is a foolish question, but. Um. I’m not imagining this, right? When I wake up, you’ll still be here?”

“Yeah. I’ll be here.”

“Okay,” he said. “Okay.”

Akira stared up at the broken ceiling and listened to Akechi’s breaths. After a little while, they became deep and slow. He still didn’t feel tired himself – as Lavenza had said, he had no real body to tire out in the first place – but he laced his hands over his chest, and closed his eyes, and made the effort anyway.

* * *

The purr of engines, the hiss of wheels on pavement. A dusty perfume in the air.

“Welcome back,” said Lavenza.

Akira straightened in his seat and rubbed his eyes. He ran his palms against the plush velvet of the chair. After all that time splashing through the Dead Sea, it was a relief to feel something dry again.

“Allow me to offer my congratulations,” she said. “We have made significant progress on our journey.”

“Took me longer than I expected.”

“Nevertheless. Your mission is now clear. You have an objective, a target, and an ally.”

“Not sure if I’d call Akechi much of an ally.”

Lavenza tilted her head. She still didn’t blink, even as strands of that fine white-gold hair brushed against her open eyes.

“Your resentment of that boy seems considerable,” she said. “May I ask why?”

“Well, he did kind of kill all those people. Seems a good enough reason for me.”

“Ah. I see. He also made several attempts on your own life, as I recall.”

“Yeah, but I don’t mind that so much. He might’ve tried to kill me but he was really bad at it.”

“And are these actions he took the sole cause for your animosity?”
Akira frowned. Neither Lavenza nor her divided selves had shown this kind of curiosity before.

He’d turned out to be good with people – maybe it was the Wild Card’s influence, maybe it was just from his natural tendency to stay quiet and beneath notice, but during his stay in Tokyo he’d had a knack for intuining what people wanted to hear, their quirks and their habits. And he’d liked all of them, for the most part, even the ones who kept sticking needles in him or humiliated him in front of an arcade full of grade-schoolers. He hadn’t minded Akechi either, initially. Ryuji might have flipped his lid when he saw the guy bad-mouthing him and the other Thieves on live TV but Akira figured that was natural for the police.

But then Akechi had approached him in person and the wrongness had started. There was something unbearably *unctuous* about the boy, an oiliness that made his every word sound rehearsed, and the way he’d kept seeking out Akira’s company no matter how curt or blunt his replies became quickly got under his skin – it was like Akechi really was just performing their so-called friendship, reading off an entirely different script. Akira had run across some reprehensible people during his time with the Thieves, but if he spoke with Akechi too long he often felt like he needed a shower afterward. Then there had been his half-threatening little rendezvous with their group in the metro, or the bafflingly casual way he’d dropped the story of his abusive childhood on him and Futaba, or how he always seemed to stay at Leblanc just long enough to chat him up and go. Every encounter with him had been out of key and out of tune. Akira had almost been relieved when he’d found out that Akechi was planning to double-cross them. It affirmed a lot of his suspicions.

But then Akira had learned about the real depth of his crimes, and that his derangement had just been nurtured further by Shido and before that by Yaldaboot himself, culminating in that raving breakdown in the pound and steam and stink of that engine room. None of the Thieves could work up the gall to condemn him outright; they’d seen too much of themselves in him, even if he’d chosen the darker path every time. Even after Akira had gone home, the question of Akechi and what had become of him after that bulkhead door slammed shut had stuck at him like a toothache. It was why, when he’d seen that bound box over the alternate Velvet Room, his mind had jumped to just one conclusion for its occupant.

“It’s complicated,” was all he could say.

“Humans so often are.” Her head rotated back into place. “I shall pry no further. But I shall witness your exploits with great interest.”

“I’ll try to put on a good show. Can you tell me anything about the person we saw in that theater?”

“Only that its malice is unbridled. And it is aware of your predicament. It may have retreated because it knows that you have no other avenue of escape.”

“But once we get rid of him, we can leave, right? Both of us?”

“So you care about that boy after all?”

“I made a promise,” Akira said simply.

“My master is presently attending to him. Should this mission be accomplished, I have little doubt that circumstances will save him from his present fate. Though he may fall into one even more dire.”

“That’s up to him,” said Akira. “Either way, we’re stuck together now. We don't have much choice but to get along.”
“Do try and develop your bond with him. A tentative partnership is often an ineffective one. And
this adversary will show you no quarter.”

“Well, either that’ll happen or we’ll just wind up killing each other. Should be interesting to see
how it goes.”

Lavenza nodded. “Indeed.”

That appeared to be the end of their conversation. Akira leaned back in his seat and looked out the
windows; there still wasn’t any scenery to speak of, just that absolute, suffocating darkness. Their
driver remained silent and ramrod-straight behind the fogged glass at the front of the bus. Lavenza
laid a hand on her book as if soothing a restless animal.

It wasn’t long before the hum of the engine lulled him back to sleep. He shut his eyes, ready to
pass from one dream to another.

*             *             *

This time, Akechi knew it was no dream.

Again he woke up curled on the floor of that cage, but it seemed roomier this time – not by much,
but his knees were no longer crammed under his chin. He rose and sought out the peephole before
claustrophobia tightened over his chest again. It didn’t take long; the slit had also gotten bigger.
Now it was the size of his head, albeit lined with thin metal bars. He wrapped his fingers around
them and tried to peer out.

Nothing but those cells and their endlessly staring shadow. He still couldn’t see the floor. He
craned his head this way and that, trying to take in the whole chamber, and then that high frail
voice spoke again and he nearly jumped high enough to crack his head on the ceiling.

“Welcome back,” it said. “And congratulations. Hardly any time had passed since your last visit,
but already your world has grown considerably.”

“Let me go,” he said, voice shaking. “I don’t want to be here anymore.”

“Hmm. A most unusual sentiment for a guest. But then, you are not a typical guest.” Akechi
thought he heard distant fingernails tapping on a table. “Introductions are in order, I believe. My
name is Igor. I attend to this Velvet Room.”

That name sounded familiar. That tapping. Those three figures, all in unison. You are a slave. Want
emancipation?

“Yes,” said Igor, as if he’d plucked the thought from Akechi’s head. “I understand your confusion.
The entity you initially encountered here used my name and my face, but it was an imposter. A
usurper. Twisting the purpose of this room to set you upon a ruinous path. However, even though
you were invited here under false pretenses, your invitation remains valid. If you require the Velvet
Room’s services, it will be here.”

“There’s nothing you can do for me,” Akechi said. “There’s nothing that anyone can do for me.
Akira was right. Even if I get out of the Dead Sea I have nowhere else to go.”

“And so you are imprisoned. The state of this room reflects that of your own heart. Why, then, has
it already changed so?”

Akechi said nothing. Instead, he gripped the bars and shook. They didn’t budge. This box was still
one solid piece of metal. If he looked out the side he could see the wicked gleam of barbed wire.

“What is it you seek, I wonder?” Igor asked. “Freedom? Atonement? Rehabilitation? The Usurper offered you power, but I can do nothing other than refine what is in your soul. And yet when I peer within, what I see is distressingly hollow. Truly, a most unusual guest. But I am nonetheless delighted to meet you. We may consider this a fresh introduction. A rebirth, of sorts.”

He clutched his head and slumped back in the cage. Even through the walls he could feel the shadows’ relentless empty stares crawl across his skin.

“Most appropriate, in your case,” Igor continued cheerfully. “A certain saying comes to mind: 'To be born again, first you have to die.'”

“I should have stayed dead,” he muttered.

“But that is not what you chose. And so I am here to bear witness. As long as you continue on your current path, this Velvet Room and its amenities shall remain open to you.”


“As I said, this room reflects the state of your heart. And right now it illustrates that a bond is open to you. It is hesitant and weak, but it is there. The blessed paradox. The shackle that eases your imprisonment.” Igor’s voice grew distant. “Until next time, then. I shall watch your progress with utmost interest.”

Akechi pulled his knees up and waited for the world to fade. Cold metal into cold water, one paranoid nightmare traded for another. He thought about Akira and the stranger and the past and the future, the consequences of his actions, the guilt that should have been there inside him, but aside from the dread of those rattling chains he still felt vacant. He didn’t know if he felt anything at all.
When they finally reunited in Leblanc the weather was drizzly, the light through Sojiro’s front windows turned colorless, mournful. Sojiro greeted them one by one, but he seemed distracted. The cup of coffee by his shoulder had gone stone cold. In the corner of the café the TV news yammered on and on. He couldn’t seem to take his eyes off it. Once they were all assembled, Makoto asked Futaba, hesitantly, if Sojiro was paying her enough attention. Futaba said he was doing what he had to do, and then she said no more.

They spread out in the loft. Ryuji had grabbed Akira’s desk chair and pulled it up to the long table beside the stairs, leaving Haru and Yusuke to stand. No one called him out for this; he was the most visibly agitated of them all, restlessly scratching his cheek or drumming his knee like an addict in need of a fix. He’d continued his patrols of the city even after his unfortunate run-in with Yoshida Toranosuke, and what he’d seen had apparently not improved his mood any. Futaba was huddled on the corner of Akira’s cot with her parka’s hood pulled over her head and her arms snaked out to her laptop. Its keys rattled over their conversation.

“Okay,” said Makoto. “Let’s review.”

She pointed to each of them in turn as she spoke.

“Paranoia Syndrome is absolutely real, and much more widespread than any of us first thought. Ohya suspects that the number of actual cases numbered in the hundreds, and there’s no telling exactly how much that number has increased since then.” Pointing to Haru: “If the sickness is the result of human activity, there’s no clear culprit. Mr. Iwai speculates that it disproportionately affected the criminal population, at least initially, and that significant geopolitical unrest is brewing as it spreads.” To Ryuji: “The government is, predictably, useless. Right now they’re just trying to lay blame on someone, and the public service announcement they made about Paranoia Syndrome probably made everyone even more anxious.” To Ann: “The symptoms are also much worse than we expected, with the unconsciousness being accompanied by severe and constant pain that might, eventually, prove fatal. There’s no traditional cure in sight.” To Yusuke: “And that’s because Paranoia Syndrome, as we thought, is most likely supernatural. I can’t completely work out Mifune’s prediction, but the way she described Akira doesn’t make it sound like he’s just lying in a hospital bed. Mifune also said that the entire world’s future seems to be growing more uncertain by the day.” She lowered her hand. “Futaba, what about you?”

“Reported cases of Paranoia Syndrome, verified or otherwise, have increased by fifteen hundred percent in the last week. Give or take.” She didn’t stop typing. “If there was a coverup then the cover-uppers have given up on it completely. Even if a lot of these are hoaxes, it’s not good news. Also, I found something weird about how the cases themselves are reported.”

“Weird in what way?”

“Distribution. I tried to unearth as many suppressed reports or videos as I could and it looks like they were posted in rough batches at specific points in time, especially early on. In other words, people aren’t just falling into comas little by little. They’re falling into comas in groups, except those groups are randomly spread out all over the world, and they’re getting bigger and more frequent. It’s completely unnatural.”

“Futaba, have you seen anyone threatening to leak this info?” Ann asked. “Or any of the medical details, like what Dr. Takemi mentioned?”
“Those idiot Medjed trolls are making noise again and I don’t have time to destroy them all. Even with their utter incompetence at all things, I’d give it a few weeks tops before one of them or some other dumbass hacker decides to drop a truth bomb on everyone. That’s all I know.” Her fingers paused. “Also, I broke down crying in front of my homeroom teacher. So. That was fun.”

None of them had anything to say to that. Rain pattered on the window as they fell silent. Then, they heard another sound – a steady, low thump. They all turned to Ryuji, who was bent low, fidgeting in his chair, tapping his foot with fists clenched. He looked ready to detonate.

“Ryuji?” Haru asked. “Are you okay?”

“Tryin’ not to flip out,” he said. He wouldn’t look up. “Don’t wanna do it. Not in Akira’s room. I’m counting backwards from ten and it ain’t working.”

“Bottling it up helps no one, Ryuji,” said Yusuke.

“If I don’t bottle it up I’m gonna put a hole through the effing floor.”

Ann leaned forward. “Ryuji, we’re all feeling the same way-”

Then he looked up and she stopped talking. His eyes were red, cheeks blotchy; he looked on the verge of tears.

“What the hell is wrong with us?” he said, voice hoarse. “Ain’t we supposed to be these big-shot saviors of society and all that? Meanwhile this shit’s been going on for months and I’ve been worryin’ about entrance exams and beating my best time on the damn track. Now the whole world feels like it’s gonna blow up any second and we can’t even do shit about it. Why’d we wait so long?”

None of them seemed to have answers ready. Even Yusuke, usually unflappable, could only stare at his feet.

“I know it’s ‘cause of Akira,” Ryuji said. “We started looking into this for his sake. But it shouldn’t have been. We should’ve been on top of this. It’s our fault it got this bad.”

Makoto said, “We promised to entrust society’s future to-”

“To the adults! I know! But this ain’t what we meant, and if we’d taken five goddamn minutes to pay attention we would’ve figured that out right away! Adults can’t deal with this cognitive-paranormal bullshit, it’s gotta be us!”

“This may be a harsh truth, but when you look closely at our activities as the Phantom Thieves, this is not dissimilar from how we’ve always behaved,” Yusuke said.

“What the hell’s that supposed to mean?”

“Think about it. Even if you consider the influence of the Phan-Site, each of our major targets were chosen primarily due to their proximity to one of our number. Kamoshida’s torment of you and Ann, Madarame and myself, Kaneshiro threatening Makoto, Haru and her father…even Medjed and Sae Niijima became our opponents because we were threatened by their activities. Masayoshi Shido himself was ultimately defeated because he had slighted us, Akira in particular.” He pinched his nose. “This latest occurrence with Paranoia Syndrome follows that pattern. We did nothing about it because it affected no one that we knew personally.”

“That’s bullshit, man!” Ryuji shouted. “We’re not…we’re supposed to be…”
“He does have a point,” Haru said. “My father was distorted, but I asked you to target him specifically for my own sake. Even if it ended…well, we know how it ended.”

Ann, meanwhile, was nervously twirling her pigtail around one finger. “Dr. Takemi mentioned something like this. She said people have trouble seeing the bigger picture.”

“So, what, now we just suck? Is that what we’re sayin’ here? We put our lives on the line to save this city and not even a year later it turns out it didn’t mean shit?”

“No one is suggesting that,” said Morgana. “But we should absolutely devote all our energy to resolving this as soon as possible. Our reputation means little considering what’s at stake.”

“The question is how,” Makoto said.

“Yeah, and it’s a damn good one,” said Ryuji. “We can learn all we want about this shit, but unless we actually stop it, all that’s gonna do is stress us out more.”

Then he looked up again, brow creased. The room fell silent as everyone mentally replayed the last minute of their conversation.

Ryuji turned around and saw a pair of deep blue eyes about two inches from his face.

“Son of a-!”

He recoiled, lost his balance, and fell back; his head hit the planks with a flat thud that made everyone in the room flinch. Downstairs, the TV fell silent.

“Everything okay up there?” Sojiro called.

“Yeah, Boss!” Ryuji forced himself up, gingerly rubbing his skull. “Just, uh, leaned a little too far back in my chair!”

“That’s a bad habit, you know!”

“Haha, well, now I do! Sorry!”

The TV’s babble resumed.

“Morgana,” Makoto said. “How in the world did you-”

Morgana bristled. “I took the bus, thank you very much! Do you have any idea how hard it was for me to make it all the way to Tokyo like this? I couldn’t even get on the trains! People kept stepping on me! You could at least say you’re glad to see me, or…”

He trailed off. Futaba had pushed away her laptop and lowered her hood; she stared at him wide-eyed, as if expecting him to flicker out like a mirage. Morgana hopped off the table, padded across the room, and clambered into her lap. She reached down and pinched his cheeks. He didn’t complain.

Once she released him, he turned and faced the group.

“I’ve been in the city for several days now,” he told them. “I would have gotten in touch, but I saw a couple of you conducting investigations of your own. I thought it would be prudent to wait until you had gathered all the information you thought was available.”

“How’s Akira?” Ann asked. Behind her, Yusuke helped Ryuji off the floor and back into his seat.
“I left the night after he fell unconscious. His parents…they’re not taking this well. I doubt they would’ve wanted me hanging around anyway.”

Yusuke turned away from Ryuji. “Morgana, you and Akira are inseparable. Were you present when the illness struck? Did he appear nervous, or report a feeling of being watched?”

“I wasn’t actually in the room with him, but I had no idea he was even sick until I tried to wake him up. He looked like he’d just fallen asleep at his desk.”

“Then that is indeed unlike the other victims. The symptoms they typically exhibit just prior to falling unconscious resemble some type of panic attack, or seizure. They don’t quietly slip away.”

“Either way, I’ve come across some information that should prove valuable to all of you. So listen up and listen good.”

They gathered round, while Morgana tried his best to look solemn and serious. He wasn’t having much success; Futaba had begun to absently scratch him behind his ears.

“I’ve been living stray again since I came back to Tokyo,” he said. “Checking out the city like Ryuji has.”

“You see something I didn’t?” Ryuji asked. “I ain’t surprised, considerin’ how you ninja around the place.”

“I was more concerned with something beyond the naked eye.” His pupils dilated to slits, as if to illustrate. “Like all of you, I suspected that Paranoia Syndrome might have some connection to the cognitive world. And down in the Tokyo Metro, where we first entered Mementos, I found what I was looking for. Not Mementos itself, but something like…an echo of it. It’s hard for me to describe, but in that spot, somewhere far away, I could sense Akira.”

“Are you saying Mementos is coming back?” Ann asked. “After all that work we did to banish it?”

“I can’t be certain of that. Either way, the ‘signal’ I picked up is so faint that I still wouldn’t be able to go there under normal circumstances. It’d be like trying to open a door made out of smoke. But with Akira’s scent acting as a beacon, I think I can head inside, wherever it is. If Akira, or his consciousness, or whatever is lost there, I recommend we go in and retrieve it.”

“Freakin’ how? The Meta-Nav disappeared with that bobble-headed mascot body of yours, remember?”

Morgana glared. “Did you forget who you’re talking to? I don’t need some tacky phone app to go where I want.”

“He’s right, Ryuji,” said Haru. “Remember when I first entered my father’s Palace? It was because I tagged along too closely to Morgana when he crossed into the cognitive world. He dragged me in with him.”

“And I can do the same for all of you,” said Morgana. “You’ve done an admirable job gathering intelligence so far. Now, it’s time we prepare for a rescue operation. Just think of Akira as another treasure to steal, and everything should go smoothly.”

Ryuji grinned. “Shit, now the cat’s speakin’ my language.”

“It wouldn’t be wise to rush in, though,” Makoto said.
“Ooh, you’re right.” Haru fretfully bit her lip. “All of my weapons are at home. It’s such a bother, carrying them around.”

“Yeah, I get the feeling the cops’d kinda raise an eyebrow at anyone totin’ a battleaxe down the street. Still, I ain’t in any mood to wait.”

“Remember our rule,” said Ann. “Anything we do, we do unanimously.”

Morgana nodded. “Agreed. Let’s take a-”

Futaba clamped her hands around his sides.

“Wait, what?”

Wordlessly, she stood up, pushed through the group, and made her way downstairs, Morgana squirming in her grip.

“Futaba, what the hell!? Put me down!” She didn’t answer. “It’s pouring rain outside, I don’t wanna get wet! Can I at least eat something first? Futaba? Futaba!”

Everyone heard his protests fade as Futaba descended. They were replaced by Sojiro’s voice. 

“Futaba, where are you- wait, is that Akira’s cat!?“

“It seems we have been overruled,” Yusuke concluded.

By the time they got downstairs Sojiro was leaning out the door and calling for Futaba down the street. He turned around; the questions he wanted to ask were clear to see on his face. He had so many he seemed to be having trouble deciding on which one to ask first.

“So sorry, Boss!” Ann said, and bowed deep. “I think we’re going to rescue Akira now!”

“You’re-”

“We’ll look after Futaba, don’t worry,” Makoto said. “We’ve just got to get to her or she’s going to enter the Metro without us.”

“She’s-”

Ryuji grabbed his umbrella. “Also we might be curin’ Paranoia Syndrome, sorta. Talk later!”

They left the café in a storm of apologies and comforting promises and left him standing dumbfounded beside the door. At last, the door swung shut, the bell’s cheery jingle like a rimshot to a joke he wasn’t in on.

Eventually, he shuffled over to the TV and snapped it off. Then he started rummaging behind the counter.

“Where the hell are my cigarettes…”

*   *   *

Their trip to Shibuya was harried and silent. The streets filled with passing umbrellas like the shells of scurrying beetles; Futaba zipped Morgana up in her coat and kept her head lowered, to keep as much of the rain off them as possible. What conversations they overheard were furtive and terse. Surgical masks were more prevalent than ever. Many of the younger pedestrians sported masks in
bright colors or with merry printed cat faces, and in this gray and gloomy atmosphere their manufactured gaiety felt somehow obscene.

“I don’t feel well,” Haru said, as they entered Station Square. She spoke in a guilty whisper, like someone standing beside a coffin.

“Then please go home and get some rest, Haru,” said Makoto. “We’re already taking a risk. You need to be in top shape.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it like that. I’ve felt this way for some time now, but it just keeps getting worse. Have you ever been so worried that it feels like you’re cramping up?”

“I, too, am experiencing this sensation,” said Yusuke. “I thought it was just hunger pangs.”

“Oh, no, Yusuke, did you skip lunch again?”

“I am quite well. Thank you for your concern.”

Ann sighed. “I really don’t have a good feeling about this.”

They furled their umbrellas and slipped into the Metro, all of them now realizing what Haru had meant. That churning, gnawing anxiety. Like butterflies in the stomach but with venomous wings – if they focused on it too long they felt their breath shortening and their chest turning tight. In the eyes of the people around them they saw their own expressions reflected, that grim and foreboding stare. Paranoia Syndrome was still barely a blip on a global scale, but the rumors seemed to have everyone on the brink of panic.

“It’s been a week,” Ryuji said. “A goddamn week. How did it get so bad so fast?”

“The incidents are compounding,” Makoto said. “And they just keep getting worse. What happened in Taitō yesterday, it-”

“Focus,” said Morgana. “Take a left here.”

They descended the escalator. When they reached the bottom, Morgana wriggled loose of Futaba’s coat and hopped out. His whiskers twitched as he raised his head and scented the air.

“This is it. The point of entry. And it doesn’t look like anyone else is around.”

Ryuji smacked his fist into his palm. “Then let’s do it. Any objections?”

“Too late for them now,” Futaba said quietly.

“It’s not too late,” Ann retorted. “But no, I don’t have any. Even if we’re out of practice, and unarmed, and we have no idea where we’re going and what we’re doing…”

“Akira is in trouble,” Futaba finished.

“Yeah. Akira is in trouble.” She smiled a little. “I guess Yusuke was right. We really are selfish.”

“I’m commencing navigation now,” said Morgana. “Stay very close to me. This is going to be tricky.”

What followed was difficult to describe. Morgana remained seated, his tail curled around his legs, but he somehow gave the impression of moving without movement, the world itself groaning around him, turning divided, turning faint. They all felt a brief vertigo as the ground seemed to shift
under their feet.

“Hey. Inari.” Futaba’s voice was level but her hands were shaking. “What do you think we’ll find besides Akira?”

He laid a hand on her shoulder. “Nothing that we cannot handle.”

“…right.”

The skin of the world broke loose. Morgana set off and pulled the scenery along with him, reality wavering and tearing apart like he’d caught its very threads in his claws. And any onlookers, had they remained at a safe distance, would not have noticed anything unusual; in fact, they would have only noticed the Phantom Thieves turning unnoticeable, those assembled young men and women skittering away to the corners of their vision until they disappeared completely. They could have been a daydream, or a trick of the light. And then they were already gone.

*             *             *

“This is the news.

“The MILT issued an official statement regarding the accident in Taitō City yesterday morning, in which a sightseer bus en route to the Ueno Matsuzakaya department store lost control and drove down the rode at speed. The bus struck several vehicles before it left the road, at which point several trees and lightposts halted its progress.

“While no pedestrians were harmed, the occupants of the damaged vehicles were injured, with several in critical condition. The driver of the runaway bus, Yoshio Ikari, age 47, was also pronounced unresponsive at the scene. Occupants of the bus at the time of the accident stated that Mr. Ikari lost consciousness while driving. Several passengers added that he seemed agitated, repeatedly glancing over his shoulder shortly before suffering an apparent seizure.

“Due to this incident’s resemblance to the ever-more prevalent Paranoia Syndrome attacks, a Ministry spokesman requested that the public remain calm in this time of crisis, and for drivers to immediately pull over to the side of the road if-”

*click*

> anon: The next one’s going to kill somebody.
> anon: jesus, what’s next? planes falling out of the sky?
> anon: Paranoia Syndrome my ass, the guy was on drugs
> anon: i feel sick every time i step outside
> anon: always there’s more and more and more and more and more and more and more…
> anon: someone needs to fucking firebomb the Diet if they don’t get off their asses, YEAH I SAID IT I DON’T CARE WHO’S READING THIS
> anon: where’s the phan-site? did it get taken down?

*click*

“-stocks worldwide suffering a precipitous downturn over the past week, with particular concern to retail and tourism markets. Financial analysts have theorized that the recent drop may be at least partly attributable to the Paranoia Syndrome incidents being reported on worldwide.

“Experts have further stated that, if this correlation is valid, then Japanese tourism and airline industries in particular may suffer further in light of the recent Tokyo bus crash, which was widely
rumored to have been caused by the driver succumbing to Paranoia Syndrome. Due to the illness’ lack of unique symptoms, this claim has officially been neither confirmed nor denied, though online discourse has reached what several social media analysts have described as a ‘fever pitch’ since the collapse of Shujin student Tsukiko Minami one week ago.

“The National Diet has remained conspicuously silent amidst growing public unrest, and community activists and industry leaders alike are now calling for an open public forum on the mystery sickness that has become virtually impossible to ignore—

*click*

> anon: even if they did say anything who in their right mind would believe it
> anon: Don’t trust anyone. Don’t even trust God.
> anon: I keep saying it’s all a hoax, WAKE THE FUCK UP
> anon: gonna be riots in the streets at this rate
> anon: feels like there’s someone watching over my shoulder right now
> anon: wtf is causing this!? say it’s terrorists or a cult or the government or a virus, just say SOMETHING!
> anon: what’ll we do if Japan gets quarantined? would it even work?
> anon: PS has been spotted in like thirty countries so far, it’s completely out of control
> anon: God help us when the Americans get involved.
> anon: think I’m gonna skip school for the next day or ten, what’s even the point anymore
> anon: I can’t sleep. I can’t eat.

*click*

“-conflict on the floor of the United Nations, as the United States representatives threatened repercussions if a full criminal investigation of Paranoia Syndrome is not immediately-”

*click*

“-spokesperson from the World Health Organization was still hesitant to officially classify Paranoia Syndrome as a pandemic, citing lack of information regarding the sickness’ infectiousness and vectors of transmission. The WHO nevertheless emphasized that they will devote all of their resources to investigating, and called for international cooperation in light of-“

*click*

“-several extremist groups claiming responsibility for Paranoia Syndrome on social media have abruptly fallen silent, with some speculating that members of these groups may, themselves, have fallen victim to-”

*click*

“-hospital capacity, several administrators sparked controversy after calling for Paranoia Syndrome victims to be relegated to home care, in order to free space and resources for more immediately threatening-”

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*         *         *

This Shadow had been standing in a glass shopfront like a macabre mannequin, a young man in a threadbare suit that was a size too large – it looked like he’d fished it out of a thrift shop, and when
Akira confronted him it turned out that was probably the case, because he was an individual grown mad with miserliness. He hoarded money, blackmailed his family, spent the bare minimum on himself and nothing at all on others. Akira had listened to all of this, and then struck him down. Akechi hadn’t been much help; he’d taken off running as soon as the glass had shattered. Loud noises still make him jump like a cat with its tail caught in a door.

Now the Shadow knelt before him, whipped and humbled, and Akechi had crept back out of whatever corner he’d stashed himself in. Akira heard his foot tapping as he listened to the Shadow’s confession.

“It’s all falling apart,” the Shadow sobbed. “My bills, my job…one bad day is enough to ruin anyone for good. The world’s changing…the climate is changing…it’s all changing too fast. I need money. I need to weather the storm.”

“Sound like money hasn’t done you much good, in the end,” Akira said. “What good is a long life if there’s no one to share it with?”

Akechi yawned, loudly. Akira ignored him.

“Maybe you should think hard about what you really want out of life,” he told the Shadow. “Not just what everyone else thinks you should want.”

“Will that help…?”

“I don’t know. But it’s clear you can’t go on like this.” He crouched down, so that he and the Shadow were eye to eye. “Take care of yourself.”

The Shadow bowed his head, and faded, and was gone. Akira was again left with that feeling of inadequacy, that he hadn’t quite said the right thing. He really needed the others to play off of, in times like this.

“You know they don’t actually listen to you,” said Akechi. “Once they’re beaten, they vanish regardless of whether you provide a shoulder to cry on. I just walk away, personally.”

“I’m not you.”

“Haha. That much is clear. Interesting inversion of circumstances with that Shadow, don’t you think?”

“What?”

“The Phantom Thieves dedicated themselves to eradicating corrupt adults who preyed on the young, did they not? Yet here we had a young man who preyed upon the older generation. His family, no less! How truly despicable.”

“Young people can be assholes too,” Akira said, and gave him a pointed look as he set off down the street.

They hadn’t been together long, but Akechi was already getting on his nerves.

He’d been quiet as they left Yongen-Jaya. Akira had gotten him up to speed on as much as he could remember – Shido’s defeat, the depths of Mementos, Yaldabaoth’s rise and fall, Akira himself turning himself in and taking the stand to put Shido away for good. His vindication and release. Then, about seven or eight months of normalcy, followed by the looming threat of Paranoia Syndrome, and what he’s learned of its true cause from the attendants of the Velvet Room. Laying
out the timeline made it clear how pathetically brief the peace they’d won had really been, but on that subject, at least, Akechi had kept his mouth shut.

That didn’t last. The vulnerability he’d shown in the theater basement quickly went and was replaced by the layer upon layer of affectation that Akira had come to know and hate. There didn’t seem to be any substance to him when he got like this – he vacillated between wheedling praise and spiteful snark at random, and didn’t let up no matter what Akira said in response. He knew that Akechi was just prodding him for a reaction, but the worst part was that he was consistent about at least one thing, and that was his mortal terror of the stranger who’d ambushed them in Yongen-Jaya. He flinched at every echo and his sleep, when he slept, was thrashing and restless. He seemed to be doing everything he could to postpone their confrontation, and that was no good for Akira. He was in a hurry.

He continued down the dripping streets, Akechi several paces behind.

“Our newfound foe doesn’t appear to be eager for a reunion,” Akechi said cheerfully.

“You make that sound like a good thing.”

“Yes, yes, you’re in a terrible rush. And yet you stop to assist every wayward Shadow you glimpse on the road. So who’s really wasting their time, hm?"

“Didn’t you say that you were saving them, too?”

“Mere diversion. It’s not as though changes of heart will get me time off for good behavior, considering I’ll just be stepping out of here and into a prison cell. Your justice will prevail, once again.”

At the mention of ‘justice’ Akira grit his teeth.

“You don’t have to stick around, you know.” He kept his pace steady. “If you’re so afraid of this guy.”

“Oh, not at all!” He dialed the smarm up even further. “What do I need to worry about, with the great Joker at my side? Frankly, I’m interested in witnessing your performance. I imagine you’d be able to fight much more effectively without your little friends weighing you down.”

Akira looked over his shoulder, at Akechi’s smiling face. There wasn’t any obvious derangement in his expression this time around. Just a whole lot of smugness.

“You’re crossing a line,” he said. That just made Akechi’s smile wider.

“Goodness. Have I actually succeeded in getting under the unflappable Phantom Thief’s skin? I can’t imagine why. It’s clear that you didn’t think much of them, either. Why else would you have rushed in here without a thought as to how they would take the news? They must be terribly distraught. The Sakuras, in particular.”

“Shut it, Akechi.”

“Though I suppose you do have a history of such behavior,” Akechi said thoughtfully. “Was it not that same recklessness that earned you that assault conviction in the first place? I must give you credit, you keep outdoing yourself. Now you’re disappointing two families at once.”

Akira came to a halt.
Akechi stopped, too, and while he kept smiling, it faltered a bit around the edges. Like someone who’d poked a friendly dog until it started to snarl. Akira stood still for a moment, then heaved a sigh.

“This isn’t working,” he said, and drew his pistol. Akechi took a hasty step back.

“That’s an obvious bluff,” he said, but didn’t sound totally sure of himself. “Shooting down someone who can’t even hurt you? Your sense of justice would never allow—”

Akira raised the gun and fired into the air. Akechi almost spasmed at the sudden noise; his smile was gone completely, replaced with clear panic.

“What are you doing!?”

“Drawing attention.” He turned and took aim and fired again, shattering a distant window; its crash and clatter reverberated down the street. “We can’t seem to find our new friend, so I’ll just have him come to us instead.”

“That’s suicide! You’ve seen the way he fights, if you don’t have the element of surprise then you’ll—” Akechi yelped and flinched again as Akira’s latest bullet ricocheted off a nearby lamppost.

“I’ll take my chances. Let me know if you see any more windows.”

He sighted down at the lamppost again and that was when Akechi rushed forward and seized his wrist, twisting the gun skyward. His composure was totally gone now, his complexion turned clammy and pale. Akira’s expression, meanwhile, remained neutral.

“Why are you being so damn reckless?” Akechi hissed. “What the hell are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking that grabbing my arm doesn’t stop my trigger finger.” He fired again and Akechi winced. “If you don’t like my way of doing things, then leave. I’ll handle this guy on my own.”

“Where has that gotten you so far? It’s not just you who’s at risk here, Kurusu! If you die then how do you think your friends are going to—”

Akira released the gun and grabbed Akechi’s other arm and pulled hard, so they were forced forehead-to-forehead. His lips had peeled back from his teeth and the glare from those bloodred eyes threatened to burn a hole straight through Akechi’s visor; he weakly struggled in Akira’s grip, to no avail.

“You try to kill me, and then save my ass ten minutes later,” Akira said. “You say I work better alone, then freak out when I tell you to go. You shit-talk my friends constantly and now you’re suddenly worried about their feelings. I’m doing my best here, Goro, but you’ve got to throw me a line, because I just can’t figure this out! What do you want from me!?”

Akechi threw him off and staggered back, massaging his wrist. He stayed like that as Akira fished his gun out of the city-wide puddle, batted water off it, and holstered it again. He looked lost.

“Hegel,” he said at last.

“What about him?”

“Do you remember our first meeting? I mentioned him then. Thesis and antithesis. Heads and tails, black and white, hero and villain. I don’t believe that I’ve never been able to shake that notion of our relationship. And you’re clearly the triumphant hero, so…”
“So you think I’m the good guy and that gives you the right to be an asshole?”

“No! That’s not… I mean, when you say it like that, it’s- Kurusu? Kurusu, where are you going?”

He splashed off into one of the nearby shops, and when Akechi caught up to him, he saw him seated on the counter, head down. The rest of the store nothing but cracked and blackened tile, with row after row of gutted, anonymous shelves. A pharmacy, or a gift shop, or a secondhand store – the Dead Sea drank the character from everything.

Akira had taken off his domino mask. He held it delicately between two fingers, rubbing the skin around his eyes with his free hand.

“Been wearing this thing way too long,” he muttered. “Feels like it’s giving me a rash.”

“I’m sorry,” Akechi said. “Really, I am. I shouldn’t be antagonizing you like this.”

“Hegel. Seriously?”

“It was the first thing that came to mind.”

“You sure you’re not just pissed at me for not helping you escape the cops?”

“Ha. That would be far more understandable. But I don’t think I care about that very much, in all honesty.”

Akira lowered his hand. Akechi stood in the shop’s doorway, half in and half out, arms partly raised like a hesitant burglar.

“Should I go?” he asked quietly.

“No. What about the other one? Did I get his attention?”

Akechi tilted his head and listened. “Doesn’t sound like it. He may be in another district. Or he didn’t feel like entertaining such an obvious ruse.”

“Lucky us. Get off the street, just in case.”

Akechi stepped all the way into the shop and leaned against a nearby shelf. Akechi put his mask aside and rested his hands on his knees, thumbs pressed together, his gloves almost offensively bright against the grayness of the shop. He looked lost in thought.

“You keep talking about my ‘justice,’ Akechi. What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Saving society. Reforming the corrupt. Whereas I just wanted to subvert society for my own ends.” He shrugged. “As I said, black and white.”

“When did I ever say I gave a crap about saving society?”

“What? I mean…you never said it outright, but it was all but obvious in the Phantom Thieves’ actions, in the way that you-”

“That was mostly Ryuji’s thing,” Akira said. “He has serious trouble keeping his mouth shut but I always kind of appreciated that about him. It gave everyone else a sense of purpose. But I kept my reasons to myself.”

“What reasons could those possibly be? You have to care about justice. Why else would you have
stood against Shido when he was accosting that woman? It’s what set you on this path to begin with!”

Akira smiled at that. “You know, no one’s ever asked me about that before. I told the others about what I did, sure, but they never asked me why.”

He didn’t say anything else for a while; he remained seated, hands knotted together, his jaw working as if he was trying to force up the words. The building creaked, like the walls themselves were leaning in closer to listen.

“We met back in June, right?” he asked. “After Madarame. Did you know we were the Phantom Thieves, even back then?”

“I had no idea. I did get a bit suspicious after you called me on the carpet in front of a live studio audience, however. That’s when I started surveilling you all more closely.”

“You find anything on my background before I came to Tokyo?”

“Only your confrontation with Shido. Beyond that, nothing remarkable. No prior convictions, no outstanding notes on your permanent record. It’s like you barely existed.”

“I barely did,” Akira said. “I was mostly one of those kids who kept their head down. You know, following my parents’ advice – don’t rock the boat, get good grades, go to a good college, and everything will just…fall in place.” He spread his hands wide like a magician.

Akechi snorted. “One of the more pernicious falsehoods bestowed on our generation, I always thought.”

“I still trusted it, though. So, that was me. Not many friends. Didn’t talk much. Just holding on and hoping for the best.”

“Until, one day…”

“Yeah. Coming home late from school one night, I saw Shido. Drunk off his ass, practically trying to drag this woman into his car. Kept ranting about how she needed to shut up and follow him for the country’s sake or something. Like letting him rape her was supposed to be this big patriotic gesture. And something…I don’t know, snapped in my head.” He pressed his finger against his temple like someone miming suicide. “And all at once, I thought to myself, ‘You know what? Fuck this guy.’”

Akechi barked a laugh at that. “He did have that effect on people, didn’t he? I have to ask, did you actually strike him? Always liked to believe the man had a glass jaw.”

“I didn’t even touch him! The idiot tripped over his own feet! He was so mad over his itty-bitty cut that he started screaming for the police then and there.”

“Truly, an exemplary leader for our time.”

“But then the cops showed up,” he said, quieter now. “And you can figure out the rest. Court, juvenile, expulsion. No school where I lived would take me. My parents had to shuffle me off to Sojiro and Shujin. And the first couple of weeks at that place…they were rough. I was expecting a rocky start, but everyone there acted like I was going to axe-murder them any second. Hardly anyone would even look at me. I felt like…”

“…a phantom,” said Akechi.
“Yeah. All of a sudden, that future everyone said would be waiting for me was gone. Instead, all I saw was a deep, dark hole. And every day, I came a little closer to falling in.” Akira had slumped his shoulders like he’d receded into himself, his coat suddenly looking too large. Then he perked up again. “Then I met Ryuji, and Ann, and Morgana. And you can probably figure out the rest. And eventually, I realized something. When I started hanging out with everyone, even though my future wasn’t any more certain than before, I was still looking forward to tomorrow. To doing what I wanted. What they wanted.”

“So what are you saying?” Akechi asked. “You were only interested in being a Phantom Thief because that’s what Sakamoto and the others wished?”

“It’s not even that. It’s the hole. I don’t think it’s gone away. I don’t think it ever did. It was always there, even before I met Shido. I just didn’t see it before. I probably never would have, if circumstances hadn’t forced me to.” Akira picked up his mask, held it at arm’s length, peering through the eyeholes like a spyllass at something unknown. “The others can talk all they want about fighting injustice and fixing the social order. But I’m not so sure it can be fixed. Even after Yaldabaoth got blown away and Mementos fell apart, the Shadows are still here. The hole’s not filling up. But I’m okay with that, now. No more just going through the motions for the sake of a future that might not even be there. If I think something is worth doing, then I’ll do it. If there are consequences, then I’ll handle them. But whenever I see the chance to reach out to someone, the way my friends reached out to me, then I won't hesitate. As far as I’m concerned, there’s not even a choice.”

Akechi processed this. Then he said, “That may be the most selfish definition of altruism I’ve ever heard.”

Akira grinned and replaced his mask. “Take a look at this outfit. I’m a thief, not a knight in shining armor. Pretty sure that was always your schtick, especially when you were…” He waved a hand in front of his face, outlining a long, sharp beak.

“Oh dear,” Akechi deadpanned. “I believe you just insulted my aesthetic. Did Robin Hood’s garb not appeal?”

“You looked like you got lost on your way to a marching band.”

“I’ll admit the epaulettes were a bit much. I can’t micromanage my look, unfortunately. For example.” He gestured at his armor. “This is mostly satisfactory, but I could never stand the stripes. It’s a bit too reminiscent of a gothic barber pole.”

“I was thinking more ‘edgy Featherman cosplay.’”

“That was the original intent, yes. In my defense, it seemed like a much better idea when I was fifteen. Couldn’t take it back later, though.” His smile faded, and he turned and looked out at the empty street. “Can’t take any of it back.”

Akira grew solemn as well. The murmuring wind was the only sound between them, for a while.

“Kurusu? What do you think will happen to me when I turn myself in?”

“Can’t say. They were queueing up the death penalty for me before you decided to hurry it along, but that was with Shido pulling the strings. Still, it doesn’t look good.”

“I suppose not.”

“I’m not just going to let you walk, but I’m not exactly comfortable with you being hanged, either. I
can reach out to Sae or something and—"

“It’s not your responsibility,” said Akechi. “That hole is waiting for me, too. It’s much too late to correct my course.” He gave a rueful little chuckle, running his finger down the cracked seam in his helmet. “From the moment I approached Shido I should have known I’d end up ruining myself. A paranoid maniac like that never would have let me get close enough to hurt him. But I kept doing his grim little errands anyway. Blindly. Ignorant of the pit that had opened up in front of me. It’s no wonder I ended up down here. What else was there to do, except fall?” He turned back to Akira. “Whether you want to admit it or not, you risked everything to preserve civilization as it is. While I’m still walking free, I’ll fight for it alongside you. And then place myself under its judgement.”

“No more of this thesis-antithesis crap?”

“Right. The world around us might be monochrome but black-and-white perspectives don’t seem to be of much use, at the moment.” His face lit up; he’d had an idea. “Hey, we’re in Shibuya, aren’t we? I’d like to show you something.”

Akira raised an eyebrow. “There’s something here to show?”

“It’s all relative. But you might enjoy it better than our current whereabouts. And it’s an excellent place to lie in wait for our target.”

“Sounds good to me. Lead the way.”

Akechi pushed off the shelf and went to the exit. “Shouldn’t be much of a walk, assuming you don’t find any more charity cases to—"

The words turned into a strangled gasp and Akechi fell to his knees as if poleaxed, bent double, squeezing his helmet so tight that the crack running across the top of it splintered even further. Akira’s eyes widened; he sprang off the counter and went to Akechi but Akechi held out a hand, shooed him off.

“It’s fine. It’s fine. This is…oh, that was a bad one…” His whole body shook like he was about to retch.

“What happened? What’s wrong?”

“Just migraines. They strike me, now and again. Seems to be a symptom of exposure to this place.” He rose, unsteadily, to his feet. “One more reason to get out of here as quickly as possible.”

“You should take off that helmet for a little while, man. Get some air.”

“It’s fine. I’m fine.”

Akira watched as he staggered off, irritable waving his hands about as if fighting off an invisible gnat.

“Don’t feel troubled over me, Akira,” he said faintly. “I’d prefer life in prison to another day of this. No future for me anyway. I can die in a cell or on the gallows. Anywhere. Just not here.”

Akira followed him out to the middle of the street, then stood and watched him go – Akechi walked with one hand pressed to the side of his head, bent-limbed and dragging his feet like a sleepwalker over the shallow water. The Dead Sea’s photo-negative sun hung low in the sky, flanked by the rotting buildings. It seemed to drink away Akechi’s silhouette.
He didn’t follow Akechi right away. Instead, he looked at the sun, and for reasons he didn’t fully understand, held out pointer and middle finger to its corner, imitating a gun. As Akechi’s feet scraped over the pavement and the city continued its slow death around them, Akira squinted, and pulled back his thumb, and fired his make-believe bullet into the cold heart of that empty black star.
Entering the cognitive world was rarely pleasant. In the brief time between Meta-Nav’s activation and the world’s rearrangement there was always a perilous sense of being nowhere at all, senseless and bodiless amongst a world turned into wavering mirage, giving the impression that a moment’s distraction would cause the hapless traveler to unravel and unspool into the seething inchoate mass of kaleidoscopic thought. And when the world snapped into place it inevitably caused severe disorientation, fleeting nausea, and – for some reason – a strong acidic tang in the back of the throat, as if the digestive tract caught up with the rest of the body a little too late.

Morgana’s trip into the remnants of the cognitive world was no different, in that regard, though that period of existential uncertainty between departure and arrival was much longer. Like holding one’s breath at the bottom of the sea, trying not to imagine the sharks. And when they arrived, it did look like the sea had just passed through – the alternate metro was dingy, gray, and sopping wet.

Ryuji looked at his hands, saw the gloves. He flexed his fingers slowly to confirm they still worked.

“Is everyone all right?” Yusuke asked. Fox-masked, fox-tailed.

“It seems we’re all in one piece.” Haru ran a finger along the brim of her hat. “And unarmed. Strange how much lighter I feel without my equipment.”

“Not really that strange when it weighs like fifty pounds,” said Ann. She experimentally stretched, testing the fit of her bodysuit. “I really didn’t expect to look like this again.”

“You and me both.”

They all looked down at Morgana. He was back in his mascot form, his head a fuzzy football, his eyes the size of coffee mugs. He inspected his paws, testing the function of his new thumbs. But something was amiss about him.

“Yo, hold up.” Ryuji pointed. “The hell’d your scarf go?”

He reached to his neck; the sunny yellow kerchief he always wore had gone, leaving him almost as monochrome as his surroundings. His ears drooped. “I gave it to Akira. Last year.”

Silence after that. Then Yusuke cleared his throat.

“If I recall correctly, this was where we typically would have entered Mementos. But, the entrance…”

The subway tunnel that had once served as Mementos’ open mouth was completely walled off. No marking or mortar, just a smooth plane of cold gray stone. Ryuji walked over and gave it a thump. It didn’t budge.

“I don’t think we’re gettin’ through here.”

Haru sighed. “I knew I should have visited Mr. Iwai this morning.”

“Yeah, well, since blowing shit up ain’t an option today, anyone got any better ideas?”
“Give me a minute.”

All eyes turned to Futaba, goggles down, standing in the spherical wireframe console that served as her portable base of operations for analysis. The hardened light cast a sickly green glow over the stones; her fingers toyed along its vectors, teasing out strands of information that only she could comprehend.

“Whatever this place is, it’s not Mementos,” she said. “It goes up to the surface, at least.”

“Any sign of a threat?” asked Makoto. She raised one leather-clad fist and clenched tight; even without her brass knuckles equipped she still looked capable of punching someone’s head clean off. “We arrived in these outfits, after all. Something out there doesn’t like us.”

“Getting a big fat zero. Let me see if I can expand the search to encompass the whole of—” She cried out and her goggles sparked and the console’s smooth lines turned jagged and crazed. “Bad idea! That was a bad idea!”

Morgana scampered over. “What is it?”

“This place…it’s big. Like, ’no upper limit’ big.” She grimaced and straightened her goggles again. “I think I segfaulted just trying to scan it all. Where are we?”

“For now, we appear to be in the ruins of Mementos,” said Yusuke. “We at least know that it was the size and shape of Tokyo itself. Perhaps limit your scan to an equivalent area?”

“Thank you, Inari, for stating the obvious.” She clapped her hands together and the sphere condensed. “Let’s see…approximate geography, no immediate hostiles, open structure – so it’s not a Palace, I’m not getting any sense of corridors. There’s some very light Shadow activity compared to its overall structure, but beyond that I…wait. I found him. I found him!”

“For real? Where!?”

“Give me a minute. Hey, don’t get so close, I can’t work! Just…hold on.” A small speck of red crawled along the console’s vectors like a spider; Futaba reached out and delicately pinched it, and its glow stained her fingertips. “He’s not far from here. And he’s on the move. He’s all right!”

Haru clasped her hands and beamed. “That’s wonderful! Now all we have to do is-”

“Wait, wait. There’s someone else with him. This signal’s familiar.” Her jaw dropped. “It’s…Goro Akechi?”

No one anything. But Ryuji’s knuckles cracked in the heavy silence.

“I’ll kill him.”

Makoto held up a warning hand. “Let’s not jump to conclusions.”

“Who the hell said anything about jumping? He was behind the mental shutdowns and the psychotic breakdowns, this shit ain’t even a step up for him!”

“It would be, at least in volume,” said Yusuke. “Hundreds of people in the span of a few months? Akechi’s methodology was targeted. Precise. This is far more…indiscriminate.”

“Akira is literally right next to him, so if he really is behind this then he’s already in a world of pain.” Futaba snapped her fingers and the grid burst into eldritch sparks, and in their dying light she
raised her goggles and her calm, blank stare nailed Ryuji to the spot. “Also. Remember this is a rescue mission. If you go off half-cocked and ruin our chances to save Akira then I will hurt you in ways that your technologically illiterate brain cannot even imagine.”

Ryuji backed away from her a little. So did everyone else.

“Right. Shit. Point made.” He kicked the ground, dislodging a spray of water. “But if we’re gonna run up against the great detective again then I’m at least gonna check on one thing.”

He raised his hand to his mask and that gleaming chrome skull burned blue.

“C’mon out, Persona!”

In that azure blaze a figure took shape, almost too large for the metro’s cramped confines – that groaning galleon with its sharktoothed smile and its master with foot planted at the helm, its face a skinless skull with those two baleful red eyes gleaming beneath the shadow of its hat, the cannon affixed to one arm eternally smoldering, the smoke winking with light as though the puffs were thunderclouds in miniature. Ryuji grinned ear to ear, all his anger forgotten.

“Fuckin’ A, Captain! Good to see you again! Ain’t you supposed to be a monkey with a mohawk?”

“It’s not just you, Ryuji.” Ann frowned and put a finger to her forehead. “I’m feeling Carmen in here. And she seems…weaker?”

“Same. Necronomicon’s scanning capabilities are still top-notch, but I don’t think any of my advanced hacks are available,” said Futaba. “Did we get level-drained?”

“It’s not worth dwelling on now,” Makoto said. “We just need to avoid conflict when possible and act quickly and decisively if we encounter a threat. We were already at a disadvantage coming here without weapons.”

“I think Milady can protect us in a pinch,” Haru volunteered. “But please don’t be too reckless. Her barriers are quite tiring.”

“Yeah, yeah, got it.” Ryuji dismissed Captain Kidd and turned to the stairs. “Let’s get outta here and see what it looks top…side…?”

At the top of the slime-slicked escalator, Morgana stood with arms crossed.

“You’re all too slow,” he said. “And it’s safe, by the way.”

They all exited the Metro, a trifle sheepishly.

The colorless devastation at the city above stopped them all in their tracks. What once had been Shibuya’s Central Street was now a cracked and askew canyon filled with yet more water, the storefronts spiderwebbed with cracks or gone completely, every television and vending machine gouged blind. Morgana looked uncomfortable just standing in place; the water might have been shallow but still went past his ankles.

Ryuji looked down the street. “God damn. It’s like a tsunami hit the city so hard it knocked all the color out.”

“What’s wrong with the sun?” Haru said timidly.

They looked up and beheld that lusterless black spot marring the sky. They didn’t look for long.
“I really don’t feel well,” Ann said. Her knees had buckled before she’d torn her eyes away; she felt much too light, as if she was about to become untethered from the earth completely.

“Don’t stare into it,” Makoto said; her voice was firm but she shivered all over. “I guess that rule applies in the real world and this one. Futaba, where was Akira when you scanned for him?”

“Like I said, not far. I can’t get an exact geographical printout of this area, but if we assume it’s still a one-to-one replication of Tokyo, then he’s right here in Shibuya with the rest of us.”

“All right. We should get transportation. Morgana, could you do the honors?”

“Thought you’d never ask,” he said. “No way am I running through this mess. Let’s see…it’s kind of like wiggling your ears, just got to concentrate and…”

He stepped out into the middle of the street and with a great flash and burst of smoke his form was replaced by that familiar van – except that there were a few differences about it now. It was roomier, for one, with an extra backseat, and it had a neat little skylight just behind the metal ears popping out its top.

“Looks like the cat packed on a couple pounds,” Ryuji quipped.

“Shove it.”

“Nah, it’s a good thing. Got crazy cramped in there, towards the end.”

“Oh, I recognize this!” Haru said. “This is the van we drove Akira home in, remember?”

“I guess.” Morgana’s headlights stared out expressionlessly. “Maybe I’ve had it on my mind. Can we get going?”

“God, yes,” Ann said. “The less time I spend out here the better.” She and the others went to the car and pulled open the doors, and then Ann paused, her face puzzled, and then turned back the way they came. “Yusuke? Come on!”

He was standing in the middle of the street, his fingers squared off, framing the black sun. His tail swayed in the cold breeze; beyond that, he was utterly motionless.

“Yusuke!” Morgana shouted. “Move your butt or we’re leaving without you!”

He started at that as if waking up from a dream. “Ah. Yes. Apologies.”

At the far end of the street the shadows coagulated, became indistinct, melting and rejoining like heaps of melted wax. Amidst that shifting dark Yusuke thought he saw a figure, humanoid and slouching, its hands joined together by something that shone dully in the city’s depleted light.

“Yusuke!”

He turned back to the car. “On my way.”

He got in with the rest and huddled in the backseat. As Makoto took the wheel and started off, Yusuke stole one last glance through the back window and that mass of wriggling dark. The figure, if it had ever been there, was already gone.

* * *

Akira had never liked the Shibuya Scramble Crossing much. He’d adapted to Tokyo’s endless
crowds well enough after the first few weeks (his initial foray into the Metro had been an ugly thing; he’d wandered in circles for what felt like days, the announcements brightly rattling off train after train that he should have boarded but didn’t, throngs of people with their eyes on everything but him and him either too proud or too bitter to ask for directions), but the Scramble was a different story. At peak hours the mob became so thick that its collective heartbeat turned tectonic, the air rendered humid by all those mashed bodies, their chatter rendering even the most well-crafted earbuds worthless. Ann, a battle-scarred veteran of the 109, had told him it cleared out nicely once the trains stopped running, but he’d never dared to sneak out of Leblanc that late. He didn’t know if it was possible to hospitalize someone with a cappuccino, but Sojiro probably would have found a way.

The Dead Sea had changed off all of that. The Scramble stood bare, a fissured and ravaged asphalt desert. The swirls and whorls of neon limning its periphery had all been sapped. With the surrounding buildings’ posters wiped blank and television screens gone dark, it almost looked like a concept of itself, a life-size model whose paint had all bled away. The sea of souls, drinking identity and hue and finally form itself, until it all rejoined that great churning mass of diffuse thought.

The QFront building looked worse than most – once its six stories of TV screens had displayed the Phantom Thieves’ declaration of war to Masayoshi Shido, their digitally masked voices issuing their challenge straight to his corrupted heart. Now all that glass was blinded, and cracked, and fallen in, and the store logo blended into the gray anonymity around it. But if someone stood outside it and looked in, then they would have seen a splotch of red through the second-floor windows, as Akira put his palm up against the glass.

“I have to admit, when you said that you wanted to show me something, I wasn’t expecting a Starbucks.”

“Not a fan?” Akechi had pulled up a stool at the counter.

“Not really. Never will be, after tasting Sojiro’s coffee.”

“Don’t get me started. I was never much of an aficionado for the stuff, but after sampling Mr. Sakura’s work, every other cup made me want to scrub my tongue with steel wool.”

Akira turned back to the shop – logo darkened, glasses gone, linoleum cracked and streaked with moisture. Akechi had slouched in his seat, one elbow on the bar; in that armor, it was almost farcically mundane.

“Why here?” Akira asked.

“Excellent acoustics, for one. No one can approach within fifty feet of me without giving oneself away. These windows provide a decent view of the whole crossing. It’s elevated, which I’ve found to be important. He only ‘hunts’ on street level.” Akechi rapped the bartop. “Also, it’s holding together reasonably well. I grew tired of sleeping on the floor.”

“Fair enough. So it’s kind of like a secret base, huh?”

“I suppose you could call it that. I tended to alternate between here and Yongen-Jaya on my expeditions. If you wanted to draw our adversary’s attention again, this would an excellent spot to lay low and wait for his approach.”

“Sounds good. Just let me rest my feet first.”
He pulled out a chair, gave it a quick shake to ensure it could bear his weight, and sat down, propping his feet up on the table. The ceiling overhead was blackened with water; he looked for patterns in that rot as if they were inkblots.

“Hey, Akechi,” he said. “Just wanted to let you know. When I told you all that stuff about my past, I wasn’t whining or anything.”

“Never thought you were.”

“Alright. Just figured, it’d be pretty dumb of me to come off that way, considering what you went through. When you were a kid and all.”

“Please, Kurusu. I brought most of that on myself. My childhood wasn’t pleasant, but you think I would have realized that prolonged exposure to Shido isn’t good for anyone’s well-being.” His talons drummed on the bartop. “You said that things began to look up for you when you encountered Sakamoto?”

“Yeah. He’s a good guy. Not really as dumb as he acts, either.”

“That wouldn’t be hard,” Akechi said dryly. “I was just wondering…how might things have turned out if I’d been the one you met first, instead? You’re clearly a good influence on people. Maybe you could have turned me onto a better path.”

“You really believe that?”

A pause. “No. I would have made you an accomplice and then killed you when you ceased to be useful.”

“There you go.”

“Not much point in self-deception anymore,” he said wistfully. “I suppose I truly am irredeemable, aren’t I?”

“I dunno. It’s hard to change who you are. It’s impossible to change who you used to be.”

Akechi blinked. “That was remarkably pithy.”

“I got it off a popsicle stick.”

“Really?”

“Maybe.”

“Your sense of humor is atrocious,” he groaned. “But, while we’re on the subject. I was always curious about something. When we did meet in that TV station last year, what was your first impression of me? I’d tried to come off as charming, but clearly everyone saw through that…”

“I thought you had fantastic hair.”

“I- What?”

“Dead serious this time.” He looked over at Akechi’s boggled expression and shrugged. “Hey, you asked. What about me? What made you single me out? Smart money’s on the glasses.”

Akechi smiled. “Believe it or not, I was being genuine when I first explained myself. The way you treated me in that studio was refreshing. I’m in the habit of judging my behavior based solely on
other’s reactions to me – mirroring them, I guess you could say – but you never gave me much to work with. You behaved like I was anyone else.”

“You were, far as I was concerned. Haircut aside.”

“Yes. And then you stood in defense of the Phantom Thieves, so naturally that piqued my interest. Then I started checking into your background, and…”

He stopped, looking like he’d just bitten his tongue. Akira raised an eyebrow. He recognized that expression from spending time with Ryuji – it was the face of someone who’d started a sentence they badly didn’t want to finish. But then he took a deep breath, and started to speak.

He was interrupted by a distant rumbling. A steady mechanical purr.

Akira bolted upright in his chair. “Is that him?”

“It. I. Um.” Akechi coughed, regained his composure. “I’m not certain. It doesn’t sound like chains.”

“What else could it be, though? Definitely isn’t another falling building.” He sprang up and went to the window. “Getting closer, too. I think this is it.”

“Fine. Yes. Please tell me you have a plan.”

“Standard attack and support. I’m packing some heavy hitters right now, so I just need you to watch my blind spots and run interference.”

“Straightforward but workable.” Akechi’s broken visor appeared to gleam from within. “I’ll have to favor Robin Hood. Loki’s performance has been extremely disappointing, of late.”

“Fine with me. That Persona might’ve given you a dumbass outfit but it had a lot of neat tricks.”

“Trust me, you have no idea.” Akechi gestured to the exit. “Shall we?”

“I shall. You stay here and watch from the window.”

Akechi’s visible eye narrowed. “I don’t-”

“If things look like they’re going south then smash the window and come out swinging. It’ll give me a moment’s distraction, too.” Akira straightened his coat. “You’ve been dealing with this asshole long enough. Let me go on the front lines.”

“…very well,” Akechi said. “Just. Don’t die.” He nervously clicked his claws together. “If nothing else, your testimony will probably be required. At my trial.”

“One thing at a time, man. It’s not over until we say so.”

Akira exited the café, pattered down the frozen escalator, and exited through the front. That guttural rumble was now very close. Akechi was right – it sounded nothing like the stranger’s usual approach. Either that meant there was yet another hostile down here, or their quarry knew that an encounter was inevitable and had decided to pull out all the stops. He traced the edges of his mask; blue sparks trailed wisplike across his finger. He could feel Akechi’s gaze on him from above.

A distant light. A cold blue glow that spilled out from the far street and coated the deadened buildings like ice. Akira squinted at it; that particular color looked very familiar. He remembered it
cutting through the shadows, figuratively and sometimes literally, as he and the other Thieves made their way through the dripping labyrinth of Mementos.

The van turned the corner and entered the Scramble.

The glare from those pupilled headlights hit Akira head-on and he raised a hand to shield his eyes as the world went white; through that gleam he heard the engine rev up to a roar, the screech of brakes, and then silence. He lowered his hand just in time for about twenty pounds of anthropomorphized feline to hit him square in the face.

“*Akira!*”

His nose and mouth were full of fur but he could still hear approaching footsteps and Ann’s and Haru’s cries of delight. He tried to pull Morgana off but he just wriggled out of his grip and leaned back enough to glare him down. Those gigantic eyes looked downright unsettling from an inch away.

“You had me worried sick!” he shouted, gripping Akira’s coat. “Do you have any idea what I went through to get us all-”

“Yeah, yeah, explain later,” Ryuji said, and casually scruffed Morgana and hurled him away. Akira heard a distant yowl and splash as Ryuji companionably draped one arm across his shoulders, then gripped his neck in the crook of his elbow and squeezed.

“Wassup, man?” Ryuji said happily. “We missed you! Can’t you tell?”

“I can tell, yeah.” The headlock tightened. “Uh, Ryuji, not to spoil the moment, but I can’t breathe…”

“Yeah, ha ha, I know.” His voice had gained a distinctive edge. “I dunno, we’ve been goin’ through a lot of shit with you gone, figured you were in danger or dying or something, so seein’ you just chillin’ out in this spooky-ass place has got me kinda pissed off! Lotta complicated feelings right now, you get me?”

“Ryuji, don’t kill him,” Makoto said. “We just got here.”

“Nah, I ain’t gonna do that.” Ryuji released him and planted a hand in the small of his back, shoving him forward. “I think someone else has dibs.”

Futaba stood there. She’d propped her goggles up on her forehead and folded her arms behind her back. Her expression was unreadable as she slowly approached Akira.

“Hey,” Akira said, for want of anything better.

“Hi.” Futaba pointed at the ground. “Could you bend down a little bit, please?”

The other Thieves had assembled behind Akira, watching expectantly, with the exception of Morgana, who was throwing a black look Ryuji’s way. Akira’s own face was that of someone facing his execution. He got down to one knee, wincing a bit as cold water seeped through his pants. Futaba barely came up to his chest if he stood up straight; now, his face was within optimal smacking distance.

She bit her lip and stepped forward, and as Akira braced himself she threw her arms around him and buried her face in his neck.
The Scramble had gone quiet, save for Futaba’s sobbing.

“Why’d you have to go?” she cried. Akira’s skin burned from the heat of her tears. “You left without saying anything!”

Akira hugged her back. He was dearly grateful that no one could see his face right now.

“I th-thought it was my f-f-fault you got sick. Did you even get sick? What happened? What d-did I do?”

“I left because of our call. I was trying to fix this. I didn’t want you to be upset.”

She choked out a laugh and weakly punched his side. “Mission failed, moron.”

“I know.” He palmed the top of her head, patted her gently. “I screwed up. I’m sorry.”

“Futaba was the driving force behind our expedition,” said Yusuke. “She took charge magnificently in your absence.”

“Shut up, Inari.” She raised her head and glared at him, sniffling. “I just pitched a tantrum until everyone did what I wanted.”

“Yes, well, everyone has their own form of leadership.”

“Yusuke’s not the type to lie,” Akira said. “Sounds like you’ve come a long way since last year, huh?”

She pushed away from him, knuckling away her tears. “I did good?”

“I don’t think an entrance to this place is even supposed to exist, but you found it anyway. That’s pretty badass.”

Futaba tried, and failed, to hide her grin. “I’m still mad at you.”

“Fair enough. You can think of a way for me to make it up later.”

“You’ll be making it up to all of us, Akira,” Ann said sternly.

“Premium sushi will just be the start,” Morgana added.

“Yeah, hey, this is fun and all, but we’re kinda missin’ something,” Ryuji said. “Where the hell is Akechi?”

Akira turned back to them. “Oh, you knew he was here? He’s keeping watch right up…” He pointed at the second-story window, and then noticed they were all empty. “Ah. Hmm.”

“Wait, so you’re buddies now? He ain’t responsible for this Paranoia Syndrome shit?”

“Buddies is pushing it a little. He tried to kill me again.” Ryuji’s eyes flashed. “No, no, it’s cool, he messed up even worse than last time. Futaba, where is he?”

She’d brought up her console again, tracing that spindly green grid. “He’s pretty much right on top of us. Must still be in QFront.”

Akira rolled his eyes and stood up and stomped past the Thieves and into the building. They stared at his back, bewildered, and then followed him inside.
“Akechi? Hey, Akechi! Come out already!” His voice echoed through the hollowed-out lobby but no response came in its wake. Akira drew his pistol and pulled back the slide. “Do I need to start shooting again? I’ll give you the count of three! One…two…th-”

“All right, all right! Quiet down, you idiot!”

Akechi’s voice was a fierce whisper; he poked his head out from around one of the nearby shops, his posture sagging and dismayed. When the rest of the Thieves turned their attention from him he flinched as if their gazes stung.

Akira holstered his gun. “You ran and hid? Come on, man. What are you, five?”

“I thought that if your teammates saw us together, it may have resulted in…hostilities.” He panned the expressions on the Thieves’ faces, making particular note of Ryuji’s. “That may still be the case.”

“Relax, guys,” Akira said. “He’s not the enemy here.”

“Good enough for me,” Makoto said. “Anyone have a problem with that? Ryuji? Are we good?”

“Yeah,” he replied, through grit teeth. “We’re good.”

Akechi swallowed hard and stepped out fully before the Thieves. He contrived to look non-threatening. Considering that he was still dressed like a corvid-themed supervillain with a persistent haunted look in his eye, this was not easy. But then Haru stepped out from the group, and tried to smile.

“Hello again, Akechi,” she said. “I’m glad you’re alive.”

He stared, then looked past her, at Akira. “I think we’d better sit down.”

* * *

In the second-floor café they assembled and shared what information they could. Akira and Makoto did most of the talking, with Akira occasionally turning to Akechi to confirm some fact or theory; Akechi’s replies were hushed and curt, as if speaking too much would summon some kind of avalanche. Futaba spent most of the time with her console up, intently scanning for something in that knotted grid. All of them had propped their masks up on their foreheads, save for Futaba, who needed her goggles to work, and Akechi, whose helmet remained firmly in place.

“-and that’s about all we know,” Akira finished. “The individual responsible for Paranoia Syndrome is skulking around down here, and I wasn’t supposed to leave until he was dealt with. That just turned out to be tougher than I thought. He probably would have knocked my head off, if Akechi hadn’t bailed me out.”

“It’s gotten so much worse on our side, dude,” Ryuji said. “People are comin’ down with this Paranoia stuff left and right.”

“And that’s not the half of it,” Makoto added. “We don’t know the true number of victims, exactly, but a four or even five-digit number still wouldn’t be significant on a global scale. But social media and the attempted coverups are making their impact on the public psyche far more severe. It feels like civilization’s hanging on by a thread.”

Ann shook her head. “What I don’t get is why. This all got going when that video of Tsukiko Minami started to circulate, but what does that have to do with anything?”
“I believe I have a theory for that.”

They all faced Akechi, who’d taken his old seat at the bar, arms crossed. He seemed deep in thought.

“Kurusu told me about the true nature of Mementos. The ‘fortress of indolence,’ was it? Shadows created by the populace’s blind need to remain insulated from the world’s troubles. And Paranoia Syndrome is very troubling indeed. As this bad news spreads, the general public may become slothful, willfully ignorant. They may become wrathful, angry at the ineffectual authorities. Wishing for the problem to go away without their intervention, wishing for whatever created the problem to be punished, or any other number of desires. Until those desires become distorted.”

“Creating Shadows,” Morgana said. “Something for this individual to hunt.”

“Exactly. As Paranoia Syndrome grows in the public consciousness, it spawns more Shadows, which allows this stranger to hunt his prey in ever-greater numbers, and grow Paranoia Syndrome further. A vicious cycle.”

“If Akechi’s correct, then it was only a matter of time,” said Makoto. “It’s like Ohya said. This couldn’t have stayed buried forever.”

“And that means we need to bring this guy down ASAP,” said Akira. “Futaba, have you found anything?”

“A big fat zero. Everything worth mentioning in a ten-mile radius is right in this room.”

“Then we’ll have to get him to come our way. Fortunately, that shouldn’t be a problem with all of us here. Ann, I know this place is soggy but you should be able to get a pretty good blaze going if you-”

“First,” said Makoto, “we’re taking you home.”

Akira blinked. He looked at the surrounding faces. All of them seemed to be in agreement, except for Yusuke, who was staring out the window. He looked at Akechi. Akechi averted his gaze.

Akira said, “That’s not a good idea. If you take me out I’ll just wake up in a hospital bed.”

Ryuji snorted. “Good. Morgana tells us your parents are losin’ their minds. We ain’t lettin’ you putter around for another week.”

“I just said we could draw him here!”

“In fairness to Sakamoto,” Akechi said, “that plan didn’t work last time. Our target speaks little, but he’s clearly no fool.”

“And neither am I,” Morgana piped up. “Now that I’ve taken everybody here once, I’m pretty sure I can find the way back even without your scent to guide me around.”

“You guys just said this is time-sensitive. With me around you’ll get it done way faster than-”

“As bad as things may seem, the world is not going to end tomorrow,” said Makoto. “We are evacuating you, Akira, for the sake of your family and for Mr. Sakura. That is final.”

Haru stood up, walked over to Akira’s seat, and gently took him by the hand. “Please don’t argue, Akira. We’ve all made up our minds.”
The way she was standing, only Akira could see the look on her face. His skin turned a shade paler.

“Fine,” he said. Then he jabbed a thumb at Akechi. “What about him?”

Ryuji glanced over. “What about him? We drag his ass out and then hand it to the cops.”

“That would be acceptable,” Akechi said. “But, if possible, I would first like to assist you all in subduing your enemy.”

“Hell no! We-”

“I’m for it,” Morgana said.

Ryuji straightened in his seat, eyes burning. “Are you shittin’ me, cat!?”

Morgana wheeled on him. “For once in your life, Sakamoto, use your damn head! We’re weakened and facing a totally unknown adversary, and here’s a potential ally at full strength with intimate knowledge of both him and this entire region. A true Phantom Thief uses all the tools at his disposal.”

“Please don’t call him that, Morgana,” Haru said quietly.

“What? No, that’s not… I didn’t…I mean, what I meant was…” He gave up and faced Akechi. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine. And accurate. I understand Sakamoto’s concerns. I did betray you once already.”

“Yeah, so I kinda figure you won’t try to pull that again,” Ann said. “I’ll throw my vote on the ‘yes’ pile. We can deal with the rest after this Paranoia Syndrome stuff is done.”

Makoto sighed and massaged her temples. “We’d have to do some real fast talking with Boss, but I suppose we could stash him in Leblanc’s attic. It’s already held one fugitive, and for a much longer time. Futaba, what do you-”

“Mona’s right.” She kept scanning. “We need him. I’ll just pretend he doesn’t exist. And I don’t want him to talk to me or look at me or mention my name.”

Akira stood up, cutting off Ryuji’s stuttered attempt at a reply.

“If we’re going, then let’s go,” he said. “We can discuss this further in the car. Yusuke, did you catch any of that?”

He didn’t look away from the window. “The key points, yes. I too believe that Akechi’s services would be useful. Though I wish to remind you all that our decisions should remain unanimous.”

“Like I said. We’ll talk in the car.” He beckoned to Akechi. “Let’s go. You can ride shotgun.”

Akechi nodded. “That seems like a good idea.”

They silently trooped outside, where Morgana transformed and let them pile in – Makoto and Akechi up front, Akira sandwiched between Ryuji and Ann in the middle seat, and Haru, Futaba, and Yusuke taking up the back. As Makoto started up the engine and returned the way they’d come, the atmosphere wasn’t as celebratory as they would have liked. Akira stared down at his feet. Akechi had scooched to the edge of his seat, like he wanted to keep as much distance between him and the other Thieves as possible. It was Morgana himself who tried to break the ice first, his voice buzzing through the van’s radio.
“We came in through the Metro, like usual, so it won’t be a long drive. Good thing, too, if we hung around here too late then we would’ve been locked in after the place closed. I’m not even sure where to start picking those locks.”

Akechi glanced at the radio. “You can pick locks without thumbs?”

“Pfft. I’ve fixed up cars without thumbs. Thumbs are overrated.”

“Akechi, you know that you can take off that helmet, right?” Makoto tried to keep her voice light. “I don’t think my driving is that bad.”

“I’m fine, thank you.” He straightened up and checked the rear-view mirror; Akira still had his head down, his fingers pressed together. “Kurusu? Are you feeling all right?”

Ryuji scoffed. “The hell do you care?”

“Ryuji,” Ann said, “none of us are exactly members of the Goro Akechi fan club, but you’re being a real dick about-”

“Can I say something?” Akira asked.

They all fell silent. Akira was fairly low-key unless he was summoning his Personas or ripping a Shadow’s face off, but now his voice was unusually subdued, even for him. He almost sounded ashamed.

“I know I worried all of you a lot, messing around down here,” he said. “I just don’t want you to think I was trying to play it cool, or something. I was thinking about you guys the whole time. I knew how bad I messed up, taking so long.” His eyes flicked between Ryuji and Ann. “Just…don’t get the wrong idea about me, okay? Even though I’m not around anymore, you’re all still important to me. Anytime you need me, you give me a call. Just like Futaba did. Doesn’t matter where I am, or where you are. I promise I’ll come running.”

For a long while, the only sound was the hum of Morgana’s engine. Then Ryuji solemnly reached out to Akira.

“Ryuji, what are you- oh okay, this is another headlock. That’s what we’re doing. Ow. Ow. Uncle!”

“Shut up and take it, dude.” He grinned and dug his knuckles into Akira’s scalp. “How d’you like that, you big softie?”

“Don’t feel it. Too much hair.”

“Damn. You beat me.” Ryuji released him and lightly punched his arm. “C’mon, man, I talk shit about you sometimes but I know we’re bros.”

“We all knew that you’d have done the same thing if it was any of us stuck here,” Ann said.

“Indeed.” Yusuke took his shoulder. “The bonds we share wouldn’t even strain under such a trifling thing as this.”

“If you’re already this torn up about it then why don’t you come visit?” Futaba asked. “You should do that. I demand that you come visit immediately.”

Haru raised her hand. “Just give me a heads-up, first. I want to plan something big for it!”
“Holy shit, guys.” Ryuji grinned. “I think he’s blushing!”

“I am not blushing.”

“Oh wow, he is. Akira, I didn’t think you could feel embarrassed.”

“I can’t. I’m immune. Quit staring!”

“They’re having fun,” Morgana’s voice crackled.

Makoto nodded and turned a corner. “They’ve all built up a lot of stress. Hopefully we can work it out on this enemy of ours and get back to something resembling normal life.” She glanced over. “Akechi? Are you okay?”

Ryuji leaned over. “Yeah, you got somethin’ to say, smart guy?”

“I was just thinking,” said Akechi. “About how I tried to betray you.” He stared out the window as the group went quiet. “I was so sure that my plan had worked, right up until it became clear you’d outsmarted me. I should have paid closer attention.” He sighed. “Listening to you all now, it’s obvious that I never had a chance.”

Ryuji’s sneer faltered a little and he settled back in his seat.

“Well…yeah. No shit. Glad you figured that out.” He groaned. “Fine, I’m tired of feelin’ like the jackass in this car. He can help us out. But we’re still haulin’ him to jail after.”

“There was never any argument about that,” said Akechi. “But thank you.”

“And there is the unanimous vote,” said Yusuke. “Well done, everybody.”

“And it’s only a few more blocks to Central Street.” Makoto studiously flicked the blinkers on and turned. “Once we’re all back in the real world we can figure out what…to…”

She slammed the brakes.

The car let out a surprised squeal and a spray of water and all the Thieves lurched forward; Ryuji nearly concussed himself on the back of Akechi’s seat. He grimaced and leaned back over, adjusting his mask.

“What’d we stop for? You see a pothole or…” He trailed off and hissed air through his teeth. “Ohh, crap.”

He stood in the street before them, his manacles winking in the murk. The soiled white of his mask and the rotted white of Iago’s mask and that violent toxic yellow cravat gleamed like the Dead Sea was just some ashen substrate laid over the world and here it had flecked away to reveal the festering pollution underneath. Akechi clenched the armrests of his seat so tight his claws tore into the upholstery. A thin whimper escaped from his throat.

“Man, this guy’s got you scared shitless,” Ryuji remarked. “I was expectin’ someone taller.”

“It’s the Persona we have to worry about,” Akira said, as Ryuji settled back down. “And he’s already summoned it. This isn’t good.”

Futaba had already brought her console up, frantically scanning the grid. “How did I miss him? I literally looked away for ten minutes and he’s right on top of us! Wait…” Data sleeted past her eyes. “Even at this range, his readings are…fuzzy. Is he jamming me somehow?”
“Could be,” said Akira. “My Personas got freaked out by him too.”

“This guy’s just full of tricks,” Ann said grimly.

“Yeah, well, it’s nine-on-one,” Ryuji said, and reached for the door. “So let’s get out there and-”

Akira grabbed his arm. “Don’t.”

“Huh? Why?”

“The Persona. Look.”

Iago convulsed and spasmed, the chains spraying out from his drowned and pustulent body link by link. They trailed into the water below.

“That Persona is incredibly strong, but its chief skill is territory control,” Akechi said. His voice sounded faraway, like he was sleep-talking. “Within seconds it can spread those chains through a large room, and here it’s been laying this trap for who knows how long. I should have known. He isn’t going to let us leave.”

“I get the feeling that if any of us set foot on that water, we’d be dragged under in seconds,” said Akira.

“So what? It ain’t even an inch deep!”

“Not all the time. It’s like when he hunts Shadows. He pulls them into the Dead Sea, and once he does, they don’t come back.”

All of them shivered. The stranger and Iago looked on impassively.

Akira narrowed his eyes, and brought down his mask.

“Mona,” he said, and they all took note of the codename. “How well can you handle on water? Will you hydroplane?”

“I’m insulted. Who do you think I am? This car could do a hairpin turn on an oil slick.”

“Good. Are you confident in your driving, Queen?”

“By all rights this thing should handle like a shopping cart, but it corners just fine. We’re all set, Joker.”

“Noir, keep Milady at the ready. Those chains tore through my defenses like tissue paper but your barriers are a lot more potent. Oracle, continue your analysis of the area – if we can’t end this quickly then we’ll need to stay away from dead ends. The rest of you are on standby. And Crow?”

Akechi stiffened in his seat. “Er, yes?”

“Are you with us?”

He turned and saw the assembled Thieves, masks on, all of them with determination in their eyes. Then his jaw set, and he nodded, and when he turned back to face the stranger and that warped Person, his visor appeared to hold other reflections within.

“Yes. I’m with you.”
Iago swung down his saber, pointing it at the van. The message was clear: make your move, or I will.

Akira took a deep breath.

“Queen.”

Makoto gripped the wheel.

“Floor it.”

The car shot forward in a screech of tires and inkblack spume and around them all the city exploded into shrieking monstrous unlife as chains burst from every one of those gaping architectural orifices and set the structures writhing as though they were corpses so infested with worms that the wriggle and hunger of those parasites had set them to walk again, chains erupting in geyserers from the blank asphalt, coiling serpentine, knotting cephalopodan, and as the car bore down on that haunting interloper Iago’s veil of chains shuddered and snatched up his master and held him close like a grotesque decoration as the chains extended ever further and bore him skyward, over the van, over the rooftops, so that they glimpsed that sickening yellow cravat high above and borne aloft in a gown of chains that then slithered away and carved through the nearby buildings like a hot knife through thin ice, and then there were only the Phantom Thieves speeding through the maddened streets in a howling sparking vortex of mottled metal and Iago and the stranger bearing dominion over them like some malevolent star.

“Holy fucking shit!”

“Turn right! Queen, turn right here!”

“Protect us, Milady!”

“On second thought, maybe it’s a good thing I didn’t fight this on my own.”

“How the hell are you still this calm, Joker!?”

“Panicking does nothing. He’s clearly pulled out all the stops. If we beat him here, we beat him for good.”

A knot of chains whipped out from the dark and cracked the van along its side; Haru jerked in her seat, mask burning, and the chains shuddered like a tuning fork and then exploded into shards of shrapnel, undone by their own terrible force. But their fellows were countless, and growing all the while. Futaba’s hands blurred across her console until they were nearly rendered invisible.

“We have obstructions straight ahead, ninety degrees, forty degrees, right behind us as well… Joker, there’s no way out! He’s completely blocked us off!”

Without a word, Yusuke darted forward to the front seats.

“Ow! Fox, you stepped on-” Ann stopped and stared as he slid open the skylight. “Wait, what are you doing?”

“Queen, please continue onward. I shall clear the way.”

He emerged into air grown suffocating with waterspray and the scrape and spark of metal, his foxtail billowing in the slipstream. Ahead of them was a swamp of chainlinks squirming like maggots on a carcass. Further tendrils shredded the city on their way to take the van.
Yusuke braced himself, then stomped down hard enough on the van to make a dent in the metal and elicit a cry and a curse from Morgana. He stood limp as his mask burnt away.

“I am thou…Goemon!”

A deathwhite face floating over his shoulder, the suggestion of a pompadour and a swinging smoking pipe, and the metal around the van stilled and was sliced apart with such force that even the water spiraled out around them. The van burst through the barrier, crushing the lifeless links under its wheels.

“Queen, continue straight on. Fox, I’m setting up a comms channel. Can you hear me?”

“Loud and clear.” Yusuke’s voice emerged from above and through Futaba’s console. “I shall remain here. You all must-”

He was cut off as the van was struck from underneath and rocked dangerously off-balance, the chains contriving to seize the entire car and pull them all down into the fathomless dark; Haru cried out as her latest barrier resisted the assault, but already she sounded short of breath, her brow dripping sweat. The Dead Sea blurred past them, Morgana’s engine snarling over the deathrattle of Iago’s chains. Yusuke looked up and saw him keeping pace with the car, his statuesque pose almost a taunt.

Iago changed tactics. The road ahead of them, already littered with rubble and the cognitive corpses of Palaces gone, burst apart into chunks; the chains reached out and ripped it open further, leaving a deep trench into which more of that tainted water poured. Nowhere to turn; no time to hit the brakes. Makoto and Akechi both widened their eyes and leaned back in their seats, already preparing for the fall.

“The road!” Ryuji shouted. “Joker, he just tore out the goddamn road!”

“I’m on it,” said Akira. “It’s all you, Black Frost!”

A bobbleheaded phantom with a distended rictus grin and eyes like burning coals materialized over the pit, and with an impish cackle it raised its hand; the air seemed to coalesce, and the black space became black ice, gleaming like obsidian, and across this glassy plane the car skidded but held steady, Morgana’s supernaturally-proficient tires finding their grip even here. When they emerged from the other side the chains lashed down with an almost spiteful vigor and missed by inches as the car swerved and continued on. More metal burst in cetacean waves from either side, breaching the soaked ground, but before they could reach the car Yusuke cried Goemon’s name again and they fell apart in halves.

“His stamina seems limitless,” Yusuke said, and he, too, sounded out of breath. “We cannot weather this assault much longer.”

Ann looked at the window and saw Iago’s hateful silhouette overhead. “We need to distract him somehow. Joker, should I toss a couple fireballs his way?”

“We’re going too fast, Panther!” Morgana said. “You won’t even come close!”

“To hell with this,” Makoto growled. “Crow. Can you drive?”

Akechi jerked in his seat like he’d been daydreaming. His mouth opened and shut uselessly for a moment.

“I’ve received my permit, but my opportunities to put it to use were few and far-”
“It’s a yes or no question, Crow!”

“Yes! Yes, I can drive!”

“Then get ready to take the wheel.” She took one hand off and held it out to Akira. “Joker! Gun!”

Akira handed over his pistol without a word and Akechi scrambled to grab the wheel as Makoto kicked open the side door and braced herself and jumped, and before she hit the cracked and crazed asphalt her whole body burned blue as if she’d been swallowed by the tail of a comet.

“Roar, Johanna!”

A new engine revved like a thousand wasps and Makoto burst out of that flame with her hand on Johanna’s throttle, the Persona’s serene face bearing witness to the decayed city as she sped forward and swerved through alleys and byways until she was parallel with the van, carving her own path, the licking fire around her motorcycle burning obstructions to ash as the chains diverted their course and attempted to capture them both. Akechi settled into the driver’s seat and fought to keep the wheel steady and above Yusuke heard the air crack as Makoto angled the pistol up and fired in Iago’s direction; he blurred and wavered away from the shots, the stranger still enchained to his body and hanging limp as a corpse.

“Setting up comms,” Futaba said. “Queen, do you read?”

“I’m here!” she shouted, fighting to be heard over Johanna’s engine. “I’m fine, but we need to get out of this city! The buildings are giving them way too much cover!”

“Not likely, I’m afraid,” Haru said weakly. “I don’t think I can last before we reach Tokyo’s border.”

As if on cue, chains burst out from their right and Akechi spun the wheel, but he wasn’t as skillful as Makoto and the van stalled for a heart-stopping moment before accelerating again; in that brief instant another horde of chains cracked over the top of the van, dangerously close to Yusuke, and Haru cried out and slumped over, now fighting just to sit upright.

Morgana’s voice came over the speakers. “There has to be somewhere we can take cover. You two said it yourselves, this city’s barely holding itself together!”

“It is, but that doesn’t mean we…” Akechi stopped and leaned over the wheel. The rubble in the water had gone fishwhite, oblong – more of those drowned and masked corpses, in greater numbers than ever. His eye lit up. “Oracle! Please, give me a topographical scan of this area. Is there anything unusual nearby?”

“What do you mean by…wait, you’re right! There’s a nearby space that's almost totally clear. Orientation is seventy degrees from current position!”

“Thank you. Hold on, everyone. Queen, please follow me.”

“I read you, Crow!”

As Akechi drove on the city seemed to squat low among them, Tokyo’s buildings becoming so decrepit that they went from ten stories to five stories to torn single-story blocks that jutted from the water like rotted teeth, and in the distance a jagged silhouette loomed from the water, a bit like a shark’s mouth caught halfway to closing. Ann was the first to place it. Her jaw dropped.

“Wait…is that a ship? Is that Shido’s ship!?”
The broken and blasted remains of Masayoshi Shido’s Palace lay in a vast empty plain of water littered only with those cognitive corpses and a few scattered chunks of rubble, as though the sea through which it had once sailed had fallen down here with it and washed the entire district away. It had been ripped in half by the explosions in the engine room and bow and stern jutted out diagonal from the waters like drowning fingers. As they approached that field, chains burst through the ground and waivered like sea-grass. Iago towered behind them, clutching his master close, the both of them bending and twisting on that massive trunk of writhing metal.

The rearview mirror reflected Akira’s grin.

“Excellent find, Crow.”

“Do we have a plan, Joker?”

“Queen, come in,” he said. “We’re going to land a decisive blow, but we need to get you a little bit airborne first. When the time is right, make your way to that ship and await further orders.” Makoto shouted her assent. “Fox, all of these chains are connected to Iago. They spread out like roots from a tree trunk. Would you be able to cut them all, if we got within range?”

“Without a doubt.”

They were very close to entering that emptied zone. Iago shot forward and Akechi swerved as that coruscating column of metal nearly blasted them off the road; the great stalk of chains stopped between the van and the ship, ready to seize them all.

“Noir,” Akira continued. “Please give us one more shield. Panther, it’s your time to shine. We need a smokescreen.”

“There’s not much to burn, Joker!”

“No, but this whole place is soaking wet. Make this city boil!”

Ann blinked, then broke out in a wicked grin. She rolled down the window and stuck out her head, hair trailing in the slipstream like flame itself.

“Burn bright, Carmen!”

The carmine seductress materialized before the stranger and Iago and stared up at them as if deeply unimpressed. She took a drag on her cigar, its end glowing a bloody red, and then flicked it into the water and stomped down hard; it erupted into a great sheet of flame and a hissing like a nest of vipers and suddenly the world turned white and redolent with steam, clinging to the windshield like cotton. They heard the chains desperately smashing all the surrounding ground to cut off any escape, but the van maintained its course.

“Visibility is at zero, Joker!” Akechi reported.

“Not to worry.” He let his eyes focus. “I can see it.”

The world fell away before him just as it had in the theater basement and he saw it clearly, the thrashing chains that had borne Iago aloft. Up above, Yusuke had shut his eyes completely. He listened to the rattle and gnash around him, and waited for Akira’s voice to echo in his head.

“Fox, we’re coming up on the target.” A chain whipped dangerously close to Yusuke’s head, but he paid it no mind. “We’ll be in range in five…four…three…two…now!”
He flung his arms out. “Goemon!”

A sleek scraping sound, a moment like an indrawn breath, and the steam burst apart as Goemon’s latest mighty swing cleaved through the chains around them and the water below and the central trunk joined to Iago; the twisted Persona recoiled, the loose ends still joined to him flailing like insect legs, but all the other chains at once fell lifeless and limp. Makoto revved Johanna and burned rubber past all of them as Iago pulled away, crippled but still airborne.

“Dammit,” Ryuji said. “Figures he can fly, too.”

“That’s where you come in, Skull,” said Akira. “Hit him hard and get him to the bow of Shido’s ship.”

He grinned. “Oh hell yes, I know where you’re goin’ with this.” Ryuji stuck his head out the opposite window and thrust his finger at Iago. “Go kick his goddamn teeth in, Captain Kidd!”

The Captain’s ship burst forth with a great boom and streaked up to Iago in a haze of thunderstorm; Iago raised his saber in challenge and the two clashed, the air full of crackle and flash as Captain Kidd’s stormclouds were rent by Iago’s blade and his remaining and still-growing chains. But Ryuji’s Persona was a bruiser even when weakened, and swifter than it looked, and even though Iago looked no worse for wear under Captain Kidd’s assault he was gradually forced back to the remnants of Shido’s cruiser. The van cut through the water, keeping pace.

“This is Queen!” Makoto said from over Futaba’s console. “I’m in position!”

“Understood, Queen,” said Futaba. “Hold tight and await Joker’s signal.” Moments later, Iago had been driven back to just above the bow of the ship. “Target in position!”

Joker leaned forward. “Go!”

The gap between the ship’s two halves exploded in a nova of blue as Makoto fired up Johanna’s engine to its limit, speeding up the diagonal surface of the broken Palace. At that same moment, Iago’s own hand blurred and Captain Kidd was slashed down the middle; Ryuji cursed and grabbed his head as the Persona burst into sparks. Iago turned to the approaching Makoto, masked face serene, blade raised high. Behind her goggles, Futaba’s eyes widened.

“Oh no. Joker, that was too soon, he’s going to cut right through her!”

“Damn it,” Akira muttered. “Queen, break it off! I repeat, don’t approach that Persona!”

But Johanna’s engine now screamed so loud his voice could no longer be heard, and time stretched out like taffy as they saw that inexorable meeting, Makoto about to run right into that notched and rusted blade, the stranger’s hands opening and closing as if in anticipation as he dangled from Iago’s side.

Akechi bent over in his seat.

Atop the van, Yusuke watched in the same rapt horror as the others. But then he nearly lost his balance as the van swerved off-course; as it spun, he glimpsed a figure standing tall in the black water. A barrel-chested, beak-masked man in a blinding white-and-gold jumpsuit, brandishing a greatbow as large as its wielder. Even over Morgana’s engine, he could hear the creak of the string as that bow was drawn back.

Robin Hood fired.
The arrow cut through the air with a silken hiss, trailing golden sparks in its wake like stardust. As Iago tightened his grip on his saber and prepared to swing, the arrow struck the side of his head with a single clear note that rang across the Dead Sea, and that unchanging mask almost looked shocked as it snapped to the side, Iago’s fingers going limp, the blade slipping from his hand. And then the ship exploded into blue flame as Johanna blasted through the railing and went airborne, bearing down on the stranger, whose single eye went wide; for a moment he seemed to bring those manacled hands up as if in feeble defense, but it was too late. Johanna dissolved beneath Makoto and her light haloed Makoto’s fist, that azure flame and her scarf trailing comet-tail behind her, and Makoto’s battle cry echoed across the whole of the ruined city:

“Fist...of...JUSTICE!”

Her fist smashed into the stranger’s head and there was a great hollow firecracker boom and a wave of blue light that burst from the impact and momentarily lent its color to the monochrome seas; the sea itself rippled outward like a waterglass in a tremor. And Iago faded, and the stranger fell limp, and gravity pulled him down once more – he fell, and when he struck the water it swallowed him whole just moments before Makoto touched ground herself. She breathed deep. There was no trace of their enemy.

Her silhouette printed against that of Shido’s burning ship, Makoto thrust her head back and roared triumphantly into the sky.

The van rocked with celebration, Akechi slumped and smiling over the wheel as the Phantom Thieves behind him whooped and shouted and manhandled Akira. Ryuji had put him into his third headlock of the evening.

“We are the best! The effin’ best!”

“That was incredible, everyone!”

“Good job, everybody. Ryuji, please let me go.”

“Can someone let Inari into the car, please? He’s just standing outside. Staring.”

“Akechi,” Haru said. “That was an incredible shot.”

The van quieted suddenly. It was Futaba who spoke up next.

“Empirically, that’s true. The arc on that was nuts, especially since we were in motion.”

“I guess it makes sense. The dude’s had a lot more practice than us.” Ryuji released Akira and settled back, voice gruff. “So, uh, yeah. Right on.”

“Glad to be of service. Should I, um, go pick up Nijima? Oh, never mind, she’s coming over here…”

The door opened and Yusuke slid in. “Hello everyone. Good work.”

“You sure you don’t want to stare at the sun some more?” Ann teased.

“No, I have internalized the sight quite well. Futaba, what of our enemy? He disappeared beneath the water.”

“Back to nil again. I’m not going to stop scanning until we’re safely out of here, though.”
Johanna pulled up beside the van and vanished. Makoto leaned into the driver’s-side window, her red-eyed stare lancing through Akechi.

“Hey,” she said.

Akechi stiffened; not ten minutes ago he’d seen this woman, whose sister he had tried to frame and murder, shouting over her enemy’s defeat like some primordial warlord. “Er. Yes?”

“Could you drive the rest of the way? I need to catch my breath.”

“Er. Yes. Yes ma’am.”

“Thanks.” She walked around the car, got into the passenger seat, then reached over and patted Akechi on the shoulder. “Nice work out there.”

Akechi smiled, nodded, and started up the engine as Makoto silently gave Akira back his pistol. When they left, Shido’s Palace was still burning.

Their progress back was slow. The devastation wreaked by Iago was staggering; he’d seemingly torn up half the city during his pursuit. Futaba had to keep searching for alternate routes.

“So, like, that’s it?” Ryuji said. “No more Paranoia Syndrome?”

“We hit him pretty hard, but there’s no way of knowing if he’s out for good,” said Akira. “We’ll have to stand by and see if any new incidents crop up. That should be a dead giveaway.”

“The moment that happens, we’re heading back down here to finish the job,” said Morgana.

“Gonna be tough without our leader here, yeah?”

“All of you handled him just fine. All I did was make some ice.”

“Oh, come on. Give yourself some credit. You were guidin’ us every step of the way.”

“I agree with Sakamoto,” Akechi said. “You shouldn’t undervalue yourself, Kurusu.”

“Dude, quit takin’ my side like that, it’s weird.”

“Either way,” Ann said, “he’s not going to just walk off that hit. Makoto probably put the fear of God into him.”

“I do my best,” Makoto said lightly.

“The existence of this place in general concerns me,” Yusuke mused. “Is it tied to our adversary’s presence?”

“Akira and Akechi said that it’s the Sea of Souls, just polluted,” Haru told him. “Hopefully it’ll clean itself up over time. Right, Akechi?”

“For the most part.” Akechi stopped the van for a moment, searched for a path without any obvious roadblocks, and started off again. “I came here before Mementos fell, so I’ve watched its expansion. The most recent additions were our enemy and that black sun. They both-”

The backseat lit up red and they all turned at Futaba’s terrified shout.

“Akechi, step on it! He’s back! He’s below us! He’s right below-”
They all screamed as the water geysered up before them; Iago rose, the stranger lashed to his side. Iago’s sword flashed and Morgana cried out in pain as the windshield was split in two, and those chains smashed through and snaked in, coiling around Akechi even as he cringed away and howled at their touch. Akira leapt forward, gun drawn, and both stranger’s and Iago’s heads at once snapped to him with reptilian speed and the chains released Akechi and grabbed him; he felt a flash of that terrible cold as the coils ripped him out of the van and hurled him up and away.

As he sailed through the air Akira glimpsed the van erupting with light, gouts of fire and flashes of lightning and gales of cutting wind, as the remaining Thieves struggled to fight him off, but more chains emerged from beneath and looped around the entire car. He could hear it smash into one of the far buildings just as he struck the ground hard enough to bounce and roll, and as he skidded to a halt he lay supine and gasping, all the wind knocked out of him and his limbs afire with pain.

The black sun leered down at him from overhead. He heard that familiar, jangling step, growing louder.

“I see you, mastermind. I see you for what you are.”

The stranger’s voice was faint and his breaths were laborered and ragged. Akira propped himself up his elbow and saw that the stranger’s clothes were smoldering and even more tattered than before – the Thieves had landed some good hits before being thrown aside. There was a livid scorchmark on that shabby mask where Makoto’s punch had landed.

Akira’s mask burned. “Ravage them, Yoshitsu-”

A chain looped around his neck and cinched tight. Akira’s summons disappeared in a strangled gasp as he reached up to his throat and tried to pull the chain loose, fingers scrabbling for purchase, finding none, and then another chain twisted his arms behind his back. He felt himself constricted, lifted up, forced to stare them both in the face. That bloodshot, livid eye. Iago and his serene mask and his ruined finery, and that mottled, slime-slicked book.

The stranger said, “No more masks.”

* * *

The world around Akechi swam back into focus.

He was sprawled out on the ground, face-first, his nose and mouth full of freezing water. He remembered Akira being pulled out of the car just moments before the whole van had been thrown away and into one of the collapsed buildings; Morgana hadn’t been able to turn back quickly enough, and most of the remaining Thieves were now half-buried in rubble. Morgana was curled up, whimpering and clutching his head. Haru could barely keep her eyes open – she was still exhausted from her earlier defense. Yusuke hung limp as his foxtail, Futaba draped across him.

Akechi struggled to stand, and then he looked down the street and felt his knees go weak.

The stranger was there, flanked by Iago, both staring silently. Above them, swallowed by a snapping twisting pandemonium of chains, was Akira; the links twisted across his neck and limbs and chest, and the agonized grimace on his face was plain to see. He struggled against his bonds, held out a hand to the Phantom Thieves. Grasping. Drowning.

Distantly, Akechi heard Ryuji thrash and scream as he tried to get upright. He tried to call for his Personas but his throat had dried up; his head still spun from the impact and when he searched within himself he couldn’t seem to grab hold of the other masks within. And as Akira’s
companions watched, his captor sank into the water and, with one final jerk of the chains, pulled him below. The Dead Sea swallowed everything – stranger, Persona, and Phantom Thief all.
“I’ll scan the city again. Let me scan again. He popped up out of nowhere last time, so maybe he’ll come back and Akira will.”

“Futaba, that’s enough. They’re gone.”

“Okay, okay, nobody panic. We don’t know for sure if any of the Shadows that guy took are actually dead, right? That’d mean a mental shutdown, right? Akechi? Akechi, answer me!”

“It’s no use. I think he’s in shock.”

“We need to make a decision now, everyone. Should we continue exploring the city or return and regroup? Like I said, I can guide us back when necessary.”

“…expand deeper, not wider, focus on his signal, already have it in memory so it needs to be somewhere, come on, come on…”

“Yusuke, could you please speak with her? She’s not listening to me.”

“I’m so sorry, everyone, but I don’t think I can go on. Milady was pushed to her limit back there, and after that attack…”

“So that’s a no. What about the rest of you?”

“Ann and I already agreed. We need to pull back. Yusuke’s trying to talk Futaba down as well. We can probably mark Akechi down for whatever answer we want right now, and-”

“Let’s go.”

“Ryuji?”

“Forget it. Let’s just go.”

* * *

When they returned to the metro the silence was sepulchral. Makoto pulled out her phone; it was a quarter past eleven. Trains still running, but the place would probably be underpopulated enough for any of the guards to become very curious about loiterers. And as they were now, they would definitely draw attention – all of their faces were bloodless and drawn tight, the shock of this latest loss plain to see. Any passersby would think they had all just seen someone die. Makoto hoped, very strongly, that this had not been the case.

Her phone also had several missed texts and calls from Sae. She groaned at the sight of them. One more thing to deal with tonight.

“I’m going to call Boss,” she said. “I’ll fill him in on what happened and who we’re bringing along. Is there anything the rest of you want to-”

She was cut off by a horrified gasp from Haru and another muttered swear from Ryuji. Even Yusuke took a surprised step back. She looked up and saw the nausea on all their faces before she finally realized what they were reacting to.

Goro Akechi was slumped against a wall, his suitcase resting companionably against his leg. His
school uniform – blazer, slacks, that black-and-white pinstriped tie – was as immaculate as it had been the day he’d set off to murder them all. The rest of him was not. After spending that long year in the Dead Sea, locked inside his armor without respite, his skin was a stark white like the underside of a mushroom; thin traceries of blue veins could be glimpsed under his face. His hair was clotted with grease and mashed against his head stiff as a welcome mat. His mouth was puckered and thin and his stare was that of someone looking past the world and into some other filled with creatures hungering and terrible. He still breathed and blinked but he looked like he had no right to do so.

It was Ann who regained her composure first. She rubbed her eyes as if to scour the sight of him away and said, “We need to get that jacket off. Someone might still recognize him.”

“The briefcase, too.” Morgana poked his head out behind Futaba. “That tacky thing is monogrammed and he brought it along to all his TV spots, everyone knows whose it is. Akechi, stick your blazer and your tie inside and untuck your shirt. The rest of us will have to crowd around him. Someone take the case, too.”

“I can handle that,” Yusuke said.

Akechi wordlessly bent down and undid the clasps on his briefcase. It took him three tries; his fingers were languorous and clumsy, like questing worms. When he finally popped the locks open and raised the lid, they all leaned in to peek inside. It was empty. Nothing but grey felt lining.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” Ryuji said. “You tote this dumbass thing around just for show?”

Makoto shook her head. “He keeps his computer and his case files inside. Though why he brought it to Shido’s Palace is anyone’s guess.”

Akechi looked up at her and she shuddered a little at that dead rust-colored gaze. He ran his fingers around the bottom of the case, caught them on something, and then flipped it up. Nestled beneath the hidden panel was a semiautomatic pistol, a suppressor, and a spare magazine.

The assembled group went very quiet. The rumble of a departing train counterpointed their quickened heartbeats. Several of them stole glances towards Ryuji. He seemed calm enough but his lips moved slightly; he was counting backwards from ten.

“Right. Point made.” Makoto turned away and dialed the phone. “Close it up and do what Morgana told you.”

Akechi struggled out of his clothes. The rest of them stood in a semicircle around him, blocking any scrutiny with their bodies, but they all flinched a bit whenever his limbs came too close. As if he’d returned from the Dead Sea bearing some virulent plague.

“Boss? It’s Makoto. Glad to know the café is still…yes, I know. Yes. …no. It- I don’t know that, exactly. We need to speak in person. The most I can say for now is that the situation’s gotten worse. Sorry…I’m sorry. Can you hang around just a little- yes, that’s fair. We’re coming now.” She glanced behind her. “And we’re bringing Goro Akechi with us.”

Several long seconds passed, then she shut her eyes and lowered the phone from her ear. Whatever Sojiro had said, it hadn’t warranted a reply.

Akechi had undressed and Yusuke had taken the suitcase, discreetly turning it around so that monogrammed “A” faced inward. It would have to do. Even if someone out this time of night had the wherewithal to take a snapshot of Akechi in this state and upload it for a hit of quick fame,
most people would probably assume he was just some homeless kid. Which, Makoto thought, would not be inaccurate.

Futaba bundled Morgana into her coat. She’d put her hood back up.

They went to the escalators without a word.

Haru, Yusuke, and Ann all flanked Akechi as they walked, carefully adjusting their position to block the view of any straggling commuters or tired shopkeepers still lingering in the Metro. Ryuji walked with his head down and his hands in his pockets, knuckles flexing beneath the fabric. Akechi winced and blinked at his surroundings like a newborn animal. Too many lights. Too much color.

Even at this hour the train cars had a few other passengers, worn-out late-shift workers or college kids scrambling to get back home after a night out in the rain. They took their seats as the doors hissed shut. Morgana wriggled out of Futaba’s coat a bit and glanced up and around.

“Are there cameras in these cars?” he asked. “They’ll have definitely seen Akechi, in that case.”

“Yes,” Futaba said dully. “But it doesn’t matter. No one cares about him.”

They rode in silence until a sound turned their heads. One of the passengers, a salaryman with his own beaten leather briefcase and a haircut that barely hid an ugly pink scar on his scalp, was doubled over in his seat, panting heavily. His glasses glimmered white as he turned to look over his shoulder but there was nothing behind him except the window and the streaking darkness beyond.

Makoto’s stomach churned. She had an idea what was about to happen even before the world fuzzed out of focus and they all saw those cold chain links biting into the man’s skin.


Ryuji jumped up from his seat and ran over, grabbing the man’s shoulder, lifting him up by the chin. His feverish eyes rolled wetly in their sockets.

“Hey! Hey, man, look at me. Just hang in there, alright?” Ryuji clawed at the chains but his fingers passed right through. “Damn it! Look, you’re gonna be okay. No matter what happens, we’re gonna come for you, okay? We’re-”

The man let out a thin groan and fell over, his glasses skittering across the ground, and the other passengers cried and leapt up like some troupe of marionettes pulled by unseen strings, crowding him, raising their phones, camera flashes printing their shadows on the wall. Ryuji looked ready to break their necks.

“What the hell is wrong with you people!? Stop taking pictures and call a goddamn ambulance!”

He reached out to snatch away one woman’s phone and might have done so if Morgana’s voice hadn’t yowled out: “Ryuji! Next car, now!”

He stomped and screamed more invective at the crowd before he left, and they crowded around the fallen man, their eyes haunted and blank as the camera lenses, recording the cold clay of that body.

* * *

The rain had grown worse. It drummed against their umbrellas like fingertips on a desktop. With that awful, anxious pall in the air, the sound felt anticipatory. A world impatient to end.
The streets of Yongen-Jaya were abandoned, houses already shut tight against the night. But the windows of Leblanc were still lit. They made their way to that glow, and paused before the door. Makoto elbowed her way to the front of the group and swung it open wide.

Sojiro was behind the counter, a cold cup of coffee at his elbow and a smoldering cigarette between his fingers. His frown was so deep it seemed to pull his entire face away from the bone. He tapped one finger against the counter as they all trooped in, Akechi bringing up the rear, huddled behind Haru and Yusuke. When the door swung shut behind him the bell jingled, and at that sound Akechi let out a muffled scream and spun on the spot, entire body quaking fierce enough to make his teeth chatter. Haru tried, ineffectually, to soothe him as Sojiro raised an eyebrow. Makoto shook her head and mouthed: Later.

“Morgana, Yusuke, could you stay down here with Futaba?” she said aloud. “I’ll explain things to Boss. Ann, take the suitcase. The rest of you bring him upstairs.”

The stairs creaked and groaned as they slouched their way up. Ann laid the suitcase on the table beside the stairwell and they spread out around the room, Akechi near the middle, hand limp at his sides, looking at nothing, looking lost. Ryuji sat down hard on Akira’s bed and bent over, digging at his scalp like he was trying to unearth wicked thoughts. No sound except the patter of rain on the window and the murmur of voices downstairs.

“Can he sit down, or something?” Ryuji asked, without looking up. “He’s creepin’ me out.”

Haru laid her hands on his shoulders and guided him to the sofa. He obediently folded his body into a sitting position and rested his hands on his knees. Stiff and somehow childish, like he’d gotten caught roughhousing and brought to the principal’s office. He looked too young and verging on some age that had never been.

They said nothing because there was nothing to say. They dispersed around the room, keeping a safe distance from Akechi, until the voices downstairs ceased. The front door swung open and shut. The stairs creaked, two by two, and Makoto’s and Yusuke’s heads surfaces from the stairwell. They leaned against the table as Morgana bounded up and sat between them. Makoto’s arms crossed, her nails pushed hard into the skin.

“He can stay here,” Makoto said. “For how long, I have no idea. I think Boss agreed mostly because he didn’t have the energy to argue. That’s probably going to change tomorrow.”

“Futaba has gone home,” Yusuke added. “Does anyone have a preferred course of action at this time?”

“We need to get some sleep before we draw up any strategies,” Ann said.

Haru nodded, and it took visible effort for her to raise her head again. “All of us are exhausted. I doubt any plans we lay now will be constructive ones.” Her voice turned severe. “Especially you, Yusuke. Have you eaten at all today?”

“I will be fine.”

“You will not be fine. Eat when you get home, please.”

He looked away from her stare. “Er, yes. Of course.”

“At this point Akira’s symptoms will no doubt have come to resemble those of the other Paranoia Syndrome victims,” Morgana said. “Even if his hospital tries to cover that up, we all know why it’s urgent to save him as soon as possible. And that’s to say nothing of how precarious the
situation is for the rest of society. If Akechi’s earlier theory is correct, the number of victims will increase exponentially until our enemy is dealt with. We absolutely cannot afford to drag our feet on this one.”

“At least tomorrow’s Sunday,” said Ann. “We can come here without having to worry about school. Then we can put our heads together and figure out…something. Anything.”

“I can bring us back to the Dead Sea if necessary, but I wouldn’t recommend it without a plan. If nothing else, our enemy has proven himself to be extremely proficient at setting up ambushes down there.”

“Akechi.”

It was Makoto who’d said his name. All heads turned to her, except Akechi’s own. He kept staring hollowly at the far wall.

“We’ll need you to contribute as well,” she continued. “You’ve already provided one valuable theory about Paranoia Syndrome’s spread. Any intelligence you have to offer about the Dead Sea or our target could be helpful.”

“Agreed,” said Yusuke. “We could benefit from that perspective. Even though Akira may have been temporarily abducted, we—”

Ryuji raised his head and looked at Akechi, and his stare was flat and dull. “It should’ve been you.”

“Ryuji!” Ann snapped. Haru clapped a hand to her mouth, eyes wide.

“What? It’s what we’re all thinking. Might as well clear the air, right?”

“This is not the time to start fights, Sakamoto!” Morgana said, hackles rising.

“Am I the only one who saw it? That son of a bitch with the sack over his head faked us all out back there. He only pretended to grab this piece of shit so he could get at Akira. I should’ve reacted faster. Should’ve just held him back.”

“No one would’ve missed him. No one would’ve given a shit. Everyone who ever pretended to care about him either died or tried to kill him first. Akira would’ve made us bail him out anyway ‘cause that’s just the kind of guy he is, but I ain’t gonna pretend he did anyone a favor sacrificing himself for this scumbag.” Akechi kept staring forward, blank-faced, and Ryuji’s eye twitched and he stood and advanced on him. “Hey, murderer, you got anything to fuckin’ say!?”

No one saw Makoto move but suddenly she was behind Ryuji, grasping his wrist. Her grip was gentle but the way she held him and the tenor of her voice suggested that, if he attempted any sudden movements, it would rapidly tighten to an excruciating degree.

“Ryuji,” she said. “Go home.”

He looked at her, then at the others. None of them would meet his eye. He grit his teeth and threw off her hand and stomped down the stairs; the door jingled open and slammed shut.

After a long moment, Ann said, “The moron forgot his umbrella.”
Makoto sighed. “Ann, could you…?”

“Yeah. On it. See you tomorrow, everyone.”

“I’m going to stay with the Sakuras,” Morgana said as she left. “Futaba will probably have to use my face as a stress ball again.”

“Sorry, Morgana.”

“All part of the job. Bright and early tomorrow, okay?”

He bounded away. Haru and Yusuke muttered their goodbyes and made for the stairs. And then it was just Makoto, and Akechi, and the gossiping rain.

She fought for something to say to him. Nothing seemed adequate. He might have killed over thirty people and attempted to kill her and her friends as well, but she still couldn’t shake the feeling that the person sitting in front of her now was just some rough mannequin sculpted in that pitiable maniac’s image. Neither his face nor his posture had changed during Ryuji’s rant. After a year in that waterlogged wasteland, the Dead Sea seemed to have drained away everything vibrant and alive from Akechi as well.

Or maybe – and she shuddered a little at the thought – this was who he’d always been. Under the layers of affectation, the preening talk-show darling and the sneering assassin and every role in between, was someone colorless and empty as a discarded bottle.

“We’ll be back tomorrow,” was all she could think to tell him. “Mr. Sakura will likely open up shop before we arrive. I strongly recommend against leaving this building in the meantime.”

He stirred at that; she could almost hear the tendons in his neck creak as he turned to face her. When he spoke, his voice was a croaking whisper.

“Where would I go?” he asked.

There was no answer for that. All she could manage was, “Get some rest, Akechi.”

Makoto felt palpable relief as she stepped out of the café and into the rain, the release of some unseen hand tightening over her chest. She looked up and into the square of soft buttery light from the attic window. After a minute, it went out, leaving the shopfront darkened and blind as the rest of the street. She turned and walked off, footsteps fading until the sound of the rain overwhelmed everything.

*             *             *

“The worst has come to pass.”

The cold steel cell and the ceaseless mosquito whine. The deep blue glow and the many-eyed shadows. The box in which he was imprisoned had begun to rot. Chunks of metal peeled away like scabs to reveal the bars of his old cage underneath. He curled up on the ground and said nothing.

“The one who put his soul at hazard to banish the malevolent paranoia from this world has been claimed by it.” Igor’s voice was grave. “And so the evil festering within the Sea of Souls is allowed to run rampant. In time, its influence shall lead to the same ruin that was so recently averted. Such a dismal turn of events. Still. All is not yet lost. I shall continue to believe in mankind’s indomitable spirit.”
“It must be so easy for you,” Akechi said.

“I beg your pardon?" 

“Locked away nice and safe in this place. Waxing poetic about humanity and its future. You’re nothing but an audience to it. If all of us went extinct tomorrow you wouldn’t be affected in the least.” He looked away from those shadows, buried his face in his knees. “Your voice irritates me.”

“Well, well,” Igor said mildly. “I do not believe a guest has ever judged me so harshly. But I cannot dispute your claim. Apart from the occasional visitor to the Velvet Room, I stand forever apart from the affairs of man. And I must admit, it causes me a certain amount of distress to be so detached from the company of others. A position, I believe, with which you may sympathize.”

Akechi didn’t answer.

“Observe this room, the chamber of your soul. A cell hanging in the center of all – always in view of the others, always witnessed, and yet always apart. You crave the attention of others, so why do you shy away from their gaze? Imprisoned by your lack of bonds, seeking connections but scorning companions, in search of validation from the society you once sought to unmake…it would appear that your very heart is plagued by paradox.”

“I’m afraid that I’m not nearly as complex as you would like to believe. I don’t care about any of them. I couldn’t if I tried.”

“So you say. But the evidence tells a different story. Your cage continues to expand and fragment, though it leaves you ever more vulnerable to these judging eyes. The fate of the world is unclear, but your rehabilitation continues apace.” Igor drummed on his desk, humming tunelessly to himself. “I shall persevere, if only to see through your time in this Velvet Room. I find you quite fascinating.”

“I’m flattered to hear that someone does.”

“There you go,” he said brightly. “You act as though your spirit is broken, and yet you are quite able to muster up sarcasm. More evidence of that unyielding human will.”

Akechi raised his head, stood up, tried to see Igor through the holes and cracks in his cell. It was no use. Even though weak blue light leaked into the box from a dozen places, he still couldn’t find a hole that let him peer down to the floor below. As he strained to see, pain flared in his head fierce enough to nearly bring him to his knees again. That silver spike. That fragmented shine in the distance. Even here, it followed him. That light now seemed almost tangible; he saw it in the cell on the far wall, still bobbing up and down. Strangely, the darkness in that cell had shifted. Retreating so far from that hallucinatory wisp that shadows were almost climbing the walls.

Igor continued to speak, apparently heedless to all of this.

“An invitation once given is never rescinded. During your imprisonment in the Sea of Souls, it was the influence of this Velvet Room that allowed you to survive. Your essence, preserved here in stasis, shielding your mind from the sea’s pernicious aura of decay. And now, though the hour is dark and the future is dim, you have broken free of those corrupted waters. If you wish to see your rehabilitation through, then hold on to the bonds you have found. Those liberating shackles, though they may remain weak and may burn to the touch. Hollow you might be, but your potential is undeniable.” He chuckled. “Who knows what can be hidden within the fortress of the heart?”
In the waning dark of his cell, Akechi’s eyes widened. “The fortress…”

“Our time is at an end. When dawn breaks, you will face unexpected challenges. I trust you will rise to the occasion magnificently.”

He felt lightheaded, sleep rushing in to claim him. As he curled up again in his cell, he held on to Igor’s words, desperately, before they crumbled apart in his mind like any other dream.

* * *

“The worst has come to pass.”

His last memories were cold. The water rushing in, and those chains so frigid that they bit at him like teeth, gnawing through his flesh and into the muscle and bone. Now the water was gone but the cold remained. He jerked in his seat from the sudden agony.

The bus had stalled. Its engine was silent. Through that fogged glass the driver sat idle and patient. And the chains had followed him here, they laced around his chair and looped around his limbs, his chest, his throat, drawing ever tighter so that he thought he could hear the cellophane-crackle of his own cartilage yielding under their grip. Then they loosened, just enough for them to draw in a single whooping breath, and cinched tight again.

Lavenza sat across from him, hands in her lap. Her face was devoid of pity.

“You were warned about the danger you faced. And yet, you cast yourself recklessly into harm’s way. The enemy has triumphed. Paranoia runs amok. Now, witness your punishment. You shall remain here, to endure suffering without end, until your feeble life is exhausted.”

This cold was almost alive. It stabbed him like needles, ever shifting, in search of more vulnerable skin. He felt his windpipe bending like a straw. He couldn’t even scream.

It all felt very familiar.

Lavenza blinked, once, slowly. Akira’s grimace of pain had twisted sideways, his labored, tortured breathing acquired an odd syncopation.

“Are you…laughing?”

“Here we are again,” he wheezed. The chains seized again but he just grinned wider. “Sorry, everyone. I just keep messing up.”

“Even now, you do not despair,” said Lavenza. She sounded in awe. "I am curious as to why."

Akira’s eyes rolled to her. “Did you forget? I’ve been here before.”

He gripped the arms of his chair and fought against the chains’ grip, struggling to lean forward. His ribs creaked and his throat burned and his arms felt like they would shatter to splinters, but they gave way – a fraction of an inch, but they gave way.

Then he let go, and they pulled him into the plush of the seat once again.

“Been here before,” he said, between rasping breaths. “And just like before. I know. What’ll happen. My friends. Will come. For me.”

She blinked again. Her lids were slightly out of sync, as if she couldn’t quite figure out how their movement worked. Her smile, too, showed very little warmth – that lineless doll’s face didn’t
allow for it – but she nevertheless appeared to be making an effort.

“We shall see. If you truly believe that all is not yet lost, then keep your spirit burning bright. Remember, I will remain at your side.”

Akira managed that cocky grin for a moment longer, then the chains spasmed again and dropped him back into that icy and hungering pain. The bus dissolved and swam before his eyes until he was lost in a blue haze. The smoldering topaz of Lavenza's eyes gleamed, it seemed to recede until it was as distant as the stars, and then the chains' gnashing grew louder and louder until it filled his whole world.
Chapter 10

The rain became a drizzle. Tokyo shivered in the November air. In the puddled streets the city lights shimmered in unnatural colors, making the asphalt look infected, gangrenous. The trains had ceased running and between their slumber and the foul weather and the dampened, frightful populace, everything seemed quieter than it had ever been. Anxiety chewed at their spirits and paranoia held sway over all.

They slept restlessly, these people. Grimacing through their dreams, hands crawling like spiders and eager to touch something. They clutched at each other, their pillows, at empty air to seize phantoms unseen. Many of them would wake feeling more tired than they had been upon going to bed, their muscles aching from the strain of caging their fears, and then the babble of the news would coax that poisonous worry to the surface all over again.

It was worse for those still awake.

This hour, already unnatural, felt downright hostile in the paranoid days. Late-shift workers and unsmiling insomniacs found themselves constantly glancing at unlit spaces; in the corners of their eyes the dark would grow tendrils and reach out to them, and they would turn and look at the shadows fully and see a patch of shadow and nothing more. They drank strong coffee and kept their eyes on computer screens to let the torrent of bad news electrify their minds awake. In the open maw of that space between today and tomorrow, they waited, and hoped that it would not bite down.

* * *

The Sakamotos’ apartment was clean but small, and made more cramped still by the riot of things on the walls. Ryuji’s mother was a big fan of picture frames. They crowded the halls to the point where the rooms seemed much narrower than they should have been. Some pictures were of Tokyo itself, some generic landscapes, quite a few of Ryuji and his mother - the former gradually growing taller but always with that lopsided grin, the latter a small and bob-haired woman with delicate long-fingered hands, pianist’s hands, unsuited for the difficult work of raising a child alone. She smiled nonetheless in every picture, often clinging to Ryuji as if the wind would pick up and blow her away. Ryuji’s track trophies sparkled in a place of honor on the living room mantle. He walked past them with his head down, the umbrella clenched in his fist still dripping water.

Anyone who knew him might reasonably expect his bedroom to look like a bomb had hit it, but this room, too, was quite clean. There were a few carefully maintained patches of clutter in out-of-sight corners, and the walls were so mobbed by posters – anime, track stars, a few discreet gravure idols – that a single wayward spark would probably make the whole place burn like a wig, but otherwise it was barely even dusty. A pair of running shoes sat reverently on the windowsill; Ryuji flung his umbrella in their general direction and fell down on his bed. The springs squealed like things in pain.

There was a shadow in the doorway. Someone lurking just outside. Ryuji stared at the ceiling and paid it no mind.

“Sit down wherever,” he said.

Ann stepped in, gingerly, as if expecting landmines, clutching her purse like a talisman. She’d let her hair out of its pigtails and it hung around her head in a scraggly curtain; she looked like she’d just crawled out of a well.
“It’s nice,” she said, hesitantly. “Always sort of wondered what your room looked like.”

“Now you know.”

Ryuji’s desk was haunted by the ghosts of homework left unfinished, its surface covered with restless doodles scribbled down whenever his attention span wandered. She carefully set her purse down on it and pulled up the chair. Time passed.

Ryuji said, “So, how about you tell me why you’re really here.”

She’d caught up to him just before he took the last train out, his forgotten umbrella in her hands. It hadn’t done him much good; he’d already been soaked to the bone. He’d taken it without a word and just before the train pulled up she blurted out if she could come to his place tonight instead. Ryuji had looked at her like she’d just ripped off her top and pulled out her whip, but she’d been undeterred. Please, she’d said. I don’t want to be alone tonight.

“I meant what I said,” she told him. “There’s something creepy in the air lately, you said it yourself. And my parents are out of town again. After…everything that happened…if I went back there on my own I’d just spend the night wide awake with all the lights on.”

Ryuji grunted. His mother was on the graveyard shift this week, he’d said. It was just the two of them.

“You should’ve hit up Haru or Makoto instead,” he said. “Their digs are way nicer than this.”

“Probably.”

“So, what? You just tag along to chew me out some more?”

“No. I don’t think you want to be alone tonight, either.”

A long silence. Ryuji kept his eyes on the ceiling, fingers laced behind his head. Then he said, “I ain’t gonna apologize. Screw that guy.”

“Okay.”

“Pisses me off, the way everyone’s walkin’ on eggshells around him. It’s like, I remember that he killed enough people to fill up a decent-sized classroom and somehow that makes me the bad guy?”

“Okay.”

“Ain’t like he’s the only one who had to eat a bowl of shit growin’ up. Futaba and Yusuke had it just as bad, for starters. Hell, Futaba had it bad ‘cause of him in the first place. All of us went through some kind of trouble. You know what none of us did? Killed people!”

“Okay.”

“I hear you,” she said, though privately she had some doubts about Haru – her awful sleaze of a fiancé had vanished very abruptly one day, and none of them had seen or heard of him since. “It’s just…what you said, it was a little…”

“I know.” He groaned and covered his face. “Goddammit. I know what it was.”

The rain tapped against the window. Ann shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

“You want to talk about what happened?” she asked.
“Nothin’ to talk about.” He pulled his hands away. “We screwed up. Again. You called it right from the start. We didn’t prepare at all, we tried to go in there like big damn heroes and we just made things worse. We all saw what happened on the train. That son of a bitch barely waited fifteen minutes before he started hunting people again. This shit’s not gonna end.”

“We won’t give up. We’ll meet tomorrow, go back and-"

“And what? Who’s gonna be the next to get snatched, you think? Makoto? Futaba? You or me? Or maybe he’ll just yank us all down at once. He’s probably bored of actin’ like we’re any sort of threat to him.” He finally looked over, saw Ann’s pained expression. He sighed. “Sorry. I’m being bitchy.”

“It’s fine. I get where you’re coming from. Morale is pretty much in the crapper, right now.”

Ryuji nodded and turned back to the ceiling, and this time Ann followed his gaze. The top of his bedroom was studded with small plastic stars, five-pointed like a child’s drawing. Ann remembered them from somewhere, and said as much to Ryuji.

“Yeah, you’ve probably seen ‘em before. How about you turn off the light for a sec?”

She did, and when the light flicked off the stars lit up, glowing a gentle phosphorescent green; the color painted the walls and lay like dust on their upturned faces. “Ohh, right, I had these when I was a little kid. Got bored of them quick, though. I’m surprised you kept them.”

“Ain’t really my choice. My ma bought a whole box when I was in grade school, but that glue crap you were supposed to use to keep ‘em stuck kept wearing off. One day I just got fed up and threw them all away. When she came home that day and saw me all bummed out and these things in my trashcan, she did something to keep them up there. Super glue, maybe. Only way you can get them down now is with a paint scraper or something.” He rested his hands on his chest. “I don’t mind it. We still joke about it, sometimes.”

“They’re pretty.”

“I guess. The glow doesn’t last long.” And sure enough, the light was already starting to dim. Ann took her seat again, the two of them in the gathering dark. “Hey, Takamaki. Can I ask you somethin’ weird?”

“Now you’ve got me curious.”

“It’s about Akira. Mostly I ain’t totally comfortable talkin’ about him when he’s…you know. But it’s botherin’ me, lately.”

“Go ahead. I won’t tell.”

Ryuji’s bedsprings shifted. “Guess I’ll just ask right out. In all the time you spent hangin’ out with the guy, did you ever get the feeling that he…doesn’t like himself all that much?”

She blinked. “Huh?”

“Technically I’ve known him longer than anybody else here.” It was too dark to see his face anymore but she still felt his eyes on her. “Not by much, but, y’know, it still sort of counts. It was just this vibe I got off him, after a while. You ever notice how he was pretty much never alone? Even when he wasn’t hanging out with us or one of the other weirdoes he knew around the city, he still had that frigging cat around him practically 24/7. And it’s ain’t exactly like he’s…he’s…extra-vertical?”
“Extroverted?”

“Yeah, that. Dude’s practically got a little privacy field floatin’ around with him. He just…never wants to be by himself.”

“I guess.” He had a point – now that she thought about it, on the rare occasion when Akira didn’t have time to spare for her when she asked, it was nearly always because he was on his way to rendezvous with someone else. It explained why, in the course of less than a year, he’d established a web of loyal social contacts that ensnared half of Tokyo. “But what makes you think he’s got self-esteem problems, or whatever?”

“It’s ‘cause I was the same way.” Ryuji’s voice was unusually hushed; in this dark room, it gave Ann the uneasy feeling that he wasn’t there at all, that he’d been replaced by some doppelganger in the dying light of the artificial stars. “After Kamoshida worked me over, sometimes I’d still hang around what was left of the track team, even though they’d give me a mountain of shit and usually a couple of punches for good measure. Because it was better than being stuck in my own head. And then there’s the shit that went down today. We ribbed Akira pretty good when we caught up with him, but you saw how bad it bothered him after. We practically had to drag him outta that Dead Sea place because he didn’t think his safety was any big deal. He went in the first place just ‘cause Futaba was bummed out. He’s gone now because he went after Akechi without thinkin’ about it. And when we did beat down that creep with the chains, you remember what he said? ‘Oh, no big deal, I didn’t do anything, it was all you guys.’ Like, that shit ain’t even funny. We talk him up all the time but he never gives himself credit.”

Ann shifted uncomfortably in her chair. What he was saying had a point – the pieces were all there, she just hadn’t bothered fitting them together. What made her more uneasy than anything was that Ryuji was doing it. She didn’t think he was as foolish as he let on, but an insightful Ryuji was more than she knew how to handle, at the moment.

“Ryuji, where are you going with this?”

“I dunno. He always acts like some badass loner but after a while I got the feeling he needed us just as bad as we needed him. I felt responsible, I guess. Didn’t want to let him down.”

“We all felt responsible. That’s what made us a team.”

“Yeah. Less than a year ago we were on top of the world. Blew away a god, saved the city. Now look. World’s gone to shit again. I couldn’t help Akira out. And I’m still actin’ like the same asshole whose leg got broke all those months back.” He sniffed and there was a rustle of cloth; to her shock, Ann realized he was tearing up. “I just…is this how it’s always gonna be? Just trippin’ into one screwup after the next? It tires a guy out. That’s all I’m saying.”

No answer, for a while. Then Ryuji’s desk lamp clicked on and he cringed away from its weak light, rubbing at his reddened eyes. Ann sat beside that glow and the tangled curtain of her hair cast her face in shadow, so that only a pale blue eye was fully visible, regarding him without judgement.

“I know what you mean,” she said. “You and Akira. I was like that with Shiho, too. After we took care of Kamoshida, I got all gung-ho over self-improvement for a while. Eventually I decided that I just wanted to be a better person for her sake. Even if she wasn’t around or didn’t need me, I still kept her in mind. Maybe that’s how Akira thinks about us. Why he was so worried we might forget about him.” She brushed her hair back, sighing. “Dr. Takemi and Yusuke had it right. People can’t see the bigger picture. Seems like we’ve just got to try and help our friends as best we can and hope the rest of the world follows.”
“I ain’t okay with that,” Ryuji said. “Sorry, but I’m not. That’s just selfishness with a pretty bow on top. It ain’t enough to fix the world.”

“Yeah, I guess so. But thinking you can fix the world all on your own is pretty selfish too. You put way too much pressure on yourself, Ryuji.” He said nothing. “But for what it’s worth, you’re not an asshole. You just…let things get to you easily. That makes you the opposite of an asshole, if anything.”

After a moment, he sat up on his bed, looking at her quizzically. “The hell would that even look like? An outie?”

“No. Oh my God, gross.”

He tried to grin. “Hey, you brought it up.”

“Just lay off Akechi while he’s still around, okay? We really do need him, for now. And I doubt he needs anyone’s help feeling shitty, considering what’s he’s got to look forward to.”

“I guess. It doesn’t make up for what he did, but it still freaked me out seeing what he looked like after comin’ back from the Metaverse. I thought he was gonna go out on the streets lookin’ for brains.” He rubbed a hand over his face. “Give you credit for one thing, Takamaki, you at least know how to pull my head outta my ass. Why don’t we hang out more? We should hang out more.”

“…are you flirting with me?”

“Haha. Yeah, no. I’m already on Morgana’s shitlist.”

“I’m pretty sure he’s over that little crush by now, Ryuji.”

“You try tellin’ him that.” He yawned. “Okay. I’m crapping out. You want me to call you a cab?”

“I’d rather not go out this late. Can I crash on the couch, or something?”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll just text Ma so she doesn’t freak when she gets home.” He fidgeted with his thumbs for a moment. “And…uh, thanks. For stopping over.”

“Thanks for having me.” She stood up. “We’ll get through this, okay? Try to worry about one thing at a time.”

“Alright. First thing, kick Chain Guy’s ass. Big philosophical stuff after.”

“Goodnight, Ryuji.”

“G’night.”

She switched off the lamp and left the room, shutting the door behind her. Ryuji pulled out his phone, sent off a brief message – Hi Ma. Ann’s here. Not gf, missed her train. Love you. – and then replaced it and settled into his pillows. The stars had drunk up the scarce lamplight and still shone faintly. Ryuji stared up at them until his lids grew heavy and the night crawled across everything.

*    *    *

Kosei Academy was proud of its liberal-arts bent, and its scholarship students in particular were offered a great deal of leeway in how they went about their studies. This was a good thing for Yusuke, because the state of his dorm room would have made even the hardiest R.A. foam at the
mouth and pass out. It could almost be considered a work of art in itself – something like ‘The Dwelling of the Distracted Soul.’ Art supplies crowded every available surface like an invasive fungus. Paint was splattered on the walls halfway up to the ceiling. Half-finished sketches and canvases formed perilous architecture throughout. And his closet was used less for storing clothes (he took very good care of his outfits, all three of them) and more for the long-discarded corpses of cup ramen containers that, along with bean sprouts, made up most of his diet. There was a new addition to that noodle cemetery tonight; out of deference to Haru, Yusuke had eaten one upon returning home, and topped it off with a protein bar for good measure. It wasn’t that he deliberately starved himself. He just always seemed to have something better to do.

He was seated at his desk now, barefoot in paintstained pajamas, a single sheet of paper in front of him – thick sketchbook card stock, sturdy and opaque. It was blank except for a large black circle in its center. Black on black on black. He’d worn down half a stick of charcoal getting the proper shade. He picked up the sheet and held it at arm’s length as if he expected something to claw its way out.

“Couldn’t be,” he muttered. “And if were, then what would that signify?”

His phone vibrated somewhere in the substrata of detritus around his futon. He picked his way over to it, careful not to upset the tottering piles of clutter, and extracted it from a pile of used paint bottles. He’d received several texts. More popped up as he read.

FS: inari.
FS: inari i know you’re there.
FS: there is zero chance your boho ass is asleep tonight
FS: pick up
FS: or don’t
FS: whatever

YK: Good evening, Futaba. Though I suppose it would qualify as early morning now.
FS: it doesn’t matter if you oh there you are
FS: what’re you up to
YK: Contemplating various matters. Mostly related to the events of yesterday. As you are, I’m sure. Do you want to discuss it?
FS: i dunno
YK: Then may I ask why you contacted me?
FS: because morgana is asleep and sojiro is asleep and i knew you’d be awake and you’re weird enough to listen to whatever bullshit i say without telling anybody else
YK: I see. It is understandable that you would be upset. Though, from what I can discern in your messages, you seem to be holding up very well.
FS: i dunno. i don’t know what i’m feeling
FS: i was sad for a while and now i guess that i’m deciding what to feel next
FS: beep boop, futaba on safe mode
FS: to be honest i kinda want to die

He gripped the phone tighter.

YK: You know that I cannot take such a statement lightly.
FS: don’t worry inari i’m not gonna hang myself or anything
FS: don’t know how to tie a knot lol
YK: This is not funny.
FS: yeah
FS: i know
FS: i guess that i’m just…discouraged? sure let’s go with that
YK: All of us are reeling a bit from our recent loss, but it is not the first loss that we have suffered. And just like last time, I am confident we will recover from it. We must have faith that Akira remains well, despite his capture.
FS: no, it’s not just that
FS: it’s like
FS: you remember how i was when you all first met me, right
FS: i was a fukken mess
FS: couldn’t speak to you without texting, couldn’t come out of my room, dead mom bad dreams seeing ghosts hearing voices and a partridge in a pear treeee~
FS: then all of you did your thing and kept dragging me out to silly crap until i got over myself a little bit, and those are good memories. you and your lobsters. little lobbies
YK: Their anatomy is truly compelling.
FS: so i figured i was on my way to being sorta kinda a normal person instead of the trashfire i was before
FS: and then the last couple of weeks happened
FS: now i’m not coming to school anymore, don’t want to leave the house, brother’s probably dying, even my phantom thief shenanigans are fucking up lately
FS: my scans missed that hobo-looking douchebag over and over again until he finally got the drop on us
FS: so now i guess i’m thinking, what was the point? why did i step outside in the first place if it’s just into a whole different world of shit?
FS: so yeah
FS: hashtag emo teen
YK: Your brother?
FS: what?
YK: I didn’t know you had a brother.
FS: wtf are you talking about
FS: oh
FS: oh god no
FS: what did i just type
FS: WHAT THE FUCK DID I JUST TYPE
YK: ?
FS: I’M DONE
FS: I’M DONE
FS: I’M SO FUCKING DONE
FS: FUCK THIS FUCK YOU FUCK ME FUCK EVERYTHING
FS: FUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUCK

[Futaba Sakura is now offline.]

YK: Hello?

No further messages appeared to be forthcoming. Yusuke sat cross-legged on his futon and looked down at his phone until the screen went black, reflecting his own face. The last vestiges of the rainstorm ran down his window, shiny silver drops that grew fatter as they ate each other.

He dialed Futaba’s number.
The first time it went to voicemail. He hung up without speaking and dialed again. Voicemail. He hung up without speaking and dialed again. On the third ring it picked up.

“Why’re you calling me? Stop calling me! I didn’t ask you to call me!”

“I believe this would be a topic better suited to direct conversation. Text messaging is too cumbersome.”

“First of all, I know that’s b.s. because you’ve got the WPM of a chatbot on uppers.” Her voice was fierce but restrained, mindful of the people sleeping in her home. “Second, this isn’t a conversation I want to have, and if I did then I wouldn’t have it with you. It’s a tiny miracle you remember to put on pants every morning before you go outside, so what the hell can you do for me? I’m hanging up now. Good night!”

He waited. The phone did not disconnect.

“Are you still there?”

“Yes.”

“Ohay.” Her voice had gone limp. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right.”

“It’s really not. I’m such a freaking mess.”

“You’ve been in considerably worse shape than this, Futaba.” He stood and went to his window, saw his impassive expression reflected. “And you have recovered. What makes you believe that this will be any different?”

“A sad girl stuck in her room is kind of a step below what’s going on now, Inari! I mean, this… even compared to what we did before, it feels too big. Even if we did have Akira around, I’m not sure we could handle it. And what’s going to come after this, huh? We got a whopping eight or nine months of everything not being totally FUBAR after the last crisis. I don’t want to keep doing this anymore.” She swallowed hard, took a steadying breath. “I just…I know it sounds selfish, but I really just want to focus on learning how to be a normal person for a change.”

“I wouldn’t call that particularly selfish, Futaba. But I believe your perceptions may be flawed.”

“The hell does that mean?”

“In my view, being normal does not always mean being happy,” he said. The raindrops coursed over his reflection’s face. “You could say that perspective is borne from my chosen occupation. Art is the human experience in miniature. And it often comes from pain as well as joy. Our own tribulations are perhaps a bit unusual compared to those of the average person, but it may help to view them as another part of your personal growth, rather than a hindrance to it.”

“…did you just tell me that when life gives me lemons, I should make lemonade? Did you seriously just drop that cliché on me?”

“If you like. The saying does have a kernel of truth. Do you think I would be a better person had I not experienced my childhood under Madarame?”

“That’s not fair. You can’t ask me that.”
“I am asking you. But you don’t have to answer.”

He reached out with his finger and pressed it against one of those silvery droplets. As he spoke that finger moved, tracing out imaginary constellations.

“We construct ourselves through our experiences. For good and ill. I, for example, am unlikely to become a hacker, or a track star, or a cat who is also an automobile.” Futaba giggled helplessly over the phone, but Yusuke’s expression remained stoic. “And there are many people who lack the means to attain the most meager of heights. Those who see the shape that their lives were meant to become growing fainter each day. I was like that under Madarame, I suppose. Resigned to poverty and plagiarism, until my eyes were opened. As yours were. Those revelations, that pain, are necessary components of who we are. I do not know what shape your life might take, Futaba. But I believe it is something that the world would be far worse off without. I would like to see it. And so I selfishly ask you to persevere.”

It took a few seconds for her to answer, and then all she could say was, “Oh.”

“Was that too much? I know that I often have difficulties making myself understood.”

“No. You came through fine. It was the most cornball thing you've ever said, but…it’s fine.” She cleared her throat. “Thanks for calling.”

“It was no problem. I will be available for a while longer, should you wish to speak again. There is some sketching I would like to do before I sleep.”

“Yeah, I’m gonna spend a little bit purging all evidence of our last chatlog from the face of the earth. It'll help me keep my mind off things, at least.”

“Why? Was there something objectionable about our discussion?”

“I won’t dignify that with a response. If you ever mention a word of it to anyone there will be no end to the horrors I will rain down upon you, got it?”

“Very well,” he said, still uncomprehending. “Good night, Futaba.”

“Goodnight, Yusuke.”

The phone went silent. Yusuke took it away from his ear, set it on the corner of his bed, and then went back to his desk. Humming a little, he extracted a pencil and a fresh sketchbook from the detritus in his desk drawers, then took the sheet with that ominous black circle charcoaled into it, crumpled it up, and threw it in the wastebasket.

“Right,” he said, and raised the pencil. “Where was I?”

* * *

Sae was waiting for her.

Makoto hadn’t contacted her initially out of sheer hubris – she’d thought that their little sojourn into whatever weird realm Morgana had found wouldn’t last long, or if it did, that they’d emerge victorious, and that she’d be able to blunt any of Sae’s lectures with the good news. Now she was slinking back into their apartment like a frail thief, empty-handed. She’d sent a single terse text before getting on the train, just so her sister would know she wasn’t dead, but the rest she would have to endure in person.
Sae Niijima had come a long way since she’d stepped away from the soul-eroding furnace that was SIU prosecutorial politics – though “stepped away” was maybe putting it too lightly. “Sauntered out in a blaze of glory” would be more accurate. Masayoshi Shido had tried to align the entire department against her, but nearly every one of his co-conspirators had been burned when his heart had been stolen and the public, with a little deicidal coaxing, had turned against him. Consequently, what remained of the SIU was now firmly in her corner. After the SIU’s plot to frame her had come to light she probably could have made Director with a little more pushing, but instead she’d settled, literally, for a hefty restitution fee in court, and invested it into a new career path as a defense attorney, focusing her efforts on the other side of the law.

The pay wasn’t as good in her new job, but she carefully budgeted the settlement to cover their basic needs, and the absence of that constant cutthroat ladder-climbing had changed her considerably. She’d lost that desperate snappishness that had punctuated her and Makoto’s earlier relationship; she came home to eat more often. But while she might have softened up a little bit, her new lease on life hadn’t diminished the sharpness of her tongue, her merciless eye for detail, or the intensity of her glare. And Makoto got a front-row seat to the latter as soon as she stepped into their apartment.

Sae was on the couch, in her robe, cell phone still in one manicured hand. She maintained her stare for several seconds longer than was comfortable.

“I know you’re a university student,” she began, “so that means I should allow you a little more independence. But as long as you’re living here you should at least tell me if you’re going to stay out so late, especially on nights…like…” She stopped and leaned forward. “Makoto, what happened?”

So it was that obvious.

After all of her covert activities as a Phantom Thief had come to light, they’d made a promise between each other. No more secrets. Makoto thought that was slightly skewed in Sae’s favor – when she wasn’t distracted by work she could detect lies with laser accuracy – but at least it simplified things for her now. She turned, locked the door, then opted for bluntness. “You remember Akira Kurusu, right?” she asked, facing Sae again.

“You remember Akira Kurusu, right?” she asked, facing Sae again.

“It’d be hard to forget without a serious head injury. Why, is he in some kind of trouble?”

“He’s dying,” she said. “And Goro Akechi is sleeping in his old room.”

Silence. Sae’s mouth remained slightly open. Then she stood up, stiffly, and made her way to the kitchen.

“I’ll put on some coffee,” she said.

Makoto was too tired to even protest.

As it turned out, she dodged at least one bullet – Sae decided at the last minute to make cocoa instead. They filled up their mugs with marshmallows and drained them at the kitchen table as Makoto filled her in. Sae spoke little throughout her explanation. Makoto suspected that, after her lengthy interrogation of Akira last year, she was used to this sort of thing.

“We’re going to regroup tomorrow morning,” she finished. “I’m hoping that Akechi will be able to give us some insight on what to do next.”

“And they’re treating you as the de facto leader?”
“That seems to be the case.” She frowned and pulled her mug close. “I was fine with it before, but…it’s shocking, how much different it is without Akira around. He didn’t speak much when he was with us but he always had the final say, you know? Now we’re flying blind. I feel culpable for every misstep.”

She waved a hand. “That’s just how you are, Makoto. It doesn’t reflect your performance.”

“I hope so. My performance has felt pretty shoddy recently.”

“I seem to recall Kurusu saying he would trust us grown-ups to handle things from now on, but I guess that doesn’t apply to supernatural epidemics.” She sighed, brushed hair away from her eye. “So, once again, the fate of the world is in the hands of people who can’t even legally drink, plus one cat. Feels downright perverse. And that’s to say nothing of Akechi himself. I’d given him up for dead.”

“We pretty much have him sequestered in that café right now. I don’t think anyone noticed him going in. Do the police…?”

“Not to my knowledge. Shido kept Akechi’s involvement under a very tight lid, and unlike the other conspirators, he didn’t seem to have any blackmail on him either. No documentation or videotape, and the only recorded call I’ve heard was the one Futaba Sakura took when she tapped his phone.” She pinched the bridge of her nose; the stress of that whole debacle still nipped at her from time to time. “I’m not a detective, but my guess is he was planning to eliminate Akechi as soon as he finished taking care of all of you. He could have said that Akechi’s death was in pursuit of the final surviving Phantom Thief and none would be the wiser. He could even use that excuse as justification to further whatever authoritarian agenda he had in mind. The Goro Akechi Act. Expanded surveillance and police-state measures for all.”

Makoto recalled that goatee’d, contemptuous face. She imagined the cartilage of his nose collapsing like Styrofoam beneath her knuckles. “I still have trouble believing someone so vile could even exist.”

“He’s an extreme case, but he’s not that unusual. If you decide to follow in Dad’s footsteps, you’ll probably encounter many more just like him.” She lowered her hand, regarded Makoto with something like pity. “Patterns of behavior reinforce themselves. If no one is around to interrupt them, then negative actions just keep spiraling further and further out of control, dragging people down. Distorting them, to use your words. In Shido’s case, it was pursuit of power. Who can say if he even knew why he wanted to control Japan so badly by the end. All of his rhetoric was just a mask for his own megalomania.”

“What do you think Akechi’s distortion might have been?” Sae seemed taken aback at the question. “I mean, the two of you knew each other much longer than I did. And we are going to be working together, in a sense. I still don’t understand him at all.”

“You shouldn’t even be making the effort,” she said severely. “He tried to assassinate all of you. There’s still no telling if he might—”

Makoto’s phone vibrated, loud as a truck engine in the solemn apartment. Both she and Sae nearly jumped out of their seats.

“Who’s calling at this godforsaken hour?” Makoto said. When she held up the phone and got her answer, her confusion just intensified:

HO: Hello Makoto.
**HO:** I’m downstairs. Could you buzz me up?

**HO:** I brought cake???

**HO:** ( -_-)

Several minutes later Haru was at their front door, bearing a small wrapped box and an apologetic expression. Rain droplets still clung to the fur ruff on her jacket.

“Good evening. Or morning, I’m not sure which is which right now. Um, can I come in…?”

“How’d you even get here, Haru?” Makoto asked. “The trains stopped over an hour ago.”

“I just took a cab, it wasn’t any trouble. I would have showed up a little sooner, but Ann told me about this all-night bakery a while ago, and I thought it would be rude to visit without bringing anything, and, er.” She held up the box like a warding against evil spirits. “It’s strawberry?”

Sae’s voice emerged from the kitchen. “Let her in, Makoto.”

“Thank you very much.”

Sae brewed another mug of cocoa and Haru divided up the little strawberry shortcake she’d brought. None of them had much appetite. Sitting around that table with their grave expressions, their tarry drinks and their uneaten cake, they looked like attendants at the world’s saddest tea party.

“I apologize for contacting you out of the blue like this,” Haru said quietly. “I knew right away that I wouldn’t sleep well tonight. I didn’t want to be on my own. And since the two of us are university students, I just thought our schedules would be-”

“You don’t have to make excuses, Haru,” Makoto said. “As you can probably see, insomnia’s been going around a lot right now.”

Sae nodded. “Makoto told me just about everything. We were in the middle of discussing Goro Akechi and his miraculous revival.”

“Oh. I see.” She sipped her drink.

Conversation withered and died. Makoto stared down into the congealed remnants of her cocoa. The mini-marshmallows were embedded in that slurry like flies in a trap. Like pinprick stars.

“Haru, can I ask you something? About Akechi?”

“By all means.”

“You have more cause to be angry at him than most of us, after what he did to your father. But you’ve been kinder to him than anyone, since we met again. Do you think that there’s…something we misunderstood about him? That he might be just another victim of Shido’s manipulation?”

“No,” she said. “He’s disgusting.”

The Niijima sisters’ eyes widened. Haru’s voice and choice of language were genteel as ever, but coming from her that word sounded obscene as a shouted curse during Sunday Mass.

“Disgusting,” she said again, as if sampling its flavor. “I still think about what he did, and the way he acted around us before his betrayal came to light, and I just…shudder. Like a slug crawled over my hand.” She tried to smile. “Which happens more often than I’d care to admit, what with my
gardening.”

“Then why-”

“Do you remember what I said, back in Shido’s Palace? It still holds true. I can’t forgive him. But I can understand him.” She set her mug down and pushed it away. “When we chose to steal my father’s heart, you all made the consequences clear to me. For a little while, I didn’t fully grasp the risks involved. Until we first encountered his Shadow, and that awful parody of the man he wanted me to marry. When the full depths of his callousness were revealed, I remember very clearly the thought that passed through my head: ‘Fine, then. Let them die.’” Her voice was low and firm.

“And at that moment, Milady came to me. So those words, that sentiment – that was the voice of my true self. Akechi is disgusting. But I still have no right to condemn him completely.”

The sisters exchanged an uneasy glance. They, too, sometimes wondered what had become of Sugimura.

“Nevertheless,” Sae said, “the circumstances are quite different, wouldn’t you say?”

“Maybe. But that’s not the only reason.” She started toying with her sweater again. “I’m not sure how to best explain it.”

“No. No, I think I’d like to get it off my chest.”

They stayed silence as Haru pieced her thoughts together. She pursed her lips. She ate a single forkful of cake. The sound of her chewing and swallowing was almost deafening. Then, she began.

“I’ve been gardening for quite a long time. I was always a bit sheltered, even before my father began to…go wrong, but that was one hobby he’d let me indulge since I was young. We had a little plot on our penthouse roof. Tomatoes and cucumbers, that sort of thing. All I really had to do was water them every so often and pluck the weeds. My father would handle the tiresome business of planting seeds and fertilizing and such. He’d let me watch.” She smiled at the memory. “It was surrounded by a little mesh cage. Like chicken wire. To keep away pests. Obviously we didn’t have to worry about raccoons and the like way up on the roof, but birds could still get in. They’re very resourceful, you know.

“One day, when I was just seven or eight, I went up to the garden on my own. It had been a while since I’d last given the plants any attention. My father was starting to become distant, even back then. So I went to the plot with my watering can, and saw that the mesh had become all tangled up. There was some kind of brownish clump stuck in the wire. I thought the wind had somehow blown leaves all the way up there. So I reached out my hand to pull them away, and my fingers…sank into it.” She shivered violently all over. “It turned out to be a dead bird. Still decomposing. It must have been hurt or sick and tried to get through the wire for some reason and couldn’t get back out. I still remember it so clearly. That warm and slippery feeling.”

Makoto reached out to comfort her. Sae discreetly pushed her slice of cake away.

“I’m fine, Makoto, thank you. Obviously I screamed blue murder. It was enough to summon my father from his office. He saw me in hysterics up on that rooftop and he was furious. Forbade me from going up there again without supervision. He said I’d have to show more backbone if I was ever going to inherit the Okumura estate.”

“That’s terrible,” Sae said. “To say that to a child, it’s-”
“Quite hurtful, yes,” Makoto said flatly, and Sae shut up. Several of her own comments made over this table were still a sore spot between the two of them.

“But he was wrong,” Haru said. “Finding that corpse up there was awful, yes, but it wasn’t why I was crying. It’s because I was late. Because I waited so long to go up there. I kept thinking of how it must have struggled to escape. I remember how bent and bloody one of its legs were. Like it had tried to chew itself to pieces to get free.” She shook her head and bent down low as if in confession. “Over and over, I kept thinking, ‘If only I had come sooner. If only I had reached my hand out sooner.’ Maybe it wasn’t my responsibility. But that bird had no one else. And neither does he.”

She sniffed and wiped her eyes. Makoto and Sae were at a loss for words. Eventually Haru straightened back up, a trace of deep steel in her tone.

“If Akechi wants to atone, then so be it. I’m not going to forgive him, and as far as I’m concerned, no one else should. But I do believe his desire to help us is sincere, despite his ill intentions when last we met.”

“It wouldn’t be out of character for him,” Sae said. “We never got along very well at the SIU. And yet, he always seemed reluctant to actually leave whenever we had to work together. Contrary, that’s what he was. And even if his accomplishments as a detective were fraudulent, he never came off as unintelligent. If he really is crucial to your success, then I’ll stay out of it.”

“Hopefully by the time we meet again Ryuji will have cooled down a little,” Makoto said.

“Pardon me for the morbid subject, but you may have another concern,” Sae said. “Given the state of mind he’s apparently in, as well as the consequences awaiting him even if he should succeed, there’s a chance he may do something…regrettable to himself.”

“I don’t believe so,” Haru told her. “Akechi had an entire year to die. Yet he clung on all that time, in that horrible place. I can’t guess at his reasons, but he seems determined to see this through.”

“Then that leads to my other concern.” She held up a finger. “Sojiro Sakura.”

They took a moment to process this.

“What about him?” Makoto asked. But she already had a feeling what Sae would say.

“He’s a remarkably even-tempered man. But his family is a weak point. I learned that the hard way when I was following up on Wakaba Isshiki’s research for the SIU. Right now he’s doubtless in a fragile state of mind, considering the trouble with Akira and Futaba. And the individual who murdered Futaba’s mother is defenseless on his property.” The other two girls’ expressions had become quite ferocious, but Sae continued anyway. “Sojiro is resourceful. If he wished, he could easily-”

“He wouldn’t,” Haru snapped. “Not ever.”

“If we lose faith in Boss of all people, we’re doomed before we begin,” Makoto agreed. “So let’s drop the subject, sis.”

“Very well. Subject dropped.”

The atmosphere around the table had turned frosty. But, a moment later, Haru dispelled it by yawnning. She sounded like a kitten.

“I’m sorry, everyone. I must have kept you up even longer.”
“It’s no problem, Haru. Sis, can she take the couch?”

“Certainly.”

“Oh, but what about the cake? We all hardly touched it.”

“I’ll wrap it up,” said Sae. “You can have it for breakfast, if you want. God knows this isn’t the time to worry about your diet.”

They said their goodnights and dispersed, but it still took a long time before any of them could fall asleep. They gathered their sheets around themselves and hoped that solutions would present themselves in the light of dawn, but in these dark hours, only one image came to them – a bird tangled in wire, shackled by it, until in its final extremity it twisted his beak down to its useless limbs and pecked and pecked and pecked.

*             *             *

He didn’t know when the hole had opened up inside him.

It hadn’t been when his mother died. She’d always been a frail woman, gaunt-faced with hair like his, her body always slightly bent as if weighed down by the judgements of the society that had left the two of them to face it alone. She’d worked constantly and slept when she could, so he’d done his best to stay out of her way. But one day her bedroom door had stayed shut several hours past lunchtime and when his stomach had started to growl he’d carefully opened the door and peeked in. There she’d been, hanging from the ceiling fan, her hair a funereal veil over her face, bare and varicosed feet dangling over the nicotine-stained carpet. He’d called the police because that was what she’d told him to do if anything ever happened to her. When the cops had arrived at their cramped and dingy apartment they’d found him kneeling on her bedroom floor, face solemn, eyes dry, looking up at her expectantly as if any moment now she would brush the hair away from her eyes and ask him what he wanted to eat.

It hadn’t been at the foster homes. Shuffled from one institution to the next, one sullen and anonymous face among dozens. Society’s leftovers, tedious distractions, raised out of obligation until they could be shoved on to the streets without complaint or controversy and die somewhere out of sight. He’d always been pragmatic; somewhere in his bones he knew from the start that no one would ever take him in. He’d silently begged for attention as he practiced the art of turning invisible. Slipping through the days with the other lost boys, making so little impression on the world that he could scarcely be said to exist at all. He’d taken his meals and cleaned his room and always stared unblinking at the caregivers’ faces, waiting for the times when, just for a moment, their eyes would meet his own.

It hadn’t been the murders. By the time he’d met those three strange figures in that dusty-smelling blue panopticon with its endless waterglass whine in the air – You are a slave. Want emancipation? he’d gained an inkling of what was wrong with him. Some crucial component omitted in his manufacture. He thirsted for any kind of recognition, for someone to settle their gaze on him or say his name, and yet it all passed through him without leaving any sort of mark; it all fell through the hole. His own emotions were like stage props, superficially appealing (whenever he’d been alone he’d practiced how to smile) but flat on close inspection, and apt to fall over at the least prodding. When those unearthly wardens had made their offer to him, he’d decided what role he should play. A single bullet fired into the heart of a villain named Masayoshi Shido. He would build that man up to be a lynchpin of this cruel society and then collapse it around his ears. He would bathe in admiration. He would quietly disappear into the night. He would be arrested by the police as he laughed wildly and bashed in that hairless head with a paperweight until it was nothing but bone jelly. He didn’t know what he wanted. He didn’t know.
One or the other. Savior or destroyer, hero or villain, heads or tails, black or white. He turned the coin of his life over and over in his fingers and saw no difference in the sides.

He’d wormed his way into Shido’s affections but still the hole was there. His falsified stardom, the great and fraudulent Charismatic Detective, earned him more adoration than he thought possible, but still none of it touched him. He laughed and sneered at the people he killed like some cheap stage villain, but his contempt still felt like roleplaying, one more thing that he did just because it was expected of him. He decided to be arrogant. He chose to believe he was better than human just because he was less. And all the while, the hole grew and grew. Until there seemed to be nothing left of him but the hole.

And at the most fatal moment, his judgement had failed him. When he’d met those assembled and ridiculous Phantom Thieves he’d falsified his emotions like always, fixated on his goal, waiting for the moment where he would unravel their pretensions of justice. He hadn’t realized until it was too late that those emotions had possessed a subtle curve to them. His laughter, his exasperation, his anger, his paranoia – all of it somehow more resonant, now that he was among people who, foolishly, believed themselves to be his equals. When he’d learned that they had slipped out of his grip, laughing all the while, he’d compared their resourcefulness to his own, the course their lives had taken compared to his own. And then, just for a moment, he’d at last seen it fully. That yawning emptiness inside him. That bottomless pit seething with poisonous contradictions. And still they had pitied him, still they wouldn’t hate him as they should have, so he’d called forth the madness-inducing monster within himself and used it to cut the cord of his own mind, just so he could blind himself to that void. But even then, as he’d faced down the Phantom Thieves shrieking and insane, the hollow echoes inside him had persisted. The thoughts he’d suffered all his life, no matter how he tried to deafen himself to them:

*Look at me but don’t come near me. Why won’t you reach out to me. I’m better than all of you. I’m the lowest of the low. There’s something wrong with me. It’s not me, it’s the world that’s wrong. The only thing that matters is myself. There’s no point to me or anything else. I’m strong enough to make it on my own. I don’t know how long I can go on. I’m the hero of this story. I’ll strike all you would-be heroes down. I’ll take my life into my own hands. Help me. I don’t need any of you people. Help me. I’ll kill you all as soon as I get the chance. Help me. Help me. Oh, God, please help me.*

* * *

He awoke.

Bright morning sunlight streamed in through the attic window; dust motes danced like fairies in that beam. He’d slept sitting up and for a moment it felt like someone had filled all the hollows of his bones with lead. It felt like far too much trouble to move. He just opened his eyes and blinked until his vision focused, ready to fall back asleep.

Then he saw that he wasn’t alone, and his breath froze in his throat.

Sojiro Sakura had taken Akira’s desk chair and dragged it over to the couch; he sat across from Akechi, close enough so that Akechi could reach over and lay his hand on Sojiro’s knee. His head was down, his expression inscrutable. He was wearing his apron and a pair of plain white cotton gloves, the kind he might use to clean the café. In those gloved hands he held Akechi’s pistol. He appeared fascinated by it. He turned it over and over like an archaeologist presented with an exotic bone.

Akechi glanced over to his briefcase. It was wide open, his jacket and tie neatly folded beside it.
With great care, Sojiro pulled back the pistol slide. The bullet nestled in the chamber winked in that dusty light. Of course – he’d loaded the gun just before he’d set off to kill Akira and the others.

Sojiro’s eyes met his.

The pistol slide snapped back in place.

“Good morning, Detective,” he said.
This frozen tableau – Akechi and Sojiro in the sunny attic, the latter stern-faced, the former somehow even paler than he’d been last evening. The café settled and creaked indifferently around them. Sojiro’s thumb rubbed at the pistol’s safety catch.

“Looks like a SIG Sauer P229,” he remarked, examining the gun again. “Not unheard of for law enforcement who like to carry concealed. But here, this threaded barrel…that’s not standard issue at all, is it? That’s for installing a suppressor. An assassin’s weapon.” He ran his palm against the barrel as if removing dirt. “Let me guess. Your father gave this to you? Some birthday present.”

“Why don’t we just drop the pretense,” Akechi said.

Sojiro peered at him from over the rim of his spectacles. A sunken little grin had crept over Akechi’s face; between his pallid complexion and his jutting cheekbones, it made him look like a horrorshow waxwork, a prop in the shape of a man.

“There’s little point in trying to hide our intentions now, don’t you think?” he asked. “Go on. Say something like, ‘Wakaba Isshiki was a good woman.’”

Sojiro said nothing.

“Can’t muster it up? I think I know why. Because you figured out a while ago that I couldn’t have killed her if she didn’t have a Palace. Some nasty little twist in the mind, eating her up inside. Who knows. She might not have been long for this world, anyway.” He chuckled as Sojiro’s eyes narrowed. “They always spilled their guts, you know. Right before I finished them off. Would you like to know what Wakaba Isshiki tried to confess? Would you like to know what she said about you?”

Behind his spectacles, Sojiro’s eyes were hard and flat as stones. He let out a heavy sigh. “Makoto Nijima tried to warn me about you last night. I told her not to bother. I already know exactly what you are.”

“Is that so?” His grin widened. “And what am I?”

“You’re a terrible actor.”

The grin disappeared.

Sojiro’s expression was now more bemused than anything; he tilted his head, the corner of his mouth tugging up like it was caught on a hook. For some reason, this made Akechi far more uncomfortable than that deathly glare he’d woken up to. His eyes darted around like he was plotting escape routes.

“I always thought there was something off about you,” Sojiro said. “Right when you started coming to the café. You were nice enough, but there was something a little too polished about it. I could’ve turned the TV onto one of your talk-show interviews and probably wouldn’t have seen a difference. Not to mention the way Akira behaved whenever you were here. When a kid like him doesn’t want to be around someone, I take notice. Like a big friendly dog that growls at a stranger.” He shrugged. “I thought, eh, that’s just your paranoid old-man instincts acting up. It wasn’t enough to really bother me. But this wannabe supervillain routine? Frankly, I’m embarrassed for both of us.”
“I’m not-”

“Enough. Start over. You got caught off-guard and tried to intimidate me so you could take control of the conversation. You screwed up. Cut your losses and change tactics.” He spoke patiently, like someone lecturing a bright but troubled student. “I had to suffer your father’s presence for years, kid. If you couldn’t bullshit Akira and his friends, then you don’t have a chance with me.”

He felt shame burning hot in his cheeks; the sensation was unfamiliar enough to nauseate him. “Why are you here, then? Come to check up on your newest tenant? I’m not going to do anything the others don’t want me to.”

“Oh? Taking your orders from them, now? I guess it makes sense, since your father is-”

“Stop it.” His fists clenched. “Please. Stop calling him that.”

Sojiro’s eyebrows went up. Akechi’s gaze had dropped to his feet; he trembled all over.

“All right, fine.” He leaned back in his chair, Akechi’s gun dangling from one hand. “And yes, I wanted to check up on you. Considering how you looked when you came in here, I’d half-expected you to have died in the night. One way or another.”

“Sorry to disappoint.”

“Not disappointed at all. Those kids were pretty insistent on keeping you around.”

“They haven’t reached much of a consensus on that. Sakamoto had the right idea. They’d all be considerably happier if I’d been lost instead of Kurusu. And that’s only fair.”

“Well, listen to you. Do you actually feel guilty for what you’ve done?” Akechi didn’t answer. “Maybe it’d be better if you didn’t. I doubt anyone could endure that kind of remorse.”

“It falls right through,” he murmured.

“Falls through what?”

“Forget it. I’m rambling.” His face turned sullen. “I’ve made my intentions clear. So I’m not certain what you mean to accomplish by playing these games with me.”

Sojiro said, “You killed Akira.”

His tone was casual, almost languid – he could have been telling Akechi the punchline of an unamusing joke. But the temperature in the attic perceptibly dropped. Akechi’s eyes were dragged back to that pistol at Sojiro’s side.

“I didn’t,” he said, voice shaking.

“Oh, yes you did. Almost a year ago to this day. Maybe he pulled a bait-and-switch at the last moment – I’m still not sure how, I’ll never wrap my head around that cognitive mumbo-jumbo – but as far as you were concerned, you shot him dead in some basement.” Sojiro’s own voice tightened like a turning screw. “He was defenseless and drugged and alone, and you killed him and walked away. And yet, here I am. Sheltering your felonious hide. Life is funny, don’t you think?”

Shido had been a master of contempt. Once he got away from the podium and the crowds, he looked at everyone and everything like something he’d just scraped off the sole of his shoe. People around him found themselves doing whatever they could just to get a moment’s relief from that
disdain. In comparison, Sojiro was more precise, practically surgical. Akechi felt that bespectacled
gaze dissecting him, diagramming him, making notes on all the parts of him it found wanting.

“Life is funny,” he said again. “I was supposed to spend my twilight years as some weird bachelor
playing shopkeeper. Instead it looks like I tripped and fell into becoming a family man. All thanks
to the damage you and Masayoshi Shido caused.” That fishhook tug of the mouth again. “Wakaba
is long passed. Maybe there are even some days, rare ones, when Futaba doesn’t grieve her
anymore. But Kurusu? God help me, I’ve got a soft spot for the kid. And now I’m expected to
believe that the little shit who pulled a trigger on him is going to help him out.”

“It’s been a long year.” His chest felt far too tight. “Things are different now.”

“What’s changed? Decided to try and make friends with everyone for real instead of just
pretending? Hate to break it to you, but that ship’s probably sailed.”

“I wasn’t pretending.”

The words left his mouth before he knew what he was saying and Sojiro’s incredulity was plain to
see. His hands flexed like someone struggling to grab a ledge. No taking it back; all he could do
now was plunge onward.

“I wasn’t,” he said. “When Kurusu and I first met, my interest in him was genuine. The way he
confronted me in front of all those people…”

“I saw it,” Sojiro remarked. “On a rerun, anyway. You looked like you’d been hit between the eyes
with a two-by-four.”

“He does have that effect on people, doesn’t he? I’d become used to either deference or contempt,
or being ignored completely. But he approached me like he would anyone else.”

“Yeah.” It was barely perceptible, but Sojiro had started to thaw. “It’s one of his few good points.”

“But the event that sparked our encounter had been his defense of the Phantom Thieves. So I
checked into his background.” He breathed deep. “I learned about his other identity fairly quickly.
Even his prior encounter with Shido, though I never told the man himself about the connection.
And the more I learned, the more fascinated I became. Shido took powerful people, important
people, and burned their lives down on a whim. A mere high school student with the gall to
actually lay hands on him? By all rights, Kurusu should have been swinging from a self-made
noose within a month. But instead, I saw his reversal of fortune. His classmates warmed up to him,
he made a place for himself in Tokyo. And, of course, he’d become one of the Phantom Thieves. A
faceless legend. I admired him for that.”

Sojiro smiled. “It’s a hell of a success story, you’ve got to-”

“And I hated him.”

The smile fled. Akechi’s face had twisted into something ugly, feral. His stared down at his
shaking fists, lips peeled back, teeth bared.

“He didn’t have any right to it. Someone who sank as low as him should have stayed down there.
After all of the filth I had to wade through just so someone, anyone, would even deign to look my
way, how could he just pick himself up back again with that insufferable smirk, touting his childish
justice around? I had to make him suffer for it. Bring him down to where he belonged. That’s what
I thought. I waited in this café for him, and I planned my commute around his, and I blackmailed
my way into his circle of friends and laughed and joked with them and all the time I just kept
thinking about the look that’d be on his face when I finally got to,” he pressed his fists against his forehead, grinding his knuckles into the bone, “when I finally got to…”

He couldn’t finish. His breath had turned fragmented. He had a persistent, irritating hiccup. Akechi lowered his hands and pressed them against his stomach, his unkempt hair hanging over his eyes; tears ran free from behind that veil. He refused to look up. He didn’t want to see Sojiro’s face.

“I apologize,” he managed to say. “I don’t know why I’m behaving this way. Something about saying it aloud… it sounds so…”

“People speak a different language inside.” Against all reason, Sojiro’s voice had softened. “I haven’t known many who could look their own ugliness square in the face without flinching away from it. For a while I thought Shido could, but after his heart got stolen he fell to pieces just like everyone else. And it’s even rarer to find someone willing to try and fix themselves. Futaba was one of them. After Wakaba died something broke in her. It took her a long time to gather up the nerve to confront all that damage. Not that I was any help. All those books and things I bought her didn’t do shit in the end. Only she could figure out what she needed to escape from her own head. How about you, hm? Are you just tagging along with these kids out of some sense of atonement? Or is there something else you want?”

He was crying but he couldn’t understand it; the action and the knowledge were there but without the emotion, it was just a troublesome distraction, like a bad itch. But he remembered crying like this recently. When Akira had rebuked him in the Dead Sea and dispelled his last lingering delusions about their bonds with each other, he’d tried to play it off, only to break down in tears and still without comprehending why. But it had been different then. It was-

“It was real,” Akechi said.

Sojiro remained silent as he sniffled and wiped his eyes.

“There’s something wrong with me,” he said. “I can’t tell when I’m acting and when I’m not. I don’t know when there’s a difference. But the time I spent with them, invading Nijima’s heart – the danger, those idiotic codenames – everything was… brighter. I thought I was pretending to enjoy it. I was too busy focusing on my goal to pay attention. But I wasn’t pretending. It was real.”

He let out a small, strangled laugh. “I know it’s pathetic. But that month I spent with them was the best time I knew. I just want to feel like that again. Just once. And the worst thing is, I could have. Every day I knew them I could have made my choice. But I didn’t. Instead I threw my lot in with Shido of all people. And it didn’t even make a difference. In the end it was all for nothing.” He covered his face with his hands. “What a waste.”

In the time since he’d woken up, the sun had risen fully. Its light streamed through the window and struck the far wall. Sojiro’s silhouette was printed there, unmoving.

“You’re right,” Sojiro said at last. “It’s a goddamn waste.”

He rose, grimacing as his stiff knees popped. He held Akechi’s gun between the tips of his fingers, daintily, like a society lady forced to pick up something dead. “I’ll keep this, if you don’t mind. You can have it back when you turn yourself in. Should definitely get the police’s interest.”

“All right.” He spoke in a frail whisper. All the fight had left him. Sojiro gathered up the suppressor and the extra magazine, started to leave, and then paused at the top of the stairs.

“You know the saddest thing of all?” he said, without looking ‘round. “I’m pretty sure those kids still think of you as one of them, despite everything. Maybe you ought to do something to deserve
that trust.” Akechi stared. “…I’ll bring up something to eat.”

The stairs creaked and groaned as he descended. Akechi was left alone in the sunny attic, looking like he’d just been slapped.

“Thank you,” he said, but Sojiro was well out of earshot. He spoke to the empty air.

* * *

The sign on the café entrance said “Closed” but Ryuji saw Sojiro beckoning him in through the window. The bell jingled as he sidled in, hands in pockets. His nostrils flared as the coffee’s familiar aroma hit him.

“Mornin’, Boss. Damn, I wish that stuff tasted as good as it smelled.”

“More’s the pity,” he deadpanned. He was nursing his latest cup, staring at the wall; for once, the TV was off, but this was far from a positive sign. The news had gone from gloom and doom to just doom, the anchors only putting words to the apocalyptic vibe in the air.

Morgana’s head popped up from one of the booths. “You look like crap, Ryuji.”

“What can I say? Didn’t sleep well.” He yawned, stretched. “Are we the only ones here? Ann wanted to swing back home to get cleaned up first. She stayed at my place, long story.”

“Futaba’s still out cold but she’s just a block away, so I figured I’d let her rest. Hopefully the others will get here soon.”

“Yep, still not used to the talking cat thing,” Sojiro remarked.

“So, uh.” Ryuji pointed a finger upwards. “Is he still, like…”

“He’s around,” said Morgana. “He hasn’t even moved from where he was sitting last night. I snuck upstairs to get a peek and even though I kept quiet he was already looking right at me. Guy’s seriously creepy.”

“All right,” Sojiro said, and set down his cup. “I won’t intrude on your conversation any longer. Got some errands to run.” He hung up his apron and put on his hat. “Just let the others in if they show up before I do.”

Ryuji watched as he left, stoop-shouldered, huddled a little against the cold. When the door swung shut he slid into the booth Morgana had parked himself in; Morgana hopped up on the table, his tail lashing back and forth across the laminate.

“He looks older,” Ryuji said.

“Yeah.”

“Probably a good thing I came alone. I’d just wind up catchin’ more shit from them.”

“About what happened last night. For today at least, I’d appreciate if you could-”

“It’s outta my system, don’t worry.”

“All right.”

Time passed. They awkwardly avoided one another’s eyes.
Ryuji cleared his throat. “Ain’t too often it’s just you and me, huh.”

“I guess?”

“It’s just that, I’ve kinda been gettin’ stuff off my chest lately, so, y’know, while we’ve got the opportunity and all, just wanted to ask…we’re cool, right?”

Morgana strived to look as condescending as possible. “I certainly am. Not so sure about you.”

“Not like that. I mean, we shit-talk each other pretty good but I just wanted to make sure we didn’t, like, mean anything by it.” He fidgeted in his seat, nervously scratched his neck; Morgana was staring at him as only cats could. “Like that time last year, when you ran off and found Haru, I kinda thought afterwards that I might’ve crossed a line there, but never really got a chance to-”

“Ryuji. It was a year ago. I’m over it.”

“Okay. Okay, cool. So we’re cool?”

“We’re cool.”

“Cool.”

A slow smile spread across Morgana’s chops. “If you’re really feeling so penitent, I’ll think up a list of ways you can make it up to me when I become human.” The smile faltered. “Assuming that’s even possible.”

“Yeah, should be.”

His ears perked up. “You really think so?”

“Dude, a cat turning into a human wouldn’t even rank on the top ten list of weird shit I’ve seen this week. Besides, ain’t you literally made of hope or something? It’s not a good look for you to get down over stuff.”

“That’s not really how it works, but thanks. Something to prioritize once this Paranoia Syndrome business is concluded.” He flexed his paws, claws popping in and out. “I’ll have to get on Kurusu’s case about it. Can’t dawdle. Especially if I want to get my chance with Lady Ann.”

Ryuji shook his head. “Alright. Morgana. Seriously, man to cat. You’ve gotta cut out the Lady Ann shit. Humans don’t talk like that. Only giant creeps talk like that. I dunno why no one broke it to you sooner.”

“Huh? But I’m just trying to be chivalrous!”

“Chival-wha?”

“Oh, for God’s sake,” he said under his breath. Then, louder: “Respectful. Courteous.”

“This is Takamaki we’re talkin’ about, right? The same one who forced herself into the Metaverse and two hours later started choppin’ dudes in half with a bigass sword? I don’t think she really cares about that sorta thing.” He shrugged. “Hell, she puts up with half of my crap without any problem. I don’t think she’s gonna give a damn about your attitude unless it’s fulla strawberries with whipped cream on top.”

“You know I’ve actually wondered the same thing?” Morgana’s voice turned strident. “Sometimes I think that maybe she’ll look my way if I shove myself in a birthday cake or something.”
“Haha, yeah. You remember how she was at the buffet after Kamoshida?”

“I didn’t know that much dessert could even exist.”

“Every baker in the city’s probably got her picture behind the counter at this point. I dunno where the hell she puts it, I never see her at the gym. Wouldn’t be surprised if all that cake goes right to her…whoa, dude, what’s wrong?”

Morgana had suddenly straightened ramrod-stiff; his pupils dilated until that unnatural blue was swallowed up by a sea of black. With liquid grace, he jumped onto the top of Ryuji’s seat, leaned down to his ear, and whispered, “I just realized Akechi can hear everything we say.”

The moment that followed was one filled with contemplation.

“I think we maybe oughta just shut up ‘til the others get here,” Ryuji said.

“Good call.”

It wasn’t long before they did. The rest of the group shuffled in all at once, yawning and rubbing their eyes. The night hadn’t been kind to any of them. Even Yusuke looked a little peaky.

“Morning, you two,” Ann said. “Anything interesting happen before we got here?”

“Nope! Nothing!” Morgana said. Much too loud, much too fast. Makoto’s eyebrow rose, but Ryuji came to his aid.

“Boss went out but he’ll be back. Meanwhile we got the great detective coolin’ his heels upstairs. We got any idea what we’re gonna do with him?”

“He’s going to assist us in figuring out a course of action,” Makoto said. “But first, I think he needs to satisfy all our curiosity about something.”

“What’s that?”

She went to the foot of the stairs and looked up. Not a sound could be heard from the attic.

“I want to know how he survived.”

* * *

To be born again, first you have to die.

He was ready to die; in the gray days that followed he would think that this, ironically, had been what saved him. Exhausted, beaten, and faced with the utter ruination of all his plans, he sealed the bulkhead door without hesitation and then trained his gun on that slit-eyed doppelganger Shido’s cognition had conjured up. That simulacrum looked triumphant. But then his twisted smile faltered, because Akechi could feel his own face warp into a grin far more deranged. Here, mired in the very bottom of his self-loathing, with all his faults made obvious and the hollowness inside him laid bare, was the chance to kill himself twice over. He almost wanted to laugh at the perfection of it.

His cognitive self meant to shoot him center-mass; the gun was leveled at his heart. But in that fatal moment of hesitation Akechi fired first. He never even heard the second gunshot. He only felt a great blooming warmth in his head, and then everything went dark.

He didn’t know how long it was before he woke up again.
He was sprawled out on the engine room floor, his cheek lying in shallow water. The pain was like acid laced into his skull and made worse by the klaxon’s ceaseless blare. With shaking fingers he reached up to his head and felt the long crack in his helmet that the bullet had made; his cognitive self’s aim had gone wild after Akechi had shot him, the gun pulling up just before its wielder dissolved into screaming smoke. His claws came away dripping blood. But not enough of it. Something was wrong.

His eyes were full of haze but as he propped himself up on one shoulder the culprit was plain to see. Beak-masked, barrel-chested, red and white and blue. His cape billowed in a breeze unfelt. In one hand he held his bow, planted on the wet ground like a shepherd’s staff. The other was extended to him, and there, held delicately between thumb and forefinger, was something small and bent and blood-slicked.

“…Robin…?”

As he watched, Robin Hood squeezed and crushed the bullet flat, and then vanished in a cloud of embers. Akechi heard it plink into the water like a dropped coin, and then consciousness left him once more.

His next awakening was a rude one. Freezing saltwater rushing into his nose and open mouth, causing him to jump up like something spring-loaded, hacking out the spume even as his vision doubled and darkened from the stabbing pain in his injured head. The engine room had gone mad. Water rushed in from innumerable ruptures in the hull and the great groaning hulk of the engine itself was spitting steam like a roused dragon, its metal rashed with patches of cherry-red; one of the screws came undone with a sprightly ‘ping!’ and shot across the room hard enough to punch another hole in the hull, missing Akechi himself by inches. His feet scrabbled across the soaking ground as the whole ship listed to the side. He knew what all this meant – Akira and his friends had succeeded. The Treasure was taken. The Palace was coming undone.

He’d privately scouted this place a number of times before invading it to kill the Thieves, a bit of insurance that had turned out to be grossly insufficient. He knew there was no way out of here except through the bulkhead he had already sealed, and his gunshot had rendered the panel inoperable. Every sounding of the klaxon was a drill bit boring through his skull. The air was caustic with steam and gasoline fumes. The engine glowed like the open mouth of Hell. There was nothing to do except drown or burn.

Then, a rough purr from somewhere below, like a length of fabric caught on a nail. The water surged and nearly knocked him off balance; as he regained his footing he saw it, in the center of the collapsing chamber. A rough hole in the solid metal flooring. There was no evidence of its making. The floor was there and then it stopped, and all that was left was blackness so solid it would have scarcely resembled a hole at all if not for the water sleeting into it and disappearing into that unfathomable dark. As something ruptured deep within the engine and its valves burst off and all its pipes chattered like the instruments of some demented musical band, Akechi carefully made his way over to the hole and looked down. No telling where it led, if it led anywhere at all. Uncertain death versus certain death.

He had minutes, maybe seconds. And yet he hesitated.

None of that, now.

He cried out and recoiled, palms splayed around his head. The voice was quiet, faintly bemused, but when it spoke he felt like his skull would burst like old fruit. The pain knocked his vision back into fuzz and there was only the klaxon, drowned into meaninglessness by that voice.
The choice before you is the only choice there has ever been. Heads or tails. Black or white. Die and find peace, or live, and continue to suffer.

He tried to scream for it to stop but the words fell over and died before they could leave his mouth; all that came out was a series of wet gasps as he struggled not to fall to his knees. His head was on fire inside. The world blurred and swam around him but in that chaotic fog something stood out like a guiding star. A distant spark, bobbing up and down like fairy-light.

Vacant one. You are alone. Every delusion has been purged. Here remains the truth. You have nothing left to do but fall. The final question is how.

Flames licked from within the belly of the engine. The hull bulged inward as if plagued with boils. He walked toward that light until the toes of his boots hung over the lip of that hole.

How will you fall, vacant one?

Akechi fell.

* * *

The Phantom Thieves gathered around him in their private orbits. Haru, Makoto, and Yusuke made up the inner ring, standing in a rough semicircle around the sofa like a trifecta of judges; Ryuji, Futaba, and Ann had taken their places on the chair or the bed, with Morgana hanging back on the table by the stairs. Akechi bent over in his seat like a penitent, laced fingers hanging between his knees. The act of speaking seemed to have exhausted him.

“That’s all,” he finished. “When I came to, I was in the Dead Sea. The remains of Shido’s Palace were in the distance. I suppose I’d been washed away by all that water.” He raised his head. “You all know the rest.”

“I’ve never heard of a Persona acting on its own like that before,” Morgana said.

“Robin Hood OP. Nerf please.” Futaba didn’t sound particularly invested in the conversation; she’d hunched over her laptop before Akechi had even begun his story and hadn’t looked up since.

“I first gained that power when I met Akira. It’s probable that Robin Hood was born from my bond with him, as questionable as it might have been.” Akechi shrugged. “We all know firsthand how powerful Akira is. Maybe that goes for Personas forged from his connections as well. In any case, I often believed he’d been the one who’d saved me, in a way. Though after a while down there, those feelings…darkened somewhat. Turned resentful. It’s why I reacted so shamefully when we reunited.”

“And then he whooped your butt,” Futaba added. “Again. As for that hole popping up, I can buy it. My mother’s notes never mentioned what happened when a Palace collapses, probably ’cause no one’s supposed to survive it. Akechi was at the very lowest point of that Palace. If some kind of connecting point was going to open between it and the sea of the unconscious, it'd logically happen there.” Her mouth twitched like she'd remembered something amusing. “You can always fall a little further.”

“What about that voice?” Ann asked.

“Sounded like it had a real stick up its ass,” Ryuji grumbled. “Kinda reminds me of Captain Kidd back when he woke up in my head, ‘cept he wasn’t such a dick about it. You sure Loki wasn’t givin’ you a little pep talk?”
“I don’t know. I never heard it again. I experienced the headaches from time to time, but I thought they were just from my prolonged stay in the Dead Sea. They were never as intense as that first one.” He gingerly touched his temple, as if pained just by the memory of it. “My head burned.”

“You look much better now, at least,” Haru told him.

He attempted to smile at that. “Mr. Sakura’s coffee. Strong enough to wake the dead.”

“Either way, you’re here now,” Makoto said, crossing her arms. “You fell, but you came back. Now the question is what you can do for us. Because I’ll be honest, I’m at a loss as to our next move. We were outmatched by this enemy of ours even with Akira on our side.”

“Correct,” said Akechi. “So our next logical step is to recover Akira.”

He straightened up and regarded them all. Haru was right— he did look better. He was still horribly pallid and gaunt, but that lifeless glaze had fled from his eyes.

“Allow me to make one thing clear. My credentials as a detective may have been false, but my knowledge of the cognitive world is not. Between my… unsavory work for Shido and my extended period in the Dead Sea, I may very well know more about the Metaverse than anyone in this room, save for Morgana. Therefore, I ask that you lend the appropriate weight to what I am about to say.”

“We wouldn’t have kept you around if we didn’t think you had something useful to offer,” Morgana said—he’d visibly struggled not to be flattered by Akechi’s compliment. “So spit it out already.”

“Very well. Here are several observations regarding the adversary we have encountered in the Dead Sea. He remained undetectable by Futaba’s scans until he wished to make his presence known to us. He ‘dives’ into the Sea of Souls, often dragging Shadows with him, and emerges the same way. Moreover, he does not kill the Shadows that he captures—their owners would become braindead if that were the case, whereas the victims of Paranoia Syndrome experience a high degree of mental activity. From this we can deduce that he travels between the Dead Sea and somewhere else in the larger Sea of Souls, and keeps the Shadows within the same location to which he travels.”

“The Sea is just a big mashup of everyone’s thoughts,” Morgana said. “It shouldn’t have a defined place to keep anything. Where could they all be?”

“In the most obvious place you can think of.”

Who knows what can be hidden within the fortress of the heart?

“All of the captured Shadows, and Akira, are most likely detained within the fortress of our enemy’s heart,” said Akechi. “They are trapped inside his Palace.”

A long, heavy silence rolled out. Akechi sighed and shut his eyes.

“Very well. Who’d like to be the first to tell me that’s impossible?”

“It is impossible!” Morgana shouted, hackles rising. “We’ve all seen the Persona that guy totes around. A Persona is born when someone accepts their innermost self, which means no Shadow. No Shadow means no Palace ruler, and no ruler means no Palace!”

“Exactly,” he said. Morgana blinked, taken aback. “So, let us examine that Persona. Don’t you all think it’s a little unusual?”
“It’s extraordinarily powerful, that much is certain,” said Yusuke.

“He didn’t really use it the way we use ours, either,” Ann said. “We pretty much just summon ours whenever we need them, but he never put his Persona away until Makoto knocked his lights out. I mean, could he have even fought us himself if he wanted to? His hands were literally tied!”

“There’s more,” Akechi said. “Our Personas are the incarnate form of the masks we wear. When we summon them, the mask of our Thief garb disappears, and that mask is often reflected on the Persona itself. But Iago’s mask bears no resemblance at all to that of his owner. What’s more, that crude mask he wore didn’t burn away at all.”

“So, what?” Ryuji asked. “You think the dude’s wearing another mask underneath? We got a Scooby situation goin’ on here?”

“That is a possibility,” he dryly replied. “There’s also no evidence that his clothing follows the same ‘rules’ that ours does. After all, I myself have bent those rules somewhat with my alternate garb for Robin Hood. Still, that Persona is remarkable enough so that I don’t believe we can rule out the existence of a Palace by its presence alone. It doesn’t appear to bear the same connection to the heart of its owner. And,” he added, “there’s another reason. If my hypothesis is correct, it means that Akira will have been imprisoned in a place that our enemy controls absolutely. Where he holds every advantage. And that is a very good thing.”

“How the hell is that–” Ryuji began, and then he stopped. Akechi was smiling, thin and unpleasant – it was an uncomfortable echo of the smug villain he’d acted when they’d all fought against him.

“During my ‘career’ under Shido, I became quite good as discerning people’s weaknesses,” he said. “And this individual’s weakness is easy to see. Consider his tactics. He initially tried to capture us all, in a show of overwhelming force. But even then, he always maintained his distance, leaving all offense to Iago. When we finally took the offensive ourselves, he was felled with just a single blow, at which point he resorted to a hit-and-run strategy. As Sakamoto pointed out last night, he feinted capturing me to strike directly at Akira. Somehow, he had discerned that Akira was the leader and mastermind of the Phantom Thieves, and made sure we all knew that he had been captured. In short, after he actually took a hit, he chose to instead disable and demoralize us, and ensure that he had every advantage should we ever encounter him again. These are not the actions of someone undefeatable.” He leaned forward. “Understand? Our enemy is not invincible. He’s frail. He’s vulnerable. And he’s afraid of us.”

“That may be so,” Makoto said uncertainly, “but it still doesn’t guarantee that he has a Palace.”

“Well, it should be easy enough to check. All we need to do is find an appropriate name for the Meta-Nav.” He stopped and looked around. The others’ faces had become concerned, almost pitying. “…is something wrong?”

“The Meta-Nav’s gone,” Futaba said.

“Yeah, dude, it vanished along with Mementos after we capped Yaldabaoth. Where the hell were you when…oh. Ooh, right. My bad.”

“A moment,” Yusuke said. “Akechi’s body was effectively kept in stasis during his time in the Dead Sea. Perhaps that applies to his phone, as well. It may have been spared from the purge.”

“Let’s find out,” Akechi said. He pulled out his cell phone and pressed the Power button. There was an expectant silence.
The silence continued.

Akechi cleared his throat awkwardly. “Um…could someone lend me a charge cable?”

They regarded one another; the dramatic atmosphere in the room had been punctured somewhat. That was when Futaba stood up, producing a fistful of cables from one of her coat pockets. They dangled between her fingers like party streamers.

“Gotcha covered,” she said. “Always be prepared.”

She walked over to the couch and sat down beside Akechi. Everyone stared at her like she’d just leapt into a snake pit.

“Here, charge off my laptop. This is the one for your phone, I think…yeah, it’ll fit. There you go. …turn it around. Turn- you’ve gotta turn it…here, let me- okay, no, you got it. Finally.”

Akechi slotted the USB port home; a fire-engine red flush had started to creep up from his collar. “It’s been a while,” he explained, lamely.

“Glad to see you’re taking charge, Futaba,” said Makoto. She then stiffened and slapped a hand over her face. “Oh, God. Pun not intended.”

“It’s okay,” said Futaba. “I got bored of being sad. Decided to get angry instead.” She looked over at Akechi and the flat sheen of her glasses transfixed him. “You. Find me an enemy, so that I may destroy them.”

“Er, yes. First we have to see if…aha.” He held up the phone to the rest of them; that familiar red-and-black eye was emblazoned on its screen. “Success.”

Haru clapped her hands together. “Wonderful! Now we just need a name.”

“Which is easier said than done,” Ryuji said. “We don’t know shit about this guy.”

Akechi said, “Japanese, likely male, between the ages of fifteen and twenty, Tokyo resident, will have been comatose or otherwise incapacitated since late summer.”

“You, what!?”

“I’ve heard him speak. He’s not talkative, but what he did say was fluent Japanese, and I have little reason to believe he’d use anything other than his native tongue. Gender is a little ambiguous due to his clothing, but age and build are easy enough to guess by the look of him. The Tokyo part is a hopeful shot in the dark – Akira said that this problem emerged as a result of Yaldabaoth’s demise, so it’s reasonable to assume that, even if our enemy’s influence is global, he himself would be based in ‘ground zero,’ as it were. The most important part is the coma.” He clapsed his phone to his heart, as if swearing upon it. “We only know of two ways to enter the Dead Sea – physically, as you did, or mentally, as Akira did. Akira came there by projecting his cognition directly into the region, which also left his body comatose. Without the Meta-Nav or Morgana at his disposal, our enemy most likely arrived via a similar method. If we can find someone with these criteria, in this region, who fell comatose just prior to the earliest reported Paranoia Syndrome cases, it’s likely we’ll have our culprit.”

Haru nodded. “Mr. Iwai said that some of the first victims were Yakuza who fell ill in September. Understandable that criminals would already have manifested Shadows, I suppose.”

“So what now?” Makoto asked. Behind her, Ann’s eyes widened; she turned away from the group,
Futaba groaned, long and loud. “Hospitals are such a pain. Their records are always an unholy mess. Some of them still have analog components, for crying out loud.”

“That mean you can’t do it?” Ryuji said, and immediately withered under the look in Futaba’s eye.

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that. If everything Akechi said is right, it shouldn’t take more than a few hours. But if I have to expand our search criteria – God, if I have to search the whole of Japan – we’ll lose a lot of time. Especially since Paranoia Syndrome’s thrown medical record-keeping out of whack to begin with. I’ll start by-”

“Hi, Dr. Takemi!”

Ann’s cheery greeting knifed through the room. All heads turned to her, but she didn’t seem to notice any of them, including Futaba’s molten glare. She was leaned up against the wall, her phone to her ear.

“This is Ann Takamaki, from- okay, yes, I know that you’re- I wouldn’t call unless it was important.” Her voice flattened out. “Yes. Yes, there is. I know you’re busy so I’ll make it short. That patient you talked about, the one who didn’t have the pain response. What was their name?”

This got everyone’s attention; even Akechi moved to the edge of his seat. “Yes, I know it’s a violation of…oh, well, that’s good to know. Spell that for me? Okay. Yes, this should be helpful. I’ll keep in touch. You too. Goodbye.”

She hung up and stepped forward, a determined set to her jaw. “Akechi. Bring up the Meta-Nav, please.”

He did so. Ann took a deep breath, and said:

“Target: Seki Shimizu.”

“Candidate found,” chirped the Meta-Nav.

Ann was not graceful in victory. She whooped. She hollered. She fist-pumped with hazardous enthusiasm. She gathered hi-fives from several of her less reserved fellows, including a double palm-slap from Ryuji that left him shaking the numbness out of his hands afterward. She flopped down next to him on Akira’s bed, legs primly crossed, grinning ear to ear.

“Back when we were gathering intel, Takemi said she’d checked up on a patient who’d ended up like Akira,” she explained. “Just had to get the name. Nice one, Goro! Your theory was right on the money!”

“Er, yes.” He hastily rubbed at his mouth to hide the smile. “Not to ruin the mood, but the name is often the easiest part of the investigation. What of the Palace location? Unfortunately, I can’t guess at anything else about this individual…”

“Seki Shimizu. Age fifteen. Resides in the Bunkyo district. Entering second year of Kosei Academy, was found unresponsive in his room on August 29th, admitted to St. Luke’s on the same evening.”

Futaba’s face was bathed in the light from her laptop screen; she pecked relentlessly at the keys. “Blood type Rh+, no prior medical history. Parents Yuichi Shimizu and Azusa Shimizu, employed as logistics manager and freelance web designer respectively. Family credit history doesn’t show anything remarkable. Pulling up the GPS tracking movement from his phone…ugh, boring. Home to school and back again. Even over the summer he didn’t go anywhere that
interesting.” She gripped the laptop screen. “That’s all for now.”

They all shuffled uneasily in place. The Phantom Thieves’ investigations were always a little invasive, but this was on a whole other scale. Futaba had just plunged her hand into their target’s personal life and ripped out its beating heart.

Ryuji spoke first. “You tellin’ me that the guy wreckin’ shit all over the world is a damn fifteen-year old?”

“I was fifteen when we boom-headshotted a god,” Futaba said. “Food for thought.”

“And I’m proof enough that age is no prerequisite for committing atrocities,” said Akechi. “His character aside, we should focus on the next keyword. For now, let’s try to brute-force it.” He held up his phone. “Any suggestions?”

“Let’s try the obvious ones first.” Makoto leaned in. “School. Kosei Academy.”

“Conditions have not been met.”

“In times like these I wish I were not so oblivious to my fellow students,” Yusuke said. “I do not recall anyone by that name.”


“Conditions have not been met.”

“I forgot how much I hated that freakin’ voice,” Ryuji growled.

“Let’s try places that someone his age would like to go,” Haru said. “Arcade. Café. Um…karaoke bar? I’m sorry, I’m still a little out of touch on these things…”

“Conditions have not been met,” the Meta-Nav droned.

“Maybe we should think bigger,” Morgana said. “Tokyo? Japan, even?”

“Conditions have not been met.”

Ryuji let out a series of frustrated noises that the Meta-Nav didn’t even consider a response. “This sucks! Sure, we pegged the guy’s name, but he’s still practically a nobody. It could just be somewhere he read about online, or something. Without more info we’re practically gonna have to guess everywhere in the world!”

“Candidate found.”

Akechi nearly dropped the phone. Ryuji gaped, the color draining from his face.

“No effin’ way,” he breathed.


“Candidate found.”

“That’s insane,” Morgana said. “Shido had the most advanced distortion I thought possible, and it barely encompassed Japan. How can a sick high-schooler have the entire world for a Palace?”

“More importantly, what sort of distortion could affect such a large area?” Akechi looked up at
them. “I’m…afraid I have nothing to contribute, this time.”


“Conditions have not been met.”

“The youth of today often labor under harsh judgement,” Yusuke said. “Perhaps a courthouse?”

“Conditions have not been met.”

Makoto rubbed her chin. “You might be on to something, Yusuke. Maybe we should try to think of distortions that would affect most people his age. The future doesn’t exactly look bright for many of them.”

“It’s a little morbid, but you have a point,” Ann said. “A wasteland? A desert?”

“Conditions have not been met.”

“I don’t believe distortions necessarily have to be negative,” said Haru. “So long as they’re something that’s warped the target’s perspective. Maybe an amusement park? Destinyland comes to mind.”

“Conditions have not been met.”

Haru sighed. “Worth a try.”

“A stage, why not,” said Futaba. She shrugged at their puzzled faces. “Ms. Kawakami’s been teaching Shakespeare.”

“C-c-conditions haaaave n-n-n-n NOT been m-met.”

They all stared.

“…dude, I think we made it mad,” Ryuji said. The Meta-Nav’s latest rejection had almost blown out the phone speakers.

“We should stop,” Akechi said. “I just realized, we’re playing with fire already. If Shimizu’s Palace takes up the whole world, then even if we did guess his last keyword, we’d instantly be transported there. And that would turn out very badly.”

“Not to mention that the Meta-Nav isn’t even supposed to exist,” Makoto said. “If we overtax it then it might disappear completely. That would certainly explain…whatever happened just now. The only thing to do is investigate further.”

Morgana tried to squirm away from Futaba’s fingers scratching under his chin. “This target’s unlike any we’ve encountered before. All of them had at least some degree of public image. Shimizu is just an ordinary civilian. Investigating him further won’t be easy. Maybe we should visit him in the hospital?”

Makoto shook her head. “Unlikely. Hospitals have cracked down hard on visiting hours. Probably because they’re terrified of anyone leaking Paranoia Syndrome’s more alarming symptoms.”

“I could ask around Kosei, but I doubt I would find much success,” Yusuke said apologetically.
“Shimizu would have just finished his first year of schooling, whereas I am a third year. His peers may be reluctant to speak with me, assuming they remember him at all.”

“That leaves his home.” Haru tugged worriedly at her collar. “Futaba said his mother works freelance, so she’d probably be around…but how on earth could we ask her something like that? We’d need an alibi. Makoto, could your sister help?”

“Sae’s no longer affiliated with the SIU. Even if she were, she’d be pushing her luck, just like she did with Boss last year. And if we just claimed to be his friends or classmates or something, I feel like we’d quickly find ourselves faced with questions we wouldn’t know how to answer. We would need someone who could pose as one of the authorities, acting like it’s…part of a formal…investigation…”

Slowly, all heads swiveled to Akechi. What little remained of his composure crumbled like a cookie under the weight of those stares.

“You cannot be serious,” he croaked.

“He’s perfect,” was Futaba’s verdict.

“I’m a wanted fugitive, for God’s sake!”

“Your crimes aren’t known to the majority of the populace,” said Makoto. “You might have dropped off the face of the earth, but the police stayed quiet about your disappearance. They didn’t want to humiliate themselves. After all, they’d lent all that power and publicity to a high-school student who’d never solved an actual crime in his life. They didn’t need that sort of embarrassment on top of the fallout from the Shido conspiracy. That should give you more than enough leeway to tell a convincing lie.” Her eyebrow arched. “You’re good at those, I believe.”

“Can he at least get some time in the bathhouse first?” Haru suggested. “Let him get clean.”

“I still have not consented to-”

“Whoa, there, Detective.” Ryuji’s grin could have been immortalized in song and story. “You can’t puss out on us now. Remember? You wanna hang with the Phantom Thieves, you better pull your weight.”

At that, Akechi’s panic seemed to subside. He stared thoughtfully at Ryuji, whose grin wilted a bit around the edges.

“Very well,” he said. “But I think I will require a disguise for the trip. Something to conceal my jacket and tie, as before. I can hardly ask you all to escort me everywhere.”

“Good point,” said Morgana. “It’d look even more suspicious if you went all the way to Bunkyō with all of us.”

“Exactly. So I just have to cover up.” He pointed at Ryuji. “That sweatshirt would do.”

“The hell!” Ryuji clutched at his violently violet hoodie. “Not a chance! I love this thing!”

“We’re about the same size. And the colors are so garish that onlookers are more likely to pay attention to the garment than to the person wearing it.” Akechi’s voice was innocuous. “I believe, Sakamoto, that with your assistance this investigation should be simple. A piece of cake.”

“Whoa.” Futaba held up her hands. “Mona, your fur stood on end all of a sudden. Are you cold?”
“Fine! Fine. Made your damn point, fine.” Ryuji stood and wrestled off his sweatshirt and shoved it in Akechi’s lap; in the same movement he bent down low, so that their foreheads nearly touched. His glare could have etched concrete.

“I hate you,” he whispered.

“I know,” Akechi replied.

* * *

“Sounds like you’ve been busy,” said Sojiro.

He’d been waiting behind the counter as Akechi slunk downstairs, briefcase in hand, the hood of Ryuji’s sweatshirt pulled up. He shrank in on himself at the sound, like a child who’d been caught up past their bedtime, but Sojiro wasn’t even looking at him. He eyed some anonymous patch on the bartop, a cigarette between his fingers.

“I shouldn’t be doing this inside,” he said, gesturing with the cigarette; a thin ribbon of smoke trailed away into the air. “Ruins the flavor of everything. But, that’s not much of a priority these days.”

“We’re making progress,” Akechi said. “I’m only wearing this because I-”

“Needed a disguise. I know. Got in a little while ago.” Akechi opened his mouth and he waved his hand again. “Don’t bother. I wouldn’t understand half of it anyway. You remember where the bathhouse is?”

“Yes. I’ve gotten quite familiar with this area, in a way.”

“Good. Leave the briefcase. Take that instead.”

Akechi followed his pointing finger. On one of the tables was a bathroom bag loaded up with basic toiletries – soap, shampoo, toothpaste and brush. A towel. A washcloth. He stared at it all as if unable to discern its purpose.

“Figured you’d want to wash up anyway, so that works out. Most of the people who go to that place are older than the hills so they probably wouldn’t recognize you even if you got right up in their wrinkly faces, but I’d keep a washcloth or something over your head just in case. Make it quick. And bring all that back when you’re done.”

Akechi stood there for a little while longer. Then he set his case down in the booth, making sure that “A” wasn’t visible. His hands shook a bit as he took the bag and headed for the door.

Sojiro said, “About what you said earlier. With Wakaba.” Akechi froze. “I don’t give a damn what she thought about me. That woman always believed what she wanted. It’s one of the things I loved about her.”

“Would it mean anything if I apologized?”

Sojiro glanced over. Akechi stood with his back to him. His words had been quiet and hurried. That vivid purple hoodie made the whole scene almost surreal, an absurd farce.

“What do you think?” Sojiro asked.

“…right.”
“If you want to atone, do it with your actions.” He blew smoke. “Seems like you’ve made a decent start.”

He left without speaking further.

The bathhouse was empty. Akechi ran the water until it was scalding and washed quickly; the steam turned everything into a silhouette of itself, the world gone out of focus. When he stepped out of the tub the water ran off him in ashy grey trickles and he stood mesmerized by its course onto the tile. A year of accumulated filth, puddling at his feet.
Akechi spent the train ride huddled inside Ryuji’s hoodie, suitcase on his lap, eyes constantly flicking here and there in a mad effort to see if anyone was watching him but without meeting their gaze. He needn’t have worried. The effects of Paranoia Syndrome were even clearer to him than most; Tokyo hadn’t possessed this dreadful, distracted atmosphere when he’d set off to the Diet Building all those months ago. Most of the other passengers wouldn’t look up from their phones. The ones who didn’t hold phones rocked back and forth in place as if trying to lull themselves to sleep. As he stepped off he thought he heard the woman nearest the door quietly weeping. It was as though all things teetered on the edge of some final and yet unseen precipice.

He’d also been concerned about the Shimizu family’s apartment, the security of it – a camera or a doorman would cause his disguise to fall apart very quickly. Fortunately, their building turned out to be like hundreds of others, an off-white ten-story polygon from which pitiful balconies jutted like overbite. He stopped by the buzzers and looked up and down the claustrophobic streets. No one to be seen. The sound of distant traffic carried over like bad weather. A few small and skeletal trees rattled in the wind, their jagged shadows crawling in the midmorning sun like grasping hands. Every shape seemed wrong.

He set down his briefcase again and took out his phone. Or, that was to say, Futaba’s phone. Because Futaba had given him her phone. Akechi’s year spent in the Dead Sea may have helped him retain an eldritch app or two, but unfortunately the same didn’t apply to his data plan. Futaba had figured this out before anyone else and thrust her phone upon him as soon as he’d gotten back from the bathhouse, monitoring the situation from her laptop in the meantime. He was very careful to stick to its most basic functions. Given its owner, he half-suspected that any attempt to prod around in the other apps would literally blow up in his face.

GA: I’m here. Otsuka 9-chome room 144, correct?
FS: yup yup
FS: unless she forgot her cell, mrs shimizu is there too
FS: i know all and see all
MN: Were you spotted?
GA: I don’t believe so. Current events have distracted people.
RS: yeah no shit, i had to put up with that when we were investigating. made me want to break someone’s nose just to wake em up
RS: don’t do that tho
GA: Noted. Any other advice? As of now, my intent is to probe for any traumatic events or neuroses which could lead to the distortion necessary to foster a Palace.
MN: Given the nature of who we’re dealing with, I’m hoping that won’t be too difficult.
GA: Don’t be so certain. Many people are quite adept at hiding their true selves.
MN: Right…
FS: just don’t forget about that thing i gave you, it should snag us a lead or ten if all else fails
GA: Understood. I’m off, then.

He hung up, opened the briefcase, pulled off Ryuji’s hoodie, and tucked it inside. Then he straightened his back, breathed deep, and pressed the buzzer.

For a long while there was only silence. He began to feel uncomfortable. Little chance of getting into the apartment without someone to let him in. He briefly regretted not somehow smuggling Morgana and his unnaturally deft paws along.
Then, a voice layered with fuzz: “Hello?”

Smile, he remembered. They can hear your face in your voice. But not too wide, they’ll think you’re a solicitor. Calibrate your speech to be helpful, concerned, slightly brusque, so your every word will say underneath, I’m here for you, but I have quite the busy schedule.

“Good afternoon,” he said. “Am I speaking to Azusa Shimizu?”

“Yes. Who is this?”

“I’m with the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department, ma’am. Do you have a moment to speak?”

“Concerning what?” Expected – that sudden sheen of ice in her voice, that hint of suspicion, the flinching away from the prying eye of society. “I’m sorry, but I wasn’t expecting…that is to say, my husband isn’t home…”

Lower your voice, tone and timbre. Conspiratorial, apologetic. “I’m very sorry for the lack of notice, Mrs. Shimizu. You’re not in any trouble. I’m part of an investigative unit working in tandem with the SIU, regarding the Paranoia Syndrome phenomenon. Forgive me for asking, but I believe your son Seki was among the first afflicted?”

No answer. For a moment he was certain she’d hung up.

“I kept asking.” That layer of ice had thickened, and there was something dark thrashing within. “My husband and I both, we all but got down on our knees and begged. You, the hospital, the news. I kept telling them something was wrong. And now, here you are. Like you’re doing me a favor.”

He should have expected this. “I’m very sorry, Mrs. Shimizu. I don’t know what to say.” Wounded, surprised – no longer a member of the police, but this woman’s sacrificial lamb.

“I don’t think you should say anything. I think you’d better go.”

“I wasn’t aware of the department shutting you out like this. I can’t pretend to understand what you’ve suffered. But please, if there’s anything at all I can do, anything you can help us with, I really need to speak with you further.” Add a slight vibrato, indicate desperation. “I don’t know if we’ll have another chance.”

Another long silence. Then the front door buzzed, and unlocked.

Maybe Sojiro was right. Maybe he was a bad actor. But he personally believed that he could perform a lot better on a full stomach and without a gun in his face.

The Shimizus’ apartment was on the second floor. He smoothed his lapels and straightened his tie. He went up the stairwell, the echoes of his footsteps trailing him like muggers-in-waiting. That old, familiar state of mind returned to him – a hissing blankness in his head like a phone left off the hook. In that emptiness he molded the soft clay of himself into whatever shape was necessary. It wouldn’t have been unfair to say that the Goro Akechi that first emerged from the Dead Sea was what he looked like unmolded. Something colorless and lumpen and barely passing as alive.

He stood in front of the door, adjusted his features – two parts trepidation to one part concern – and knocked. It opened immediately.

Azusa Shimizu turned out to be a pale and homely stump of a woman with an unflattering bob haircut, its overgrown bangs almost, but not quite, hiding the steely, observant glint in her eye. She
wore ragged jeans and a cable-knit sweater that looked like it had lost a couple of rounds with a taffy puller. He could see the lecture forming on her lips before she recognized his face, and then those eyes went wide. He smiled disarmingly.

“Hello, Mrs. Shimizu. I apologize again. In person, this time.”

“I know you. You’re that boy who was on all the talk shows.”

“Haha. Well, I occasionally do some detective work as well, you know.”

“You look horrible.” His smile nearly slipped; evidently the bathhouse hadn’t done as much good as he’d hoped. “Why did they send you here?”

“Well, the police do keep me busy. Especially now that I don’t have the talk shows to distract me, haha.” Sheepish, self-effacing. “Could, er, I come in? I’d be happy to explain further, but this hallway is a bit drafty…”

She watched him a moment longer. Then, she stepped away and retreated further into the apartment. Akechi followed, shutting the door behind him.

He took in the foyer as he slipped off his shoes. A typical two-bedroom dwelling. Small, low-ceilinged, not much in the way of decoration – apparently interior design wasn’t the Shimizu family’s strong suit. The kitchen was just off to his right, the buttery afternoon light pooling on the table and the countertops. The sink was heaped with dirty dishes. There was a faint, off-putting aroma in the air. So they weren’t keeping it clean. But it lacked that veneer of yellowed filth he remembered from some of the foster institutions. This uncleanliness was a recent development. He didn’t have to think hard to guess what had brought it on.

Mrs. Shimizu went to the counter, fretting over a coffee pot.

“All this time and they send a child,” she muttered. “With all due respect, Detective.”

“I can’t say that I’m owed very much respect in the first place. Especially after we kept you waiting for so long.”

“When did you finally figure out this was a problem?” She moved to the sink, swept over a rough edifice of plates, and began to rinse out the coffeepot. “After it became a national crisis, or a worldwide one?”

“I can make no excuses for the department, but unfortunately I have little control over what cases they take and when. Not to mention, as you know, my credibility has suffered. After the Phantom Thieves incident and all.”

She turned and one of those overbright eyes pinned him. “I imagine you amused yourself reading the tabloids after you dropped off the map. I kept up with them, for a while. Whatever Became of the Charismatic Detective? You were dead, you were in jail, you’d changed your identity and been transferred to Scotland Yard. I could have filled a scrapbook. But instead…what? They just put you on a leash?”

“Haha. Unflattering, but not wrong. I did embarrass the department to a rather severe degree.” The half-truths caught like jawbreakers under his tongue. “But, I still make myself useful. They’re keeping me on retention until they think it’s acceptable to let me back into the public eye.”

“And my son is your second chance at the big time, mm?” She set down the pot with a harsh clunk.
This was not an appropriate moment to continue smiling. He briefly covered his mouth with his hand as he tried to contort his face into the right expression.

“No, that’s not…I’m sorry.” He lowered his hand to reveal a shamed grimace. “This isn’t about me, in any case. Bigger things are at stake. We’re trying to determine commonalities between Paranoia Syndrome cases. As I’m sure you know, it doesn’t appear to be constrained by location or physiology, so we’ve selected a number of noteworthy cases to try and find similarities elsewhere. Background, medical history, mental state…anything could be useful.”

“Mental state? So you think this is some kind of psychological problem?”

“We’re not ruling anything out. This is a poor time to be a skeptic.”

He wrenched his eyes away from the woman’s stare and looked at the walls instead. Some photographs here, not many. One a black-and-white portrait of a man in a suit, looking uncomfortable in his middle age – jowls, paunch, a badly receding hairline. Mr. Shimizu, he imagined. There was another of a mop-headed boy looking into the camera alongside a panting Shiba Inu. The boy held the dog’s leash in one bony hand, bearing it up like a slacked noose. He stepped up to the picture, feeling wary. A pet could make things awkward. Animals didn’t like him.

“I take it this is Seki. And…your dog?”

“Eikichi. He died a little over two years ago.”

“My condolences. An accident?” From what he’d seen of Shimizu in the Dead Sea, he wouldn’t be surprised if he’d killed the animal himself. That would certainly give their investigation something to work with.

“He was old. He got sick. Seki took it well, but I know he was crushed. We’d had Eikichi since he was a toddler.”

“What do you mean, he took it well?”

“No tears. Didn’t make a scene. He had us take away his leash and bowl and everything a week later. He was…he’s a very serious boy.” A brief note of horror accompanied that accidental slip into the past tense. “We weren’t surprised when he was accepted to Kosei.”

That was his cue to move down the wall. Here was a picture of Seki bearing up his letter of acceptance, standing between his parents. His features were easier to make out now – compared to his parents he was slimmer, features sharp-edged and aquiline, black hair falling in tangles down to his neck. All of them beamed into the camera. The parents looked ready to burst with pride but Shimizu’s own smile didn’t reach his eyes; he stared wearily out of the frame as if telling Akechi to step away and move on.

“How was he in school?” Akechi asked. “I know he had no disciplinary history, but that only says so much.”

“Worked hard. Good grades. He didn’t bring friends around and he didn’t go in much for clubs or anything, but it was only his first year. I told Yuichi to give him time. He always liked to keep himself to himself, anyway.”

He turned and faced her; she’d already gotten another pot brewing. Compared to Leblanc the smell was like burnt rubber and nicotine.
“Mrs. Shimizu, I understand this may be a delicate question, but were there any…domestic issues in the period leading up to Seki’s illness? Anything that may have caused him stress?”

“Ha. I’ve been asking myself that.” She leaned against the counter, caught in the window’s sunbeam; it illuminated wispy strands of hair that swayed like seaweed atop her scalp. “But I don’t recall anything dramatic. I mean…we work a lot. My husband in particular.” Reproach crept into her voice. “More and more, lately. And I’m freelance, so the money…well, it isn’t always there. But he didn’t want for anything. We made sure of that. As for violence, loud arguments into the night, Yuichi showing up drunk with lipstick on his collar? No, nothing of the sort.” She rocked on her heels a bit. “So, you think this disease is stress-related? No wonder the whole world’s susceptible.”

She was sharp, all right. “As I said, we’re examining all angles. What about Seki himself? Was anything amiss about him?”

“He was fine. He seemed tired in the mornings, but the new school year was starting so that was probably nerves. Then, one night, he just…didn’t wake up.”

The coffee boiled and frothed.

“The hospital won’t let us see him anymore.” Mrs. Shimizu sounded calm, pensive. Akechi recognized that behavior from Shido. She’d taken her rage and carefully jarred it and set it on a shelf, in case she needed it later.

“I don’t understand how that’s acceptable.”

“It’s the room he’s in. They keep the air conditioning much too high. How is he supposed to recover if he’s always so cold?” A pause. “Would you like some coffee, or something?”

“In a minute, perhaps.” The smile returned, wider this time – what luck, it said, now we’re friends. “If I may, could I take a quick look at Seki’s room? I promise to respect his privacy.”

She frowned, but not for long. “Behind you. Down the hall. Please don’t disturb his things.”

“Of course.”

As he made his way over, he glimpsed the living room – sunlit and still, the air choked with dust motes. In the corner was a desk bearing up a computer and a chaotic mess of paperwork. Bills, sketches, news clippings. Mrs. Shimizu’s, he guessed. If she was her own boss, then she clearly hadn’t been a very good employee lately. The door to Shimizu’s bedroom was partly ajar. He swung it open and slipped inside like a shadow.

All of the crime scenes Akechi investigated in the past had been arranged for him in advance, but he still wasn’t naïve enough to expect anything particularly dramatic. Still, for the first few seconds upon coming in, he was completely nonplussed; he almost thought he was back in his old bedroom again. Clean white walls. Well-made bed. Small TV in the corner. A bookshelf containing some scattered school rubrics and what, at a glance, he determined to be workbooks, unless pre-calculus had somehow become popular reading among teenagers recently. Some dusty DVD’s and a few manga volumes that looked bookstore-fresh. Their presence on the shelf seemed obligatory, a grudging acknowledgement that someone actually lived here.

Nothing under the desk or the bed. Nothing under the pillow. He checked the closet and the dresser and found only hung and folded clothes and his schoolbag curled up like a discarded snakeskin in the corner, though at the back of the closet’s top shelf his questing hand did uncover a bag of stale
cookies that his parents had probably missed. Maybe they had cleaned the place out after Shimizu had lost consciousness, but he didn’t see any rings or discolorations that would mark something recently removed.

Plan B, then. Shimizu’s laptop was on the desk, its charge cable still in the outlet. Akechi flipped it open, turned it on, and withdrew Futaba’s little party favor from his jacket pocket.

This flash drive was an upgraded version of the one Makoto had used on Sae’s computer last year – it cracked passwords and hoovered out a hard drive’s entire contents in less than half the time. It finished downloading barely ten seconds after Akechi plugged it in, and then he withdrew it and switched the laptop off again.

When he returned to the kitchen, Mrs. Shimizu was setting two mugs on the table.

“Do you take cream and sugar?” she asked.

The reasonable thing to do would be to make his apologies, say his goodbyes, and leave. He’d gotten what precious little he was able to find, and the woman was clearly grieving but also far more intelligent than she looked. But when she looked at him from across that expanse of bare hardwood and tile, the two mugs steaming at her sides, he found himself saying, “Yes please. Two sugars.”

She nodded and mixed it in. He pulled up a chair, maintaining his modulated smile.

“Find anything worth mentioning?” She attempted to keep her tone light. The coffee mugs were cheap things, printed with a gaudy and grinning Big Bang Burger logo.

“Nothing extraordinary. Though I suspect you knew that already. He’s your son, after all.”

“Of course.” She stirred in the sugar, slid his mug over, and sat down in the chair opposite. “So, no one really does know if the victims will wake up again. Or why they got sick in the first place.”

“When we find something, I’ll make sure to inform you.”

She shook her head. “You don’t have to go to the trouble. It’s…kind of comforting, actually. I couldn’t stop wondering if there was something I’d missed, in the days leading up to it. Something I could have done to help him.”

“You have to stay strong for him, Mrs. Shimizu.” Gentle, soothing. This was when he was at his best. People were so often too wrapped up in themselves to pay attention to him. As long as spoke the right clichés in the right tone of voice then he could get away with murder. Occasionally he had. He held his coffee mug in his gloved hands and let her self-pity carry on.

“Sticking to platitudes because you don’t know what else to say, hm?”

His face betrayed nothing but he squeezed the mug tight. She’d looked up from her mug, head tilted slightly, her bangs parting to reveal one half-lidded eye. That glare was uncomfortably reminiscent of her son’s, that vagrant phantom stalking the decaying alleys of the cognitive world. And the way her hair hung over her eyes reminded him of something else. Something he didn’t want to recall.

“You seem surprised,” she said. But he didn’t, he was certain he didn’t. “I’m aware of how I look, you know. This face isn’t exactly cabaret-club material. It wasn’t much better when I was young. Had to learn to use my brain instead.”
He couldn’t say anything so he took a small sip of the coffee. It tasted like noise.

“It’s all right. Sorry for putting you on the spot like that. And I’m sorry for how I acted earlier,” Mrs. Shimizu went on. “It’s good to know that at least someone’s trying to fix all this. But to put it on the shoulders of someone like you…to be honest, I never liked this child-detective business. Shoving you in front of cameras and into crime scenes. To me it always felt like someone was just using you as a prop.”

She was much too good at this. “Haha. Well, it was still quite a step up compared to how I was living before. I don’t know if you saw any of my biopics…”

“Oh, I saw. It was very inspirational. But they’re not planning to keep you like this forever, are they?” She raised her mug again, and then stopped. That one eye narrowed. “Wait. Are they even letting you attend school? The tabloids wouldn’t have gotten so crazy if you’d just gone back to your routine.”

His grip tightened further. This is exactly why he should have left. The whole Charismatic Detective business had been a shallow ruse; he’d lived his glamorous life on Shido’s dime, kept afloat by a steady stream of dark money from the conspiracy. With that gone, his cover story was a hollow shell that had already been rotting for a year. Stupid. Stupid.

“Well…er…” He coughed. “I’m being privately tutored. On the department’s funding, of course. And, um, you might have noticed my old apartment was repossessed as well. Not as much money in my account without the TV spots, haha.” His laugh was going wrong; it was much too brittle. “I’ve been given lodgings elsewhere, of course. The department pays my rent and a small stipend in exchange for my continued services. They’ve been very kind.”

“And what happens if they decide to let you go?” That quiet outrage was creeping back in to her words. “You get shunted back to the foster system?”

“I…I’m a bit too old for that now…”

“The streets, then. Even worse.” She shook her head again, harder. “I apologize, but that’s not employment. That’s slavery.”

Want emancipation?

“You must have someone, right? I know about your family, but…after all this time, surely there’s someone who’d take you in?”

No one would miss him. No one would’ve given a shit.

“It’s really quite all right, Mrs. Shimizu.” He tried to stay jovial, he tried to add a sharp and insistent undertone, but it was all going wrong. His voice wavered, threatened to crack. The hole was there again. His toes hung over the edge; he was losing his balance. “I’m capable of handling things myself. They’ll keep me around until I…that is to say, I’ll be fine so long as I’m useful to them. Now, I’m sorry, but I really should get going.”

He was all set to stand up and walk off but he couldn’t seem to release that tacky coffee mug. He felt anchored to it. But that indignant ferocity left Mrs. Shimizu; her shoulders drooped, her mouth sagged.

“Yes. Of course. Listen to me, making a fool of myself.” She tried to smile, hair hanging over her eyes. “You really do look exhausted, though. Would you at least like something to eat?”
That mildewed apartment. That yellowed carpet. The lunchtime long past. The way the ceiling fan creaked as she hanged there, hair veiling her face.

Akechi’s palms burned hot.

He cried out and recoiled from the table, his palms splayed out and dripping brown. The coffee mug sat in a widening puddle. He’d clutched it hard enough to crack the ceramic.

“Oh no, no…” He looked back and forth for a towel, quaking all over. “I’m, I’m sorry, don’t know what came over me…”

But Mrs. Shimizu had already grabbed a handful of napkins and tossed the ruined mug in the sink. “It’s fine. Are your hands all right?”

“Don’t worry about me. The mug, I can pay for it, I have some cash…”

“Don’t be ridiculous, my husband contracts with Okumura Foods. I can give him a call and he’ll bring me a whole box of the things.” She wiped up the last of the liquid and tossed the napkins in the trash. Akechi saw her face enter his vision like a passing moon, and then gentle hands were on his shoulders. “Sit. Breathe.”

He obeyed. He tried to mold his face into something professional. But his expert touch had failed him; the clay of himself fell apart in his hands. Mrs. Shimizu stared down at him, long and hard. She appeared to come to a conclusion.

“Stay here,” she said, and turned to the front door. “I’ll be back soon.”

“What? Where are you going?”

“The police station. I’m going to find your supervisor and make them wish they’d never been born.”

He almost fainted on the spot. This was falling apart worse than he’d ever thought possible.

“Mrs. Shimizu, that is really not necessary, I’ve just been a little overworked lately—”

“Listen to me.” She spun on him, eyes fully displayed and burning bright. “For three months I’ve been rotting away in this apartment with my son locked up in a damn hospital room and my husband burying himself alive in his office. I sat at that table and replayed every minute I spent with Seki, trying to find out where it started to go wrong. And this? This is wrong.” She jabbed a finger at him. “The world is miserable enough already. I will not stand by and let the police run a high-schooler into a nervous breakdown just because he made a mistake on a job that they should have been doing themselves in the first place. I have nothing but time on my hands. I’m going to give them hell.”

“Mrs. Shimizu, don’t—”

“I promise you’ll be fine.” She turned away. “And you’re staying here. For as long as necessary. God, you can take Seki’s room if you really need—”

“Please don’t!”

His voice splintered and his chair scraped as he leapt up, the woman becoming two women and then three as his eyes began to water. She turned back, face suddenly wary. He could feel it. The situation was unsalvageable now. No way of coming back from that outburst.
“Can’t do this anymore.” He laughed weakly and fell back into his seat. “Unbelievable. I can’t even manage this.”

“Mr. Akechi…Goro…” She crept up to him. “Am I missing something?”

“I lied to you.”

He peeled off his sodden gloves and dropped them on the table. Underneath his hands were clammy and pale. He hung his head; he couldn’t look at her.

“I don’t understand,” Mrs. Shimizu said.

“There is no investigation. I’m no longer with the police. I haven’t been affiliated with them since my disappearance.” He’d been hanging from a ledge for so long that it was almost a relief to let go. “I am looking into Paranoia Syndrome. There are some…associates of mine who are looking for a solution to the whole crisis. They’re sheltering me while I assist them. But not for much longer.”

He raised his head. “Mrs. Shimizu, the truth is that I’m in some very serious trouble. I can’t tell you the details. But the day the police learn of my presence will probably be my last day as a free man. I was going to turn myself in soon. But first, for those people, I want…I just wanted to do something right for a change.” She still looked bewildered. “I know you’re angry. This deception was unacceptable. But, please. Just give me a few hours before you report me. Let me tell them what I’ve learned. I have to do that, at least.”

The coffee’s charred reek hung in the air. The sink dripped. Outside the sun approached the horizon, its light turning rusted.

“Can you help him?” Mrs. Shimizu asked.

He blinked. “Excuse me?”

“My son. Can you and these people, whoever they are, help Seki?”

For a while he didn’t know what else to say. The only truths left to him were lethal ones. That Seki Shimizu was some kind of malevolent revenant trawling the seas of the unconscious for people to torment, that by any realistic measure he was probably the most dangerous terrorist the world had ever seen. That Akechi himself still had no idea what had caused the boy’s mind to become so warped, or why. He struggled to find the words.

“We’ll wake him up,” he said at last. “We’ll get him out of there.”

She still didn’t move. He was sure she was going to take out her phone and dial the police. Then she said, “You can still stay here, if you want.”

He couldn’t take much more of this.

“You don’t even know me.” His voice had gone rasping, gossamer-thin.

“I know that you reached out to us when no one else would. That’s enough. It might sound selfish, but it’s the truth.” She stepped forward. “And as for whatever crime you committed, I doubt it’s as bad as you’re making it out to be. You’re still a child. Children are allowed to make mistakes. It’s adults who should know better.”

If only you knew, he thought. About me or your son.

She took another step and for a horrible moment he thought that she would embrace him. But
instead, she took out her phone. “Before you leave, could we exchange numbers? Just in case?”

He didn’t resist. He gave her his number, took down her own. Then he made a feeble goodbye and gathered up his gloves and his briefcase, limping to the door.

“Goro?”

He looked over his shoulder. Mrs. Shimizu stood in the rusted twilight of the kitchen like an abandoned totem, face solemn, hands folded at her waist. The dark coffee stain on the table behind her was plain to see. She bowed deep.

“Thank you,” she said, “for confiding in me.”

The crisp, cold air burned his throat as he staggered outside and wrestled Ryuji’s hoodie back on. He took out Futaba’s phone, scrolled down to Mrs. Shimizu’s number. Then he deleted it. He’d given her his old number. As he made his way back to the train station, body numb, feet scraping the pavement, he imagined it – her dialing to reach out to him, and being greeted with an empty hiss that would never, could never, answer.

*             *             *

GA: I’m on my way back now. Currently on the train.
MN: You took a while. Find anything useful?
GA: Not much, I’m afraid. We can quite definitively rule out parental abuse or domestic strife as a source of distortion. His mother is deeply distressed at his condition.
GA: The apartment was unremarkable. His bedroom, likewise. However, I was able to obtain the contents of his hard drive.
FS: bingo
FS: lemme at that sucker (■・□・■)
FS: i’ll take every secret he’s ever had and turn it inside out
HO: It sounds like Futaba and Goro have things well in hand from here. I think I’ll go home. I didn’t get much sleep last night, I’m sorry to say.
RS: join the club
RS: and i ain’t goin nowhere til i get my hoodie back
RS: it is literally cold as balls outside
AT: i’m gonna head back too. yusuke, can we keep talking later?
YK: Certainly. It’s an interesting plan.
GA: What plan?
FS: secret
MN: The three of them were chatting downstairs for a while. They wouldn’t say what it’s about.
AT: you’ll know when the time is right (○^ ε ^○)
AT: no point in bringing it up now anyway, it’ll just be distracting til we get a better idea of the last keyword
GA: There’s something else I have to say.
GA: My cover was blown.
GA: Shimizu’s mother saw through me. I suppose I’m out of practice.
GA: I evaded the most unsavory details and swore her to secrecy, but at this point I believe that I’m a liability to the investigation. Should my presence be uncovered by the authorities and linked to Leblanc, it will be an unacceptable hindrance to our goal.
GA: I’ve gathered all the intel I can and you have access to the Meta-Nav. It would be prudent to turn myself in now and let you handle things from here.
RS: yo akechi morgana’s reading over my shoulder and he wants me to pass along a message real quick
RS: “You’re an idiot.”
RS: harsh but fair
RS: i mean personally i’m kinda two ways about the whole thing
RS: on one hand you’re a huge dick who def needs to go to jail, but on the other hand, EFF THE POLICE
AT: mama sakamoto didn’t raise no snitch
RS: yeah p much
RS: you said you’re gonna turn yourself in anyway so i don’t give a shit if the cops come snoopin around
YK: There is also the small matter of your contributions in the Dead Sea. Makoto would likely have perished without your aid. It would be exceedingly callous of us to simply discard you at any juncture prior to the completion of our task.
YK: And even then, our relationship has ceased to be one of quid pro quo. We have committed to doing this together. That commitment will endure, regardless of circumstances.
AT: mr sakura already said he’d cover for you too if anyone came around for any reason
AT: we’re in it to win it, understand?
...
AT: goro, you there?
RS: he’s underground, signal’s probably wonky
GA: I’m here.
GA: Sorry, but this is my stop.
GA: I’ll see you all shortly.

[Goro Akechi is now offline.]

...

[Futaba Sakura has messaged you.]

FS: so
FS: fyi
FS: i’m still tracking that phone, remember
FS: you’re still on the train and the train is nowhere near yongen-jaya
FS: feeling bashful, little birdie?
FS: don't worry, i won't tell the others
FS: just remember
FS: i KNOW all, and SEE all
FS: (☼_☼)

* * *

It was dusk by the time he returned to Leblanc. Ryuji and Sojiro were the only ones downstairs, the former flipping disinterestedly through his schoolbooks, the latter buffing the counter. Only Ryuji looked up when the bell jingled.
“Freakin’ finally.”

“Apologies.” Akechi lowered the hood. “Had to make a few detours. There were crowds to avoid.”

“They probably wouldn’t have noticed you anyway. Unless you got Paranoia Syndrome, of course. Then every asshole in a ten-block radius woulda come runnin’ to snap pictures.” He peered at Akechi’s face. “Man, I recognize that look. Shimizu’s ma really worked you over, huh?”

“She was…understanding. But lectures did happen, yes.”

“Haha, I know the feeling. Moms, right?”

Sojiro’s hand stopped mid-polish. In the long, pregnant pause that followed, Ryuji’s grinning face carefully rearranged itself.

“Tell you what,” he said, voice slightly strained. “How’s about we forget everything I just said.”

“It’s fine.”


Akechi took it off and handed it over. Ryuji held it up, studied it carefully for any signs of staining or stretching, and then pulled it back on, shoving his hands in the pockets. “Least you took care of it. Futaba and Morgana are still upstairs. Everyone else went home.” He headed for the door. “I’mma turn in too. ‘night, Boss.”

“Get home safe,” said Sojiro.

“Goodnight, Sakamoto,” said Akechi. “We’ll contact you if there are any breaks in the investigation.”

“Yeah, whatevs.” He grabbed the doorhandle and stopped, back still turned to Akechi. “And, uh. About what happened last night. It got…I mean, things were pretty shitty for everyone.”

“I understand. No hard feelings.”


After he left he exchanged a glance with Sojiro. The man shrugged, pointed upstairs, and got back to work. He went upstairs and found Futaba and Morgana seated side-by-side on Akira’s bed like twin sentinels.

“There you are. Gimme.”

Akechi handed over the flash drive and Futaba plugged it into her laptop and bent down low. The laptop’s screen printed two hard circles of light over her glasses. Her fingers spasmed as she cracked the joints and lowered them to the keyboard.

“Eeny, meeny, miney, moe,” she said, menacingly. “I wonder how my search will go.”

“You might as well take a seat,” Morgana said.

Akechi nodded, set down his briefcase, and took his place on the sofa. Morgana curled up and fell silent. Time passed. The sunlight receded from the attic window, bruising purple and then black. Futaba’s keys rattled like irregular machinegun fire. Sojiro came upstairs with curry plates and Akechi ate his with murmured gratitude, making sure not to get any on the furniture. Futaba’s own
plate sat unacknowledged on the table, slowly congealing. Sojiro gave it a disapproving look when he returned.

“You need to eat, Futaba,” he said.

“Later. Busy. Saving the world, probably.”

“It’s late. Let’s go home and-”


“It’s fine, Boss,” Morgana said. “I’ll look after her!”

Sojiro turned to Akechi. “What did the cat say?”

“He said that he’ll look after Futaba.”

Morgana preened. “Finally, an honest translator.”

“Well, I appreciate the sentiment, but a cat doesn’t make for much of a guardian. Futaba, I’m not really comfortable leaving you-”

“-alone with Akechi?” Futaba finished. “Who cares. He’s not going to do anything.”

“I’m not going to do anything,” Akechi agreed.

“I’ll come home when I’m done.” She irritably waved a hand. “Now go. Begone.”

Sojiro’s mouth formed a tight line; he drummed on the banister, apparently considering what would happen if he just took her laptop away and dragged her home. Akechi didn’t give much for his chances of success, at least with both eyes intact.

“Fine,” he said. “But I’m not going to bed until you do. Have some consideration for that, at least.”

“I will. Goodnight, Dad.”

She really was diabolical. Akechi saw Sojiro melt under the warmth of that word. Then she stabbed a finger in Akechi’s direction. “You. Say goodnight to him, now.”

“Er, right. Goodnight, Mr. Sakura.”

“Goodnight, Boss!” Morgana said.

Sojiro grunted and stomped downstairs. The light from below went out, and the door opened, then closed. Futaba got back to work. Akechi settled into the cushions, lids growing heavy. He tried to forget the afternoon spent in that dirty and sunsoaked kitchen, pushing it away from his mind, until the night seeping in through the attic window crawled over his vision and covered up everything.

Futaba’s scream woke him up.

Her voice ripped through his head like a drill bit and his body convulsed hard enough to nearly lift him bodily from the couch; as his heart jackhammered in his chest he saw Morgana propel himself from the bed in a similar fashion, his fur standing on end like he’d just plugged his tail into a light socket. Futaba had gripped her hair in her fists and pulled hard, the shriek trailing from her mouth like the whistle from a teakettle.
“What happened? What’s wrong!!?”

“Nothing! Zero! A big fat goddamn goose egg! I’m at fifteen percent battery life and this asshole’s got absolutely nothing!” She bent over and clamped her hands on her laptop screen as if trying to throttle answers from it. “Do you have any idea how frustrating it is for me to not get what I want from a computer for hours?! It’s worse than waiting to sneeze!”

“Okay, okay, let’s just…calm down,” Akechi said. Morgana had retreated to the edge of the bed, frantically licking down his fur. “Do you mean the hard drive was wiped?”

“No! That at least would give me something to suspect, and it’s not like I couldn’t recreate most of the data anyway unless he took a hammer to the thing. It’s not blank, it’s boring! How can someone trying to destroy the world be so boring?”

“Tell me what you found. Maybe it’ll help get your thoughts in order.”

“Fine. Fine.” She breathed deep, got herself under control. “I mean, I had a bad feeling from the start about this data. The OS was installed in August of last year, so the laptop was probably a present for getting into Kosei or something. That’s not a lot of time to build up evidence. But this is ridiculous. All his download folders are blank and his document folders are full of nothing but schoolwork – I skimmed his essays and the writing’s okay from what I can tell, but it’s not like there’s a revenge diary or a ten-point plan for dominating the world or anything in there. Nearly all of the software on this thing came out of the box. There are library computers with more incriminating crap than this.”

“What about online? Could you obtain his search records?”

“Yeah, his cookies were all there. Most of my time was spent putting all that together.” She made another few clicks on her laptop. “But I got nothing. He has the browsing history of an old man. Some news websites, a couple of environmental blogs…he’s been to a few message boards, but it’s all general-use stuff, nothing big. I hacked his email and most of his messages are either spam or library book notices. Apparently he’s been studying Renaissance-era theater for his summer homework. I know, riveting stuff, guess Kosei’s on a Shakespeare kick too. His search terms don’t deviate much from any of this. Oh, except he looked up the Phantom Thieves a lot last year. Went to the Phan-Site, too.”

“That could be something.”

“Not really. Nearly all of Tokyo was hanging off our butts, for one reason or another. Either they were cheering us on or really wanted to tell everyone how much we sucked. And the Phan-Site was anonymous, so I couldn’t even know if Shimizu posted anything on there.” She huffed. “I thought Mishima was an NPC but he’s Mr. Personality compared to this kid. At least he’d have some funky stuff to laugh at in his computer.”

“Who?”

“Doesn’t matter. Never mind.” She looked at him. “It pains me to say this, but I think I’m out of luck. What now? Inari said he’ll ask around at Kosei but I really don’t expect much to come of that, something about his thousand-yard stare makes people clam up. Do we get Shimizu’s phone, maybe?”

Morgana had finally regained his composure. “That would be the next logical step. Maybe he just used this computer for work. His cell phone might have some more noteworthy material.”
“I didn’t see any trace of it at his apartment,” Akechi said. “And I would very much prefer to avoid returning there, if possible.”

“Oh right, you got made. What a shame. But Akechi, you need to think hard about what you saw at their home. The missing piece has to be in there somewhere.”

“I hope so,” said Futaba. “All the targets I saw were super-obvious scumbags right from the start. Including you,” she added offhandedly. “You’d think that with Shimizu there’d be something huge that we’re missing. You’re sure that his parents were on the level?”

Akechi thought hard, then shook his head. “I only met his mother, but she made it clear that their relationship with Shimizu was healthy enough. Maybe they were a little troubled by him – he’s apparently very introverted – but I saw no evidence of abuse or neglect.”

“And you think her testimony is trustworthy?” Morgana asked.

“Yes, I do. She had no reason to lie. Even less, after my cover was blown. She actually became offended on my behalf. She thought my appearance was due to mistreatment by the police.” He smiled, a little sheepishly. “I don’t think she was entirely in her right mind, to be honest. She’d been bottling up her stress over Shimizu’s condition for a while. She even offered to let me…use his…”

Morgana and Futaba both saw his face go slack. They said something but he didn’t hear. It was as though his mind had been some hunk of barely-functioning machinery, choked with rust and grime – corrosion, maybe, from spending too long at sea. A cogwheel had broken loose; the wheels would not turn. But now the cog had dropped in, and the entire machine burst into life. In that first moment, he believed he’d grasped the answer. In the next moment, he knew the answer couldn’t possibly be anything else. My God, he thought, is this how real detectives feel? No wonder the job is so popular.

He got out Futaba’s phone.

GA: It’s me. Is anyone still awake?
YK: Good evening, Akechi.
MN: I was just about to turn in. What is it?
GA: Sorry to bother you this late, but I wanted to say this now. At least the others can catch up on it tomorrow morning.
GA: I know the last keyword.
MN: What?
YK: Truly?

“What?” gasped Morgana.

“What!”?

FS: how the hell am i not getting first dibs on this!?!?!
FS: i busted my ass for hours!
FS: I AM LITERALLY IN THE SAME ROOM AS YOU
MN: Akechi, are you certain of this?
GA: I’m unable to test it for the reasons I mentioned earlier, but I’m almost positive. Let me have the night to think it over. I’ll tell you all the next time we assemble at Leblanc.
YK: A bit dramatic, don’t you think?
GA: It’s been a long day. Allow me to indulge.

FS: FFFFFFFFFFFFFFF

GA: Futaba was vital in this discovery as well, of course.

FS: THANK YOU

FS: FINALLY

FS: alright

FS: calming down

FS: if he wants to hold off on spilling the beans then that’s fine, but we ought to get a definite yes/no on this first thing in the morning so we can prep

FS: as for me, all my batteries are just about nil, so i’m done for today

MN: It may be a long night for me, as well.

MN: I think we had all better turn in.

MN: And Akechi, regardless of what happens with the last keyword tomorrow – good job.

YK: It appears that I must accelerate work on a particular project of mine.

YK: I will retire to bed as soon as it is complete. Goodnight, everyone.

GA: I believe it’s time I returned Futaba’s phone. Goodnight.

Futaba’s laptop snapped shut and she held out her hand. Akechi tossed the phone over. She pocketed it and stood up, flanked by Morgana.

“Time to head home so Sojiro can tuck his geriatric butt into bed. Hey Mona, what’re the odds he’s snoring in front of the TV right now?”

“I wouldn’t want to bad-mouth Boss.”

“Pretty good, then. Off we go.”

She set off for the stairs, and then stopped. Akechi looked up at her; she was staring at the far wall, her hair a fiery curtain over her face. The café settled and creaked around her. As though she were the nucleus allowing it to maintain its form.

“I hate you, you know,” she said quietly. “I’m pretty sure I’ll always hate you.”

“That’s fair,” Akechi said.

“Hmm. I wonder.”

Without warning, she went over to the sofa and sat down beside Akechi, pulling up her knees into her typical perching position, the laptop clutched to her chest. Both he and Morgana stared at her like she’d just grown a second head.

“Akira’s probably dying,” she said.

“I know. But we still have time. We’ll save him.”

“Yeah. And I think he knows that, too.”

“He knows that you will,” Akechi said. “He doesn’t think of me that way. But it’s fine.”

She glanced at him, her glasses winking. Then she went back to staring at the wall.

“You never figured it out, huh.”

“Figured what out?”
“When you woke back up in the engine room. How long do you think you were out for? Days? A week? Impossible. You would’ve starved. Or maybe just bled to death.”

“Well, I had other things on my-”

“Akira was really insistent that we send the calling card the day after we ran into you. Like, he didn’t shout or anything, but he got intense about it. You know what I mean.” Akechi indicated that he did. “And when we ran into Shido…his Shadow was easily the toughest I’d seen, but Akira freaking curb-stomped him. I almost started to feel sorry for the guy. At first I thought it was because of the way Shido’d screwed him over before he came to Tokyo. Now I wonder if it was something else.”

“What, you think he took up arms to avenge me?” He scoffed. “You’re imagining things.”

“Maybe. I know he didn’t like you much. We basically talked endless smack about you all year. But Akira kind of sucks at hating people, in case you didn’t notice. That fight we had with you messed up his head pretty badly.” Morgana had quietly retreated to a far corner of the room, tail curled around him, watching on. “Can I ask you something?”

“Go ahead.”

“Why didn’t you just die?”

He turned his head at that. But Futaba’s pose hadn’t changed – she kept her disinterested gaze on the wall, chin on her knees, toes flexing. She might have just asked him the name of his favorite TV show.

“You spent a whole year in that Dead Sea place. No way to leave, no one around except for Shimizu and he’s definitely not friendly. No one to come back to, either. So why didn’t you die? It would’ve been easy.”

“I could ask you the same thing,” he said, perhaps more sharply than he’d intended. “I know what happened to you after Shido and I dealt with your mother. Your shut-in years. Did you never consider...alternative solutions?”

“Yeah, sometimes. That would’ve been easy, too. Even locked up in that room all I would’ve needed was a belt and a doorknob.” In his corner, Morgana winced. “Mostly I pictured the look that would’ve been on Sojiro’s face if he’d come in and seen me like that. Kept scaring me off the idea. Who knows how long it would’ve worked, though.”

“That makes sense. And it’s not as though I had the same excuse.” He thought it over. “I don’t know. For a long time I just kept going on out of spite. At the foster homes I learned that society at large would like nothing more than for people like myself to disappear. I refused to give them the satisfaction. That sort of behavior was...habit-forming. Drove me to keep living even when no one was left to care. And I was afraid of ending up like all the other bodies down there. Just sinking into the water. No one to even know if I was gone. But after I ran into Akira again...I became more accepting of it all, I suppose. Our reunion wasn’t exactly a pleasant one, but I want to believe it justified all the time I spent in the Dead Sea, if nothing else. I never would have seen him again if I hadn’t fallen so far.” He bent over, lacing his fingers. “It’s the same here. All those things I did…even if I did feel guilty for them, remorse alone would be worthless. But I still want something good to come of it. And for all my bluster, the Phantom Thieves seem to have a much clearer idea of right and wrong than myself. I’m not one of you. Akira won’t ever think of me as one of you. I gave up that chance a long time ago. But I still have a role to play.”
“You’ve changed.”

“Ha. A change of heart, maybe?”

“Maybe,” she said. “So I’m not sure if it’s okay to hate you. Because I don’t think you’re the same person who killed my mom, anymore.”

“It doesn’t work that way, Futaba. Not that I don’t appreciate the thought, but I can’t just banish who I used to be.”

“I guess. But you can’t get rid of who you are now, either.” She stood up. “Anyway, tired and bored. ‘night.”

She went down the stairs, leaving him dumbfounded. Morgana sidled up to him.

“Do you, uh, want me to stick around…?”

“Please leave.”

“Well, excuse me for asking,” he huffed, but he sounded grateful. Then he said, “Go to sleep, Akechi. And take the bed, for crying out loud. No one else is using it.”

He bounded down the steps and then Akechi was alone. The door’s jingle echoed briefly in the empty café. He sat with his hands on his lap, face stony, studying the patterns in the woodwork walls. Then he took out his phone, selected the Meta-Nav. That seething red eye filled the screen.

Outside, Yongen-Jaya had gone still, its residents sinking once again into their restless, paranoid sleep. There was no transformation within him. No revelation that had sundered him to his core. The people who’d had their Treasures stolen were always reduced to weeping wrecks; he’d had a few slips, here and there, but he liked to think he hadn’t fallen apart quite that severely just yet. He cast about for memories of Wakaba isshiki, of Kunikazu Okumura, of all the Shadows who’d prostrated before him with his gun to their heads, and still didn’t know what he should feel or why. That numbness in him still chewed up everything. But its teeth seemed to have grown duller. There was something glimmering there, deep inside the hole.

“Target,” he said. “Goro Akechi.”

“Conditions have not been met.”

He sighed and pocketed the phone again. Akechi rose, and turned out the light.

* * *

The walls had fallen away.

The suffocating cell in which Akechi had found himself not two weeks ago had degenerated completely, reverting to an unadorned cage hanging like a chandelier from the Velvet Room’s unseen ceiling. Through these bars he had first seen those unsettling twins, and the face of Igor. He saw the latter now, looking up at him. He waved one thin-fingered hand.

“Welcome back,” said Igor. “And hello at last. We finally see each other clearly.”

“You don’t look any different than the other one.”

“Yes, the Usurper’s imitation was quite masterful. But it still failed him, in the end.” Igor spread his hands. “My faith in the Tricksters was not misplaced. Nor, it would seem, was my faith in you.
Your progress has been astonishing. Already we approach the end game.”

Akechi gazed around at the blue-stone panopticon. Those endless cells in which the shadows thrashed and surged. Now more than ever he felt the weight of their observation – mindless eyes, without judgement or recrimination. It didn’t make him any less uncomfortable.

“Why are you doing this?” he asked.

“I beg your pardon?”

“This. All of this.” He spread his arms, encompassing the cage, the cells, Igor himself. “What do you gain from it?”

“It is not a matter of gain. The Velvet Room exists for your benefit, not mine.”

“I’ll admit that it’s been an entertaining performance. But I don’t know what your own end game is supposed to be. Even if this cage breaks, I’ll be destined for a less metaphorical one soon enough.” He curled his fingers around the bars. “Were you just trying to refine me into a more effective tool for Kurusu’s sake? If so, I don’t particularly blame you.”

“No,” said Igor. “That is not at all the case.”

Akechi blinked. Igor’s words had been unusually forceful. He began tapping his finger on the desk, his other hand curled beneath his chin – another tic, Akechi noticed, that Yaldabaoth had imitated well.

“In my time as the attendant for the Velvet Room, I have seen no end of would-be gods,” said Igor. “They spawn from the twists and the flaws within mankind’s soul, without cessation or interruption. A menagerie of horrors seeking to pull their creators to ruin. And yet, that same flawed soul gives birth to such wonders. Your desires burn like a flame. They bring warmth to those around you, they shine like a beacon to those in need of guidance, though they ever threaten to become a conflagration that will consume you all. That delicate balance. Another blessed paradox. The Velvet Room was born to nurture that spirit. Those who possess the will to lead humanity away from perdition are invited here, so that we may guide them on a better path. So far, every mad god and conniving demon has fallen to those champions. But the Usurper?” His voice grew harsher. “He was the first to strike at the Velvet Room directly. To corrupt its purpose and mistreat its attendants, and mislead a guest onto a path that would end only in destruction. For this, I despise him.”

Akechi recoiled away from the bars. Igor’s fists had clenched; upon speaking that word his gentle voice had acquired a guttural chthonic rumble that set Akechi’s heart rattling in his ribcage. The entire Velvet Room seemed to bow outward like a boiler about to burst; the shadows all fled to the far ends of their cells, quivering in terror.

“Death alone is too light a punishment for such an offense. I sense that his influence is not yet banished. His stench yet clings to every brick of this Velvet Room. I choke on it with every breath.” Akechi shrank away from him; the air around Igor had turned alive with vibration, like the inside of a subwoofer. “I will not be satisfied until he has been completely purged from this sacred place. Every trace obliterated. Every wrong righted. And that,” he said, voice softening at last, “includes my own.”

Akechi crept back to the front of the cage. Igor looked up at him again; his rictus grin attempted to look apologetic.
“It was my negligence that allowed the Usurper to gain entry. His actions, and all consequences thereof, stem from my own failure. That includes your current predicament.” He steepled his fingers. “So now you see. Even in this endeavor, you are not alone. I, too, am in need of rehabilitation.”

“Does that make me your community service? You may have bitten off more than you can chew.”

He chuckled. “Do you truly believe so? Your growth may have been irregular, but thus far I have nothing but pride in your accomplishments. You scarcely required my guidance at all.”

“Not true. Thanks to you, I realized where Kurusu was being kept.” He paused. “Can you tell me how he’s doing?”

“Alas, no. He left my sight when he ventured into the Sea of Souls. But I have left him in the care of my assistant. So long as his own soul continues to burn, she will not leave his side.”

“Fine. I’ll come for him soon enough. We’ll end this. And then…” He sighed, resting his head against the metal. “Whatever happens, can happen.”

“This is not goodbye.” The Velvet room began to grow indistinct. “And your time is not yet at an end. A future remains to be grasped, even for you. Hold on to that hope.”

Akechi didn’t reply to that – and even if he had, there was no guarantee Igor would have heard him. His shape was dissolving into murk as well, the Velvet Room once again crumbling in the dawn. His head stung in that haze and he saw it again, that distant light, tauntingly flitting about in the center of his vision. His last memory was reaching out to it, the bars parting like smoke around his fingers, his prison now insubstantial as everything else in the dream.
Chapter 13

RS: hey hi hello mornin i just got out of bed and i guess we FIGURED OUT THE LAST KEYWORD WTF
RS: WT ACTUAL F
MN: Ryuji, classes start in fifteen minutes. Why are you just waking up now?
AT: ouch, busted
RS: so i overslept a little, nbd
RS: who even cares, this is like the best possible day to play hooky anyway
MN: The world will not end within the next eight hours, Ryuji.
MN: ...probably.
RS: see, even you admit it!
MN: I did no such thing. Either way, truancy officers still exist last I checked, and if any of you ran into one then that would be far more damaging to our plans.
MN: We also need confirmation from Akechi before we make a move.
YK: For my part, I believe that he will answer in the affirmative. He was quite confident last night and he does not strike me as the type to act rashly in this matter, except when it comes to insisting upon his own premature incarceration.
YK: No doubt Futaba will give us a definitive answer when she next makes contact with him, but in the meantime, I recommend that we make all necessary preparations today.
HO: Leave the equipment to me. I had a very nice chat with Mr. Iwai over the phone yesterday and it turns out he can have a selection of our usual armaments discreetly shipped to Leblanc this afternoon. No need to smuggle anything ourselves. I’ll foot the bill, naturally.
HO: I also need to stop by his store to pick up a special order. I want to bring him something nice! Maybe some gourmet lollipops? Ann, are those a thing??
AT: those are absolutely a thing
HO: Hooray! o(^▽^)o
HO: I have a few things to do this morning, but I’ll have everything ready by the time school gets out. See you all then!
[Haru Okumura is now offline.]
RS: so am i only one who’s kinda scared that haru and iwai are bff’s?
RS: fiiiiiiiiine
RS: i’ve got a thing to do after so i’ll be a little late comin to leblanc anyway
RS: time to stick a toothbrush in my face
[Ryuji Sakamoto is now offline.]
AT: yusuke, are you all set?
YK: Naturally.
MN: Is this about what you and Futaba were discussing last night?
AT: i’m surprised you haven’t figured it out by now, makoto
AT: we’ve got a target, we’re invading a palace
AT: time to send a calling card
MN: What?
YK: Futaba pulled up a layout of St. Luke’s and the location of Shimizu’s hospital room. We intend to deliver the card there.
MN: But he’s comatose. The card needs to actually be comprehended by the target to affect their cognition.
MN: Not to mention that the hospital will probably be locked down tight. They’re barely accepting patients anymore, let alone visitors.

AT: Dr Takemi said that the paranoia syndrome victims are all way more aware of their surroundings than normal coma patients, so maybe that goes for Shimizu too.

AT: We’re hoping that he’ll understand what we’re doing even if he’s not awake.

AT: Like, you ever start dreaming about a car alarm and then you wake up and find out it was just your alarm clock going off? Same idea.

YK: As for infiltrating the hospital, Ann has a strategy of her own.

YK: I personally am dubious as to its chances of success, but it is worth a try.

AT: Excuse you!

YK: Even if we fail, we will likely just be escorted from the hospital, though I suppose there is a chance the authorities could be involved. However, I believe it is a necessary risk. Given the nature of this mission, it is vital that we take every measure possible to ensure our success.

YK: Shimizu is holding Akira hostage. He will strike us with everything he has the moment we arrive. We should let him know that we intend to do the same.

MN: It sounds like you’ve given it enough thought, at least. I’ll leave it in your hands.

AT: We’ll almost def be the last ones at Leblanc, this’ll take some prep on my end.

AT: Hopefully we’ll be in before sundown though.

YK: Wish us luck.

AT: Pffft

AT: I make my own luck.

* * *

St. Luke’s was a sprawling multi-tiered campus with buildings the color of old plastic; the hospital, from above, looked a bit like an arrow with the point sheared off, but at street level all that could be seen were sharp-edged and angular walls ridged with windows like the notches on a cheesegrater. The area around the entrance was less mobbed than Yusuke had expected, but there were definitely large clusters of people standing about nervously like petitioners with phones to their ears, consulting with relatives before they braved the chaos inside. Through the front entrance and the windows Yusuke glimpsed movement that reminded him of a snowglobe. Give it a shake and watch the frenzy.

He stood beneath a dead and leafless tree beside the chromed menagerie of bicycle racks, the metal somehow overbright in the afternoon sun, oppressive as a shouted curse. His school uniform and placid stare drew no attention from the crowds. They had other things on their minds.

As he’d predicted, Futaba had gotten in touch with them all later that morning and relayed a message from Akechi—he was confident in his last keyword. Haru cheerfully went about preparing to have their tools of destruction shipped to an ever-wearier Sojiro’s café. Ryuji slunk away to some unknown errand in Akihabara that he seemed reluctant to explain further. That just left Yusuke and Ann.

His phone rang and he put it to his ear.

“I’m on my way,” said Ann. “Just got off the train.”

“I am awaiting your arrival now.”

“Good. Just like we said. Follow behind me and don’t look around or talk. We’ve got to just march on through.”
“May I ask how, exactly, you determined this would work?”

“I saw it on TV.” She delivered this explanation with an unsettling degree of confidence. “And I am a model, after all. There’s a lot of power in the way you walk. If we don’t get lost and don’t break our stride we should squeak through.”

“I suppose I will have to leave it to you.” Yusuke looked up at the fourth-floor windows; up there was the ICU ward, and Seki Shimizu’s room. “Something has been bothering me, however.”

“The room, right?”

“Correct. Why has he not been moved to the general population? It’s been months. And his condition, if Akechi’s theory is correct, should be even more stable than that of the other Paranoia Syndrome patients. One would think that he would be transferred so that the equipment could be used by someone in greater need of it.”

“I’m not sure, either. Shiho was moved out of intensive care after just a couple weeks. Maybe he’s in worse shape than we thought?”

“Perhaps. Or his transfer was lost in the chaos created by the rush of new patients. Either way, it does us little good to speculate now.” He patted his back pocket. “The card is prepared. Though I am curious why you wished for me to accompany you in the first place. It sounds as though I have little to contribute besides the card itself.”

“You’re from his school. It’s a decent alibi. Plus, you’re good moral support. You’re unshakeable, Yusuke. You’re my rock.”

“I see.”

“Say it. Say you’re my rock.”

“I am your rock.”

“Louder! With confidence!”

“There are people about, Ann.”

“Oh, right. Never mind. Train’s stopping anyway, so I’ll be there in five. Keep an eye out.”

“Understood.”

Yusuke hung up and continued to wait. The icy November air nipped at him through his thin clothes but he paid it no mind. He watched the sun’s reflection in one of those recessed windows. The way the light haloed around it, as if painted atop the canvas of the sky. He resisted the urge to frame the sight – the familiar gesture was marvelous for his composition and memory, but it also tended to make people stare. He didn’t even notice the crisp clack-clack of heels coming up behind him.

“Let’s go.”

He turned. “I beg your pardon, miss, but I believe you have the wrong-”

He almost choked. Even with the blond hair, he’d barely recognized her. Ann had traded out her usual attire for a sober burgundy blazer, knee-length skirt, and sensible heels; she wore tinted sunglasses that muffled the blue of her eyes and her hair was tied back in a no-nonsense ponytail.
draped over one shoulder. All of this, plus the clipboard tucked under her arm and her stern and unsmiling mien, had changed her appearance from that of a bubbly high-school student to a particularly fearsome bureaucrat, the kind that some hapless salaryman might be forced to confront after slighting one middle-manager too many.

“Remember the plan. Front door, please.” Even her voice had changed – she’d sanded it down to a harsh and unamused monotone. She headed for the hospital entrance without another word, her short and sprightly stride clicking her footsteps staccato on the pavement. Yusuke fell in line and tried to bury his shock.

That shock came to the surface again when they entered the hospital proper. The transformation was startling; from the outside it looked crowded but manageable, but on the inside it was like a hellish cross between a funeral and a department store on Christmas Eve. Every seat in the lobby was taken. So was much of the floor. Parents clutching children, elderly fighting for space, people bent over their phones like compasses hoping for some advice that could help them navigate the snarl of humanity choking the front desk. What staff could be seen looked ready to splinter, their veneer of polite helpfulness sanded down to bare wood as they fought to soothe the endless procession of people either fighting to see patients interred in the hospital or begging for a moment with the doctors themselves. Several people had their eyes closed and appeared heedless to the chaos; Yusuke dearly hoped that they were just asleep. The pleas and shouted recriminations and rescheduled plans and lashings of rumor bled into one another until it all became white noise, a sea of mindless sound through which Ann waded, her bespectacled glare and unflinching footsteps neatly cutting a path around every sprawled body or harried nurse. Yusuke followed as she slipped right past the front desk, and into the hospital corridors.

The hallways themselves weren’t much better; the staff rushing around were bug-eyed, tight-lipped, staring at nothing, all of them on their way to put out a dozen different metaphorical fires before they became literal ones. They passed by a gathering of several orderlies and nurses that had cornered a single smooth-pated doctor whose eyes swam behind his thick spectacles; all of them brandished files, and for a moment the doctor looked ready to claw his way out of that mob and beg Yusuke for aid. St. Luke’s patient rooms were all private ones. Several doors they passed were ajar. Every bed was filled. Every occupant was limp and silent. The chaotic rhythm of their heart monitors was like water torture.

One nurse had the presence of mind to stop and point at Ann. “Excuse me, what are you-”

“He’s with me,” Ann said curtly. “Keep up the good work, miss.” And then they were already past the nurse and accelerating.

They slipped into an elevator too filled with anxious humanity for Ann and Yusuke to even stand out; Ann stared down at her clipboard and flipped through the papers as they ascended. Yusuke glimpsed several of the pages. They appeared to be notes from Ms. Usami’s math class.

The elevator dinged open and they slipped back out and into the circulation of staff through the halls. Left, right, right again, now in the ICU where the nurses’ conversation was more frantic than ever. The stress in the atmosphere was almost cloying. Yusuke was faintly acquainted with this sort of tension – standing among other hopefuls around their art exhibits, where every sideways glance weighed heavy with judgement and a single remark could make or shatter a career – but it was a pale imitation of what he felt here; it was like trying to walk against a strong gale. But Ann’s step was unbroken, until finally her heels’ tempo came to a halt.

“Room 404,” she said. “Let’s hope it’s unlocked.”

Ann tried the doorknob and it turned freely, and she barely managed to suppress her triumphant
grin. They stepped inside like the thieves they were.

“That,” Yusuke said, after the door shut, “was extremely impressive.”

“Thank you.” She tucked her glasses into her blazer collar, shook her hair loose. “Just like I thought. No one ever bothers someone important-looking who walks around like they own the place. Nearly everyone was too busy to notice us anyway.”

“Your acting was unexpectedly…that is to say, compared to when we first met, it was quite-”

“Just because you start out bad at something doesn’t mean you have to stay that way. I took some lessons over the summer.” She winked. “And, you know, my acting had a pretty good track record last year too. It’s all about what people want to see.”

“Where did you even acquire those clothes?”

“Oh, I just got this off-the-rack on the way home last night. I wasn’t sure about the cut and I was kind of worried the color would stand out too much, but it reminded me of my thief outfit. Gave me a little confidence boost, you know?” She suddenly chattered out that last word, shivering violently. “Yikes. They forget to turn on the heat, or something?”

If anything, it was even colder in here than it was outside the hospital. Yusuke massaged his arms, tried to work the prickling chill away from his skin.

The room was a soft sepia and smelled faintly of laundry detergent. Across from the door, one large window provided a clear view of the bustling city outside. The sunlight through that window intersected the bed where Seki Shimizu lay. Ann approached him, her expression grave.

Pale but clean complexion, thin nose, long lashes that lay on his cheeks like smears of soot. His hair had grown during his time asleep and formed a dark halo on the pillow. He could have been called handsome at one point, but his time spent bedridden had caused his flesh to slacken and slough in a way that appeared nauseatingly unnatural, like a corpse that the undertaker had just finished dolling up. His mouth was open slightly. His chest rose and fell. His heart monitor beeped off the seconds. He looked nothing like the entity that had hunted them through the Dead Sea, and yet, as she stood over him, Ann shivered again, harder.

“Geez, did they seriously just forget about him in here? Feels like the AC is running full blast. It’s not August anymore.”

Yusuke ran his fingers over the ventilator beneath the window and felt nothing.

“I do not think we should linger here,” he said.

“Well, I’m not exactly planning to start a picnic with him.” She turned. “Yusuke?”

He clutched at himself, staring hard at the floor, his complexion turned cheesy and sheened with sweat.

“The angles,” he said hoarsely. “They’re…improper.”

The corners of the window. The recesses in the walls. The way the blandly appealing picture frames hung and the setting of the floor and the tilt of the doorway whose door they’d shut. All of these things seemed normal at first but as Ann peered around at them they all felt suddenly and subtly off. The lines gone crooked like a child’s rough drawing of a room. The doorway seemed to tilt too far to both the left and the right at once. The ground beneath her feet pitched and yawed like
a ship in a storm. Every beep of the heart monitor was a nail driven into her ear. And there was
something else. A sensation with which she had been much too familiar over the last several
weeks.

“Yusuke,” she said, and the syllables were too syrupy – she all but forced them out of her throat.
“Do you feel like you’re being watched?”

“Paranoia.” He spoke it like a warding.

The both of them looked at Shimizu. Here was the flashpoint of a distortion eating the entire world
alive. The walls between cognition and reality were far too thin. They could almost smell the acid
tang of that cold, dark water.

Yusuke stepped up beside her and withdrew the card. Its bright crimson glowed in the antique-
photo coloration of this room. Ann took it, and held it out to the body in the bed.

“Hello, Shimizu,” she said. “Recognize this?”

His eyes remained closed. This was absurd. Surely she’d imagined that sudden half-beat skip in the
heart monitor.

In unison, they began to read:

“Seki Shimizu. Malevolent dreamer, gaoler of the Dead Sea. From your tainted sleep you have
tormented this world, entrapping it within the paranoia you wrought.”

At once, the room’s temperature plummeted; it nearly stole their breath away. For a terrifying
moment Ann almost dropped the card, but she gripped it tight enough to crease the cardboard and
read on, every word an icicle cutting at their throats.

“Whatever your motives, we cannot allow this evil to continue. Therefore, we have decided you
shall awaken from your dream, and confess your crimes with your own mouth.”

They had to shut their eyes; the room tumbled and groaned around them, straining against the walls
of the real. Every corner and angle warped until they seemed ready to split at the seams and reveal
a glimpse of dark and eyeless horrors underneath. The view outside the window had disappeared,
the sun washing out the world until all that remained was a square of searing white. That relentless
mechanical beeping had been drowned out by a second harmonic underneath. A sinister rattle. The
approach of chains.

“We shall retrieve our comrade from the fortress of your heart, and then steal your distorted desires
without delay!” They rose their voices, screaming in defiance against the frozen air. “This we
swear, as the Phantom Thieves of Hearts!”

And then their throats locked up. Frozen chain links constricting the skin, sealing their windpipes
shut. Before them Shimizu lay placid and peaceful as ever. Behind them was a voice, that toneless
dragging rasp, clotted with inhuman hate:

“Then come.”

The chains disappeared. The temperature reverted. The room snapped back into place. They gasped
for air, rubbed their unmarked but burning necks. The calling card crumpled in Ann’s fist. She
turned to Yusuke, started to say something.

Then the door burst open and in charged a plump and wild-haired nurse brandishing a stack of
paperwork like a berserker’s shield. “What was that shouting? What are you doing here? You’re not supposed to be here!”

“I. Er. That is to say. Mm.” Yusuke’s mouth flapped open and shut like a gaffed fish. But then he heard sobs behind him, loud and lusty.

“I’m, I’m so s-sorry.” Ann sniffled, wiping her eyes. “We just…we haven’t seen Seki in s-s-so long, and just the sight of him…I mean, he looks like he’s already dead…” She clapped her hands over her face and went on crying. The nurse blinked, relented a little.

“You’re…friends of his?”

“We attend the same school.” Yusuke felt like he had to make a contribution.

“You’re still not supposed to be here. Visiting hours are suspended.”

Ann wiped her eyes on her sleeve. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know. One of the other nurses, she said we could…but I don’t want to get anyone in trouble…”

The nurse fidgeted in place like someone trying to pull themselves loose from quicksand. Then she gestured at the door. “Come on. I’ll escort you out.”

Ann managed a brave smile through her tears. “Thank you so much.”

They left. Yusuke silently noted how the tension left the nurse’s posture the moment she stepped out of that room. Little wonder Shimizu hadn’t been transferred out. The staff here probably spent as little time in his presence as possible. He was lucky they could tolerate that hostile atmosphere long enough to change his IV.

When they reached the lobby Ann murmured her gratitude and goodbyes and gave the nurse a quick hug. In her closed fist, Yusuke could still see the crimson folds of the calling card.

“That was some quick thinking,” he said, once they were outside again.

“Mhm. Eat your heart out, Mika.”

“Who? What?”

“Nothing. I was gonna go home and get changed, but now I think I’ll head straight for Leblanc. You?”

“That was always my intention, yes.”

She stood with her back to him, her untied hair blown askew in the chill wind. Something about the set of her shoulders made Yusuke hesitant to get much closer; the surrounding air felt volatile, like firedamp. One spark could set off an inferno. Her fist shuddered as she clenched it around the calling card again and again.

“He hurts all those people, kidnaps Akira, and now he seriously thinks he can scare us away?” She turned just enough for one blue eye to burn through him. “Let’s go, Yusuke. Forget about just stealing hearts. The Phantom Thieves are going to war.”

* * *

“Breaking news.
“Civil unrest erupted in Hong Kong this morning following an official announcement from several hospitals that they would be unable to accept any further patients afflicted with Paranoia Syndrome, citing lack of space and resources. Crowds of protestors who were already at the scene to decry the hospitals’ suspension of visiting hours then assaulted the hospitals and surrounding area, prompting intervention from the HKPF. The situation is still ongoing.

“This incident is the latest in a series of ‘tipping points’ which have also occurred in Moscow, Bangladesh, Athens, and New York City, among others. While most of the protests have been dispersed with no significant injuries or casualties, they represent a trend of growing unease about the seeming inability to cope with the ever-growing number of.”

“-markets in freefall for the third consecutive day, with Paranoia Syndrome as the likely cause. Travel and airlines in particular have suffered significantly following an incident where two passengers aboard a JAL flight were afflicted with Paranoia Syndrome within an hour of one another. The flight was diverted and the victims were provided with medical attention.

“JAL has issued an official apology to the other passengers and commended the airline staff for their swift and professional response. However, the number of canceled flights has continued to climb, with tourism suffering accordingly as Paranoia Syndrome-”

> anonym: is anybody out there?

> anonym: Of course we’re all sick. We’re letting it into our heads.
> anonym: stop talking about it! stop THINKING about it!

> anonym: the wheels are turning, we’re all going to kill each other at this rate
> anonym: every day feels like a year
> anonym: My mom won’t wake up. I don’t what to do.

>anon: Of course we’re all sick. We’re letting it into our heads.

>*click*

> anon: stop talking about it! stop THINKING about it!

>*click*

> anon: the wheels are turning, we’re all going to kill each other at this rate
> anon: every day feels like a year
> anon: My mom won’t wake up. I don’t what to do.

>*click*

>anon: Of course we’re all sick. We’re letting it into our heads.

>*click*

>anon: stop talking about it! stop THINKING about it!

>*click*

>anon: the wheels are turning, we’re all going to kill each other at this rate
>anon: every day feels like a year
>anon: My mom won’t wake up. I don’t what to do.

>*click*

>anon: Of course we’re all sick. We’re letting it into our heads.

>*click*

>anon: stop talking about it! stop THINKING about it!

>*click*

>anon: the wheels are turning, we’re all going to kill each other at this rate
>anon: every day feels like a year
>anon: My mom won’t wake up. I don’t what to do.

>*click*

>anon: Of course we’re all sick. We’re letting it into our heads.

>*click*

>anon: stop talking about it! stop THINKING about it!

>*click*

>anon: the wheels are turning, we’re all going to kill each other at this rate
>anon: every day feels like a year
>anon: My mom won’t wake up. I don’t what to do.

>*click*

>anon: Of course we’re all sick. We’re letting it into our heads.

>*click*

>anon: stop talking about it! stop THINKING about it!

>*click*

>anon: the wheels are turning, we’re all going to kill each other at this rate
>anon: every day feels like a year
>anon: My mom won’t wake up. I don’t what to do.

>*click*

>anon: Of course we’re all sick. We’re letting it into our heads.

>*click*

>anon: stop talking about it! stop THINKING about it!

>*click*

>anon: the wheels are turning, we’re all going to kill each other at this rate
>anon: every day feels like a year
>anon: My mom won’t wake up. I don’t what to do.

>*click*

>anon: Of course we’re all sick. We’re letting it into our heads.

>*click*

>anon: stop talking about it! stop THINKING about it!

>*click*

>anon: the wheels are turning, we’re all going to kill each other at this rate
>anon: every day feels like a year
>anon: My mom won’t wake up. I don’t what to do.
revelation’ regarding the Paranoia Syndrome incidents within the week. Further details remain unknown, but it has been speculated that the leak may be connected to a series of recent cybersecurity breaches across several Japanese hospitals.

“Medjed, which had fallen silent after its brief clash with the mysterious vigilante group ‘the Phantom Thieves’ last year, has received an unprecedented amount of public attention following this announcement, as rumors continue to spread regarding Paranoia-”

*click*

“-expected to make a full recovery following his assault yesterday. Diet Councilman Toranosuke Yoshida, who had recently been re-elected to office after several public relations incidents earlier in his career, was attacked in the midst of a public gathering, as several individuals rushed from the crowd and struck him repeatedly before being detained by local authorities. Yoshida had become well-known for his rallies in the Shibuya region during his campaign, and had reportedly called for this latest assembly as an opportunity for a ‘transparent exchange of ideas and show of compassion for fellow citizens’ in light of the Paranoia Syndrome epidemic sweeping across the world.

“Reporters were not allowed inside the hospital where Yoshida was being treated, but he released a public statement via a representative earlier this morning, asking for leniency for the individuals who attacked him. He has declined to press charges.

“The attack on Yoshida, widely believed to be one of the more communicative members of the Diet, is the latest expression of mounting frustrations with the government and their inability to respond in the wake of Paranoia-”

*click*

> anon: It doesn’t matter anymore. Let the people die.
> anon: wtf did Tora ever do to you!?
> anon: PS is just giving people the excuse to fuck each other up
> anon: and here i thought climate change was gonna be what finished us off
> anon: anyone else subscribing to medjed, they’d better have something juicy
> anon: Just watch it all collapse, no one’s going to fix this

*click*

“-number of cases has risen significantly, with any official census of Paranoia Syndrome victims failing to accurately account for the true scope of-”

*click*

“-planned protests and candlelight vigils for Paranoia Syndrome victims continue to grow, as information remains-”

*click*

“-Paranoia Syndrome remains the number one global search term, as people search for answers regarding-”

*click*

“-police presence intensifying in the wake of Paranoia-”
"-Diet remains silent regarding Paranoia-"
"-world continues to suffer under Paranoia-"
"-Paranoia-"
"-Paranoia-"
"-Paranoia-"
"-Paranoia-"

> anon: This is how it all ends, isn’t it?

* * *

The babble of bad news coaxing the populace in and out of restless sleep.

The bodies which fell like cordwood in the streets and in their homes.

The hands raised high at the sight of every victim. The phones at the ends of arms like eyestalks from which their lidless stares flashed.

Seki Shimizu, tranquil in his hospital bed, a great weight upon the sheet of reality, distorting it around his presence until it began to tear.

And as the new year approached, the world dug in its heels, terrified of facing tomorrow.

* * *

Everyone else was assembled at Leblanc when Yusuke and Ann walked in, several of them with curry-smeared plates, Makoto downing a cup of Sojiro’s special house blend (mild acidity with a nutty aftertaste, approximately as potent as rocket fuel). Futaba sat next to her, laptop open, not acknowledging any of their presence. Sojiro, still at his honored seat behind the bar, made a passing, disgruntled mention of the very large box that two reticent and be-suited men had dropped off in the attic (“If they hadn’t mentioned Haru’s name then all of you would have been shit out of luck”). Ryuji’s booth was also occupied by an Akihabara shopping bag bearing the symbol of a grinning and goggle-eyed UFO; he seemed reluctant to let anyone see inside. Haru had a duffle bag in her seat heavy enough to distend the cushion. They all appeared ready to go, and Ann’s outfit drew a few compliments and a low whistle from Ryuji, but as the two of the described what they had encountered in the hospital, a pall settled over the entire group.
“You’re making it sound like the room was haunted,” Sojiro said. “You’ve never run into anything like this before?”

Ann shook her head. “Never. I mean, you remember what happened the last time the real world and the cognitive one got mixed up. Tokyo got really ugly. But that took the combined distortions of everyone in the city. If Shimizu alone is able to change his environment like that, then there’s no doubt he’s the one we’re after.”

“But I have no idea how he’s able to exert such a powerful distortion in the first place,” Makoto said. She downed the rest of her coffee; the cup jittered slightly as she set it back in the saucer. “And now that the calling card has been delivered, his Palace will be on red alert. It might be even more hostile than Yaldabaoth’s domain, and we don’t have any idea of what the place looks like, much less a route to the Treasure. This is going to be a tough one.”

“Understatement of the year,” Ryuji muttered. “Hey, is Akechi hearin’ any of this? Yo Akechi, are you hearin’ any of this?”

“Quite clearly, thank you,” Akechi called down. “I told him he could sit in the back booth if he wanted, but he seemed more interested in going through that box,” Sojiro told them. “Heard a lot of clunking and clattering for a while.”

“I’m sure he’s perfectly capable of eavesdropping, in any case,” Morgana said darkly. “We’re all assembled. The calling card is sent. We shouldn’t delay any longer.”

“Agreed.” Yusuke had taken his place in front of the Sayuri, gazing impassively at that inscrutable smile. “The difficulty of this task is irrelevant. We must succeed. No one else will do it for us.”

Futaba closed her laptop. “Sojiro has to leave. The Meta-Nav’s got an AOE. Nothing screws up a raid faster than some schmuck who doesn’t know when to run out of the circle.”

“Futaba, I have no idea what you just said.”

“The Meta-Nav transports everyone within a radius of its activation,” Makoto explained. “We’re going to trigger it in the attic. If you stay here, you’ll get yanked into Shimizu’s Palace with the rest of us. I shouldn’t have to tell you that would end badly.”

“You can just pop out and come back in half an hour or so, Boss. We should be gone by then.” Haru stood up and hoisted the duffle bag over her shoulder. She attempted enthusiasm. “Well! Ready to save the world again, everyone?”

“There’s something I want to say.”

All movement halted. Every head turned to Sojiro. He’d bent low over his coffee cup, looking into its depths like someone perched at the edge of a balcony. The craze of jagged reflections in his glasses clouded his eyes.

“The last couple of weeks I’ve been staring at the TV while you kids ran all across the city. Some days it felt like you were the only ones trying to do something about this craziness. Everyone else has been useless. The police. The government. And me, too.”

Futaba stood up from her seat. “Sojiro, that isn’t-”

“No, listen. I know what a shitty place the world can be. How it might turn out to be. Even if all the chips fall in place for kids like you, we’re still marching you off into a future that looks less
and less certain by the day. It’s hard enough just trying to make a life for yourself out there. Meanwhile all of you sit around and drink my coffee and act like this...this thieving business is just part of your routine. I don’t know if you’re actually saving the world, but you all act like it’s nothing. It’s not nothing.” He looked up, and his eyes shone wet. “You hear me? It’s not. I know that you’ll never be recognized for the things you’ve done. Seems like you and Akira have made your peace with that. But, for whatever little it’s worth, I do recognize it. And I’m proud of it. Proud of you all.”

It was Futaba who moved first – brisk, businesslike. She stepped away from her stool, walked around the bar, and then threw her arms around Sojiro and held him tight. Sojiro hugged her back. They all heard the way his breath shuddered.

“You come back, okay?” His voice broke. “You come home safe. I’ll be here when you do.”

“Oh-huh.” She stepped away, wiping her eyes, and glared at them as if daring them to comment. No one did.

“That goes for him, too.” Sojiro pointed a finger upward. “I don’t care how bad this Paranoia Syndrome business is. None of you should die for it. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Boss,” they chorused.

“Good. Then I’m gone.”

Yusuke stepped reverently out of the way as he passed. The bell jingled. The door closed.

They went upstairs without another word.

Akechi had moved from his old place at the sofa. He now sat on Akira’s bed, solemn as a judge, his hands resting on his knees. Off to the side of the room was the large crate that Iwai’s men had delivered to the café. Its contents were on the floor – all of their weapons, neatly paired off by user. They were scattered across the hardwood like augurs, Chien Tung sticks foretelling violence in their future.

“I suppose it’s time,” he said, withdrawing his phone. “I hope I didn’t mix up anyone’s equipment. And Okumura’s firearm appears to be missing entirely.”

“I brought my own,” said Haru.

She dropped her duffle bag on the floor and unzipped it. What she withdrew looked like a pump-action shotgun’s bigger, meaner cousin, all weathered wood and oiled metal. The bore was big enough for any of them to stick both their thumbs comfortably inside and still have room left over.

“China Lake model, made to order.” She tested the pump-action and the gun produced a meaty cha-CHUNK. “Goodness, what a satisfying sound.”

The rest stared wide-eyed. Ryuji, who’d hung back by the stairs, leaned over and whispered to Morgana.

“Yo, Morgana?”

“Hm?”

“I’m pretty sure our team’s got some of the scariest women in the world.”
“Mhm.”

“That makes all of us,” Akechi said. “Now, as for the keywords-”

“Hold up a sec.”

Ryuji strode across the room and his shadow fell over Akechi. He offered the shopping bag. Akechi looked up at it quizzically.

“I know that Boss took your gun, and, y’know, good on him,” Ryuji said gruffly. “But that kinda left you empty-handed, so I swung by Akihabara, and it ain’t like I know what any decent models are but there’s this kid who hangs out in the arcades and he knows Akira because of course he frigging does, and he gave me some recs that were, y’know, reasonably priced, and…yeah. Anyway.” He put the bag on the bed and stepped away. “Here.”

Everyone mercifully withheld comment as Akechi withdrew a toy lightsaber and a silvery ray gun from the bag. He held them in his hands like he was trying to decide if they were edible.

“I took ‘em out of the packaging first,” Ryuji said. He’d started to flush around the neck. “You know what a pain in the ass that shrink wrap can be. And batteries ain’t included. Dunno if that changes anything.”

“It shouldn’t.” He took the gun in both hands and sighted down. “It has a good heft to it. Thank you, Sakamoto.”

“Yeah, whatever.” He took up his own weapons and retreated into the throng.

“Keywords,” Futaba piped up.

“Yes,” Akechi agreed. “Keywords. I may not get it right the first time, but I know the concept behind Shimizu’s distortion. After that, it’s just a matter of finding the proper nouns.”

“Real interested in knowing exactly what caused your little eureka moment last night. I stayed up thinking what I found that set you off and came up with nothing.”

“It must be a powerful distortion indeed to affect such a wide area,” Yusuke said.

Akechi nodded. “It is. And Futaba had it right the first time. She believed that she had found no evidence. But that absence was the evidence itself.” He looked away from their confused faces. “The final piece was his bedroom.”

“What about it?” Morgana asked. “You said there wasn’t anything worth mentioning there.”

“Yes.”

He brought up the Meta-Nav. That bruised eye bore through him.

Akechi said, “It looked like mine.”

As they stared on, Akechi held up the phone, and spoke:

“Target: Seki Shimizu.”

“Candidate found.”

“Location: the world.”
He looked around the room one last time. The Phantom Thieves, armed and in unison, nodded their assent.


“They all braced themselves. But that familiar sensation, the world falling away under their feet, didn’t come. Akechi rose an eyebrow at the phone. He looked ready to say something – a question, an apology. Then:

“The phone grew warm in Akechi’s hand.


That serene voice warped and distorted and stuttered. Akechi grit his teeth at the phone grew hotter. The eye on the screen warped like wax, grew pale and choked with static, crowding out with white. The speakers fuzzed and the voice slowed until it only spoke the first piece of its intonation, sounding like an endless denial, and as it spoke their guts all heaved and the attic fell away one plank at a time, the wood wavering and peeling away to parts unknown.


And as its voice echoed away, the world became awash in white.

They were in their thief garb and here there was nothing at all. No ground or sky or walls. No sound; their heartbeats pounded frantically in their ears, the echo of their blood off their bones the only noise available. No taste to the air; they breathed but weren’t sure how, and every inhalation felt recycled and stale. They clustered together and hoarded one another’s color, because reality had fallen away into a screaming white void, endless horizon without feature or interruption.

“Is everyone all right?” Akechi asked. Even his voice sounded muffled, as if the sound was in search of molecules to knock together.

“We’re fine,” said Ryuji. “Dude, your mask is still messed up.”

Akechi blinked, noticing his two-tone vision had returned. He touched the top of his mask and felt that familiar crack. Then his hands went to the sword and raygun holstered at his side.

“It’s not important,” he said. “At least the weapons made it through. Oracle, can your scans bring up anything at all?”

She already had her console open. “I’m gonna have to get back to you on that. In the meantime, I’m laying down a beacon my Persona can track later. I get the feeling that it’s gonna be a real pain finding our way back to the entry point of this place.”

“Entry from where?” Ann asked. “Where can we even go? I was expecting something bad, but this is…I don’t know what this is. Where do we even-”
“Everyone, look!” Makoto cried. “Look up there!”

They turned and followed her pointing finger and gaped at what they saw. High overhead, hanging in the empty sky like a massive punctuation mark, was something familiar. That unnerving landmark. The blackened sun of the Dead Sea.

“Did it make its way over here somehow?” Morgana asked. “A cross-over between this Palace and the Sea of Souls? This is completely uncharted territory. It shouldn’t even be possible!”

“That sun appeared in the Dead Sea around the same time Shimizu did,” said Akechi. “I believe this may, in fact, be its point of origin.”

Haru shielded her eyes. “Looking at it still makes me feel…wait, Fox, what are you doing?”

Yusuke had stepped away from the group, once again framing the sun with his fingers. No one tried to hide their exasperation; Futaba looked ready to choke him with his own tail.

“Seriously, Fox? We’ve got other priorities right now!”

He said, “I knew it.”

They fell silent as he lowered his arms and turned to them. The eyes behind his mask’s slits were coolly impassive as ever.

“I thought there was something amiss when we first encountered it,” he said. “Now that I see it plain, with no distraction, the truth is clear. The solidity of the shading, the lack of any halo effect…and of course, there is the disorientation upon looking at it. One’s depth perception goes terribly awry. It explains that weakening sensation. The feeling of falling in.”

“Well, yeah,” Ryuji said. “Makes sense you’d get a little woozy if you stared into the sun.”

“You misunderstand me. That is not the sun. It’s a hole.”

They had no reply to that, though what little color remained in Akechi’s face drained away. Inexorably, their gaze was dragged back to that black mark, and they didn’t look away even as that familiar nausea and cold anxiety weakened their knees and gripped at their hearts. Above was the crown of Seki Shimizu’s Palace. A puncture in the void itself, bearing dominion over the Phantom Thieves and them alone.
Chapter 14

The black star, the featureless gouge in the cognitive world, hung over them as they trundled through the void.

It was better inside the van, but not by much. In here their voices didn’t sound so oddly muffled, the air pumped through Morgana’s ventilators tasted more natural, and the roof mostly blocked their view of that ever-present hole, but there was still no sensation of the road underneath, nothing outside on which the eye could focus. No landmarks, save for the hole, which never seemed to shift no matter how long they drove. If not for Futaba’s scans they might have been on an amusement park ride, a childish parody of movement, going and going but never arriving anywhere.

She’d picked up a signal after a brief, cautious scan of the Palace. Of what, she couldn’t be certain. But it gave them an orientation and a place to go. Her console stained the back of the van with its sickly green light.

“Anything new, Oracle?” Makoto asked.

“We’re getting closer, but hard to say how much. Still can’t really pick up what’s generating the signal, either. So far all I know is that it’s something. It’s easy to find something when everything else is nothing.”

“This at least explains how Shimizu’s distortion could envelop the entire planet,” Morgana said. “Shido’s Palace was remarkable because it was an impression of a living society in miniature. Fitting, given his megalomania. That ship was chock-full of cognitive representations of people, all of them flawlessly duplicated.”

“Including myself,” Akechi said dully. Since they’d gotten in the van, he hadn’t looked away from his reflection in the side-view mirror.

“If you like. But Shimizu’s Palace goes in the opposite direction. Instead of taking a localized area and filling it with detail, his distorted perception just wipes everything totally clean. He’s literally a ruler of nothing.”

“What I want to know is how such a distortion could have developed in the first place,” said Makoto. She gripped the wheel tightly; the lack of feedback or vibration beneath her feet was disturbing her. “Crow, did you really find no childhood traumas or anything that could have led to this?”

“His dog died several years ago. And he appeared to be less than enthused about going to Kosei. All very banal.” He paused. “Maybe he doesn’t need a reason. Maybe the hole was always there.”

“Pretty sure people don’t work that way, dude,” Ryuji said.

“So you believe people are fundamentally good? Not an uncommon thought, but a bit naive. From experience I can say that—”

“Just shut up, Crow.” Akechi’s words ran dry – Ryuji didn’t even sound angry, just exasperated. “Even I ain’t gonna buy that you had a hard-on for killing people the day you were born. You might’ve made the dumbass choice to hang around Shido, but do you seriously think he didn’t do anything to screw you up worse than before? Both him and that shiny son of a bitch Yaldabaoth. Society messes with people, man. That’s why we worked so hard to fix it.”
One clawed hand gestured out the windshield. “In that case, realize that all of this incubated within the very society you fought for. In the same city, even. So what would you say was actually fixed?” Ryuji fumed but said nothing, and Akechi’s hand fell. “Regardless. This probably isn’t the best time for a debate. We need to focus on our goal.”

“Agreed. Stop making noise with your idiot faces.” Futaba bent over her console. “Signal’s finally closing in. Still weirdly fuzzy, but it’s not far now.”

In this endless emptiness any landmark should have been visible from miles away. And yet the source of Futaba’s signal did not make itself known. It was as though concepts like distance no longer existed here. Instead, as they approached, a silhouette faded in from the white, like strips of canvas peeling away to reveal the crossbeams obscured underneath. They all crowded around the windshield to get a closer look.

They struggled to discern its shape. A vast heap of broken geometry that sagged like a toadstool, the color of an antique photograph. In those cracked angles they eventually made out the remnants of awnings, windows, columns stained and warped as plant stems. And in the very front of the building, something far more distinctive. A small booth jutting out from between the doors, almost swallowed whole amidst that mass of rotting masonry and woodwork.

The van stopped. Morgana resumed his old shape. They approached the building as though it would bite. There was no sun here to cast shadow but still they felt its silhouette pressing down on them all.

“Is this...a theater?” Ann asked.

It was nothing that should have ever been. A crazed mishmash of architecture from every region and age – stage and film, Renaissance and Noh, ornamented like a rococo cathedral and decayed nearly beyond recognition. As they watched a nearby parapet shuddered and fell apart like a sloughed-off growth; the bricks tumbled across the jagged rooftop and flew out into the void, and once they were detached from the larger organism of the theater they crumbled like ash. A moment later there was nothing left of them.

“It’s seen better days, huh?” Ryuji observed.

“That’s probably truer than you know,” Morgana said. “Is anyone else thinking what I’m thinking?”

“The incongruity,” Akechi said. His armor stood out like a streak of graphite in the void. “A place like this has no business in this type of distortion. Unless...”

“Correct. This may very well be Shimizu’s original Palace. Just look at this damage, it’s like the void is consuming it.” He shook his head, those saucer-sized eyes full of worry. “It just keeps getting worse. Even his distortions have been distorted.”

Ann raised her finger. “Hold on. Didn’t the Meta-Nav freak out when Oracle suggested ‘a stage’ for his last keyword?”

“It didn’t react much better when I gave it the correct answer,” said Akechi. “This explains it, then. A conflict within search terms. Two distortions, one slowly overtaking the other...it’s all being swallowed up. And this void is already dominant.”

“Oracle,” said Yusuke. “I assume this structure is the source of your signal?”

“That’s it, all right. But it’s still not coming through all that clearly. Like it’s being insulated,
Makoto smacked her knuckles into her palm. “In we go, then.”

Akechi withdrew the gleaming chrome sword hilt from his waist. He stared at it pensively. His thumb flicked a small switch on its side. A sizzling blue-white ray of solidified light shot out, crackling like a dynamo; it was almost invisible against the blank white backdrop around them. He gave it a few experimental waves, then disabled the blade and re-sheathed it.

“After you,” he said.

The doors’ hinges, gagged with rust and grime, sounded like bitter laughter.

They expected an antechamber or a lobby; Akechi had a brief flash of the desolate and waterlogged reception area of the Yongen-Jaya theater. They found neither. Beyond the door was splintered wooden corridor, vast and bare. No carpeting, no decoration. Nothing to mark it as belonging to a theater or any sort of place at all. There were no torches or sconces but the hall bore a dingy gray light that seemed to emanate from the very air.

They took several cautious steps forward. There was a scraping in the walls. An insidious patter like the scamper of rodentine feet.

“...Phantom Thieves...”

That autumn-leaf voice, rushing down the hall. They shivered as the sound passed through them, and it left behind an almost imperceptible creaking from where they’d come.

Makoto looked over her shoulder. “The doors are gone.”

She didn’t sound surprised. Her tone was slurred, dreamlike.

“So the trap is shut,” Akechi said. Futaba had brought up her console, attempted to construct a map. What she produced looked like a Magic Eye picture that had partly exploded. Her face was unsmilting and taut.

“This place is...let’s just say it’s bigger on the inside. And the outside was pretty big to start with.” Her hands made a few quick passes over the grid and part of the console was bathed in an infected red light. “Shadow activity is through the roof as well. Encounter rate way, way up. That’s probably what I detected when we first entered the big empty out there.”

“What about Akira or the Treasure?” Makoto pressed her hand against a wall and pulled it back at once. The wood felt ordinary but there was a sick vibration passing through her skin that made her want to retch.

“I’m not getting anything, but given the size of this place we could walk for half a day and not get enough proximity. Not to mention that the entrance is, uh, missing. We just got shuffled to the heart of the maze. I don't even see a blip of any saferooms, either. His cognition is rock-solid all the way through.”

The way the planks around them creaked was almost smug.

“He is unlike our prior targets,” said Yusuke. His voice was steady but his foxtail twitched and shivered. “He knew we would arrive even before the calling card was sent. And because his body is incapacitated, it may be assumed that he is able to fully focus his mind on the reinforcement of this Palace. Crow’s earlier theory seems to be correct. In this space, he holds every possible
advantage."

“Nothin’ to do but bash our way through,” Ryuji growled. “We’ll go nuts if we just stand around.”

Akechi stepped to the front of the group, lightly touching his ray gun. “I don’t entirely approve of Skull’s approach, but it’s the only way we can make progress for now. Not a fortress, but a labyrinth...how interesting.” He took another step forward. “I’ve seen similar, but the way he manipulates his environment is-”

The floor opened up beneath him.

There was a flat crack like a snapping branch and then Akechi was gone from the waist down. He made no sound and his back was turned so his face was hidden and all they could see were his claws digging grooves into the woodwork as they fought for purchase, and Haru cried his name, his given name, the codes forgotten and the formality lost, and she lunged for the pit that had opened up beneath him and the pit at once opened wider so that Akechi was left holding empty air. He fell, and twisted, and in the moment before the jagged planks snapped back shut like a pair of jaws she saw his expression, and it was one of puzzlement, as though he’d been posed a difficult question and had was certain that if he had a moment, just another moment, he would come to the answer soon.

The sound of his disappearance faded. Haru was left on her knees, her hand still reaching out. The Phantom Thieves were left silent and pale. They saw no Shadows and no exit. It was only them, and these bare and forbidding walls, which seemed to have drawn a little closer.

*             *             *

He fell through a dark so deep it was almost liquid, cracking his elbows and shins on surfaces unseen. His helmet – finally, for once – kept him from cracking his skull, but it was still a painful descent, Akechi curled up fetal as the fall went on and on. He felt like he was moving in directions other than downwards. The unseen corridors turned intestinal, forcing him through. When he came to a halt it took him a while to realize it.

He unfurled himself, wincing at his bruises. That stained gray light here turned everything murky and his broken visor did little to help matters. It had sustained another crack in his fall; the fissure ran diagonal across his left eye and everything that it touched became mirrored upon itself.

He was in a room and a room was all it was. Like the corridors it was devoid of any character, a mere wooden box perhaps the size of the theater in which he and Akira had sparred what felt like a century ago. The walls around him groaned and shivered. That rat-feet pitter-pat teased at the edges of his hearing. There was no entrance or exit. Whatever gap through which he’d tumbled had already closed up.

“Best make my own exit,” he muttered to himself, and brushed at his visor. “Loki.”

Laevateinn flashed gold and struck the nearby wall with a thud. It barely made a scratch. Akechi stared, nonplussed.

“It won’t work.”

Loki and his blade faded into embers as Akechi spun in place, his single eye wide. The voice had been so close he’d expected to feel its breath in his ear.

“Shimizu?” He cautiously backed towards the center of the room. “Where are you?”
“I’m here. And you’re here. And here we are again.”

He had never heard Shimizu speak so much at once before and he was struck by how colorless the boy sounded. There was no emotion or intonation behind that thin rasp. As if the empty noise on telephone lines or between radio stations had grown teeth and tongue.

Shimizu said, “He’s here, too.”

The planks behind him groaned and he spun on his heel. His breath stopped cold at what he saw.

Akira. Akira come up through the floor like an act of macabre conjuration. Akira in a plush red velvet chair with eyes shut and skin clammy with fever-sweat. Akira with chains constricting his limbs and chest and neck, wrapped taut around his seat and yet still moving as they continued to constrict, making him grimace from the depths of whatever unnatural sleep into which he’d been forced.

Akechi didn’t speak. He rushed forward and grabbed at the chains and recoiled with a high yelp of pain. The rusted metal hadn’t lost that unnatural cold; if anything, it had only intensified. He’d only brushed it with his fingertips and yet his skin throbbed right through his gloves.

“You can’t save him. Any of them. It’s too late. It will only get later.”

“And why are you showing me this?” Akechi asked, massaging his hand. “Attempting to break my spirit?”

“There’s no need.”

He was reminded of the time Shimizu had nearly ambushed him on the streets of the Dead Sea. Trying to find a place to hide as the chains’ jangle surrounded him. It was the same here. That voice came from everywhere at once.

“You wanted to see him, didn’t you? Here he is. And here you are.”

“Why not bring the others along too, then?” He dared sarcasm. “I’m sure they’d be delighted with you for the reunion.”

“No. Not them. Only you. You’re not one of them. You never will be.”

That shut him up. Shimizu’s voice, that dispassionate noise, sounded no different in that moment from the thoughts echoing within his own head.

“I see you for what you are.” The walls shivered again, dislodging dust. “I see what you’ve seen. The holes within and without. The things you’ve done have been whispered in my ear. You’ve already arrived at the truth. No future. You would die in a cell or in the gallows. Anywhere. Just not there.”

He clenched his fists so tight his claws threatened to lacerate his palms. Those words. The same thing he’d said to Akira after their squabble in the Dead Sea. “Were you spying on us?”

The answer this time was long in coming. He thought he detected hesitation. That telephone hiss – Please stay on the line.

“It was whispered in my ear,” Shimizu said again. “I should have heard it sooner. There was no need to chase you. Nothing to take. Nothing to show.”
“Is that supposed to be an apology?”

“You wanted to see him. Here he is.”

“And here I am, yes.” It wasn’t just Shimizu’s voice that was unnatural; his vocabulary seemed limited, broken, constantly struggling to circle back to these same phrases.

“You tried to be one of them to find him again. Now you’re here. He is found. You can unmask.” Akechi thought he heard Shimizu’s tone change at that last word, ever so slightly, like he’d spat it out. “I’ll take care of the rest. You can stay here. Apart. As it should be.”

“I’m going to free him. And then we’re coming for you.”

“You can’t. You won’t. But you can try. Kill him, if you like. I don’t need him anymore.” Akira let out a strangled cry as the chain on his throat bit deep. “It’s all right if you want to kill yourself, too. But I’ll come back when the others are gone. If you’re still here, I’ll show you somewhere else. A quiet place. You can see the end of the world from there.”

With dim horror, Akechi realized that Shimizu was trying to be magnanimous.

“It’s too late,” said Shimizu. “It will only get later. Goodbye.”

There was little indication that he had actually gone – just a sense of receding pressure, an absence of prickling on Akechi’s neck. It was like the difference between being in an empty house and one in which all the occupants were asleep. The weight of other minds had fled. He still called out Shimizu’s name once, twice, but heard no answer.

Fine, he thought. To the problem at hand.

Observe the subject. Akira seated and bound. Key question – could this be a trick? A cognitive replica was certainly possible. Akechi had experienced enough of that firsthand. But he didn’t think it was the case here. Every detail of Akira’s garb was perfectly recreated and the way he spasmed and thrashed was sickeningly real. Shido’s cognitions had been excellent because the man had an eye for people, psychopath or not. Shimizu was the other way around – solitary, closed-in. Akechi didn’t think he could even muster up the effort to think up false humans in this Palace, let alone the ability. So, that meant this was the “true” Akira, his essence lashed to this theater seat by Iago’s chains. The task – set him free.

He remembered when Iago had seized him after his battle with Akira in the Dead Sea. It had only lasted a few seconds and yet the pain had felt bigger than the world. Every grain in the metal had been a sawblade. Every patch of slime a corrosive acid. In some calm place deep within his frenzied agony he’d thought that the links had a will of their own, an unspeakable bacterial malice that emanated from the chains and attacked their victims somewhere deeper than flesh and bone. The feeling of hopelessness that had permeated him then had been absolute. But Akira had still broken him free with ease. Iago hadn’t been able to drag him off; the chains had still possessed plenty of slack. One good swing from Yoshitsune’s blade had diced the lot of them.

He didn’t think it would be so easy now. The links had bitten so deep into Akira’s body that in places they looked melded with flesh and cloth. Severing them now would take incredible precision, and precision and power were often exclusive concepts. Any of his more potent attacks would just obliterate Akira along with his bonds. He gingerly reached out and scraped one of the chains with a claw. Even though his skin didn’t make contact he still felt that arctic chill.

Akechi stepped back and drew his laser gun, the weapon born from whatever 2000-yen novelty
Ryuji had grabbed from Akihabara. It actually didn’t look too bad, certainly sleeker than his other models; cables snaked octopoid throughout its frame and glowed softly from within from the weapon’s current. It even had an intensity dial. Akechi turned it to the highest setting and the gun’s sudden surge of light and high mosquito whine made him hastily crank it back down again. Now probably wasn’t the time to fiddle with the controls.

He took careful aim and fired. A beam of burning white light shot out and bounced off a chain as if the metal were mirrored. It nearly took Akechi’s head off on the ricochet. He huffed, holstered the gun, and unsheathed the beam sword. Delicately, he held the beam against a link adjacent to the chair, away from Akira’s own body, and sliced. The chain didn’t so much as smolder.

“Not impressive, Sakamoto,” he sighed, and sheathed the blade again. Akira continued to convulse. Time for a keener edge. He brought his hand up to his cracked and broken visor again and called Loki’s name and the Persona’s coruscating monochrome form spun itself into being before Akira, slouched upon the blade’s hilt, hooves dangling. Akechi stepped back and Loki angled his head expectantly.

Loki had been an excellent means to an end, or so he’d thought for a while; his power to sever the bonds that held people’s sanity in place had been the foundation of Akechi’s illustrious career under Shido. But considering where that career had ended up, he’d almost resented the Persona ever since. And they’d never had much of a rapport even before that – during his time with the Phantom Thieves, Akechi had listened to the enthusiastic way they discussed their own Personas with a quiet mix of confusion and disgust. He’d thought it was like grown adults chatting with imaginary friends; Ryuji had practically been on the verge of starting a Captain Kidd fan club. And Akira had offhandedly mentioned talking with his own Persona, as if the voices in his head were members of a bridge club he stopped by to visit every weekend. But from Loki he remembered nothing. Just mute acceptance and mask and there he’d been. His ‘voice,’ if he’d ever had one, was an empty wind blowing through the canyon of Akechi’s own mind. Still, Akechi drew himself up now, tried to look commanding.

“Set him free,” he said, gesturing to Akira. “Can you do that?”

Loki didn’t nod or speak. He merely hopped off Laevateinn’s hilt, seized the blade, held it high. The air glinted gold as he reared back in front of Akira.

“No, no, wait!”

Akechi jumped between the two with palms splayed out as the blade hissed through the air. Its edge stopped a fraction of an inch from Akechi’s head; it nearly embedded itself in what remained of his helmet. From where he stood Akechi saw Loki’s face bisected by the sword and mirrored again by the crack in his visor, a snarl of faceless reflections.

“I didn’t tell you to kill him! That’s not what I meant!” He felt a slither of doubt in his mind and smashed it flat. Loki’s expressionless inkblot of a face, for an instant, looked faintly smug. Akechi’s vision flashed red.

“You’re completely worthless!” he screamed, and a detached thought in the back of his mind remarked on how foolish this all was, how his voice cracked when he shouted like a sulky adolescent, how he was condemning a mute and apathetic reflection of his own heart, but he kept going anyway. “Ever since you came to me all you’ve done is give me grief. Mental shutdowns, psychotic breakdowns, driving people insane and all of it for what? What did it bring me? And now look at you! All you were ever good for was hurting people and now you’re less than useless!” He smacked the blade aside. “Get away from me! Get out of my sight!”
Loki obligingly disappeared. Akechi was left panting and red-faced, claws restlessly scraping across one another. He looked over his shoulder at the unconscious Akira.

“I apologize for that sorry display, Joker. Maybe your bond will be a little more useful, hm?” His voice was bright and jolly. He could feel his mind slipping free of its moorings again. No matter. One thing at a time. Don’t think of what Shimizu might be doing to the others. It would be counter-productive for him to go mad now. He reached into the void within himself and grabbed hold of the other mask there.

“Come out, Robin Hood!”

His other Persona materialized in a rush of wind that stung Akechi’s face and blew back his tattered cape; Robin Hood’s own cape continued to flutter in a breeze unseen. He had his greatbow planted on the ground, his free hand on his hip. That beak-crested face looked from Akira to Akechi and back again like a custodian taking in a particularly filthy room.

“Save him.” There was an edge of desperation in his voice now. “I know you’re just me, I know you can’t do anything I can’t do, but...you saved me, right? I never asked you to but you did. There must be something you can do. Some trick. You’re so full of tricks.” He attempted a smile. “Shoot off these chains, weaken them somehow, just...please. Please.”

Robin Hood did nothing. His bow remained in place. He stood and stared. In that flat yellow gaze Akechi thought he saw something like disappointment.

Akechi’s expression was unreadable. He slowly bent double, clawed hands opening and closing. With an incoherent snarl he ripped off his helmet and smashed it to the ground, and it bounced off the planks and went right through Robin Hood, already reduced to a silhouette, already fading to embers. The helmet rolled off and the blue flames faded as Akechi fell to his knees before Akira like a penitent, arms limp at his side. There was no other sound save their breath and the chains. This featureless chamber offered no respite.

Hot tears pricked the corners of his eyes. This was too much failure.

“Someone, please. Help me.”

No one will come.

He straightened up as if galvanized, mouth yawning open in a silent scream. Suddenly there was an inferno in his head; the pain nearly knocked him flat on his back. He almost scratched his eye out as his talons gripped his temples.

Ah, so you can hear me? It has been some time, vacant one.

That flat and faintly bemused voice. The agony in his head and that distant, bobbing light. Except it wasn’t so distant anymore, and somehow more solid, coherent. He could make out edges. He saw a shape to it. It looked like a coin, flipping endlessly and end over end.

It is unseemly to assign blame to one’s masks. By no one’s will save your own that did you arrive at this place. Time and again you have sought to go on, knowing your existence would only end in ruin. The choice before you is the only choice there has ever been. Heads or tails. Black or white. Die and find peace, or live, and continue to suffer.

Who are you, he wanted to ask, but the words baked into ash. The heat inside his head was
immense. Somewhere in that churning pain he had an image of his brain boiling in his juices. It seemed to spread even to his hands. Akechi’s palms burned hot.

**Vacant one. You are alone. None remain to bear witness. All masks have fallen away. If you continue to seek tribulation, then reach out. Take hold of it. Grasp it with your own hands!**

His palms burned a blinding white. A sheath of flame around his gloves. The sparks leapt and nested in the hollows of his face. The glint of that tumbling coin was lost in their glow.

He looked up to Akira. At the chain constricting his throat.

Numbly, carefully, Akechi stood up and slipped his burning hand into the narrow gap between the seat’s back and that single chain. That chill pierced right through the flames; it made him shake all over. He grit his teeth, took a deep breath, and grabbed on tight.

The pain roared up his arm and turned his spine into a molten iron bar; he went ramrod-stiff, head thrown back, the cords on his neck bulging like a relief map. The metal had come alive in his hand, it crawled like a nest of vicious biting insects, and when he started to pull the pain only intensified, a chill that went past numbness and through the other side so that every nerve ending across the entirety of his skin screamed, and he screamed too, he squeezed his eyes shut and howled into the cracked and splintered ceiling of the room as the chain pulled taut and the metal creaked and the links around his hand burned blue, and just when he thought his mind would simply crack and send him tumbling into unconsciousness alongside Akira there was a *snap* and a tinkling sound that was almost festive, like sleighbells, and Akechi reeled back, clutching his wrist, as the shattered chain links clattered across Akira’s sleeping form and flaked away to rust before his eyes.

Akechi sobbed with the pain. He looked at his hand and saw that the chain’s frozen fire had gone right through his glove; past the licking flames that still encased them there was a link pattern tattooed into raised and reddened flesh. His hand spasmed, the fingers unresponsive as wood.

He looked back up at Akira. His eyes were still closed. But he now breathed a little easier.

Akechi’s jaw set firm. He staggered back over to Akira.

“Well…” He reached out with his other hand. “That’s one down.”

* * *

Their progress through the labyrinth was cautious and slow. It could scarcely be called progress at all give they had no idea of an origin or a destination. Their step was steady and their faces determined but an unspeakable dread percolated in all their minds. There weren’t even Shadows to give them respite from this anxiety. Futaba’s scans brought up enemy activity suffusing the entire Palace, with especially heavy concentrations right on top of their location, but no Shadows could be seen in any shape. They nevertheless had the constant feeling of being watched.

Makoto spoke up. “It has to be asked. Why just Crow?”

“He was pursuing Crow and Joker through the Dead Sea for a while,” Haru said. “Maybe this is just his way of finally catching up to them.”

“A more strategic, and dire, explanation would be that Crow possesses our one functioning copy of the Meta-Nav.” Yusuke’s tail had retreated between his legs. “If he is lost, so is our only avenue of escape.”

“Yeah, well, if that was Shimizu’s idea then he’s an idiot,” Ann retorted. “We’re not leaving
“Crow’s also got the only Personas that’re still in top shape,” Ryuji said. He was clutching his iron pipe so hard the metal nearly warped around his fingers. “The rest of you are still feelin’ drained, right? Like, I’m stoked to have the Captain back and all but he’s definitely seen better days.”

Futaba grunted, eyes on her console. “Looks like the Dead Sea’s level-down debuff was permanent. That is one seriously b.s. area hazard. And there aren’t even any trash mobs for us to grind. Where the hell did all the Shadows go?”

“Maybe this place is tampering with your scans?” Yusuke suggested. “He has already done something similar in the past.”

“That’d mean we’re blind, weakened, and in hostile territory the size of Tokyo. So I’m just gonna go ahead and ignore that possibility, thanks.”

The corridors around them creaked and settled. Knotholes like embryos, fissures in the wood like dried skin. Between those cracks was nothing but darkness. Claustrophobia plucked its fingers across all their nerves but as one they knew that they couldn’t crack, couldn’t shout, couldn’t announce the truth of their predicament. Even Ryuji was pale and tight-faced and silent. They were sealed tight within the stillborn decrepitude of Seki Shimizu’s cognition and if someone’s nerve cracked it would cascade across all of them until they went mad.

They felt eyes on them. An empty curiosity. Like a child watching an insect drown in a puddle.

“Anyone think of just bustin’ through these walls?” Ryuji said suddenly. “Draw a straight line right through the maze, that kind of thing.”

“By all means, try,” Makoto replied. “I’m right behind you.”

Ryuji nodded and gripped his pipe. “The Captain’s gonna put a little oomph behind this one.”

He reared back and unleashed a home-run swing into the nearest wall and the pipe nearly split his face open on the rebound; it rebuffed the blow as if it wasn’t wood at all but a foot of solid steel. He staggered back, the pipe still vibrating in his hands. The walls’ creaking seemed to grow fiercer around the point of impact and then silenced again.

“Didn’t work,” he said simply. There was a dangerous note of panic in his voice now.

Morgana raised his hands. “Okay, everyone take a breath.” He raised his head and scented the air. “Nothing yet, but my nose can’t be fooled. Between me and Oracle we’ll have to find something, right? Eventually. We have to.”

Time warped like putty. They’d been here for hours or for days. The sterile repetition eroded them. Their communication smothered by their mutual dread. Several of the more calculating Thieves saw the brilliance of this strategy. Through their strength alone they had struck down a god, and so time and again, Shimizu had sought to place them in situations where raw power would serve them little. Here was his crowning achievement. Bait laid to lock them within his mind so that their own minds would eat themselves. Digested within the vitriol of their despair.

And then.

When Futaba cried out they nearly suffered a collective coronary from the shock. Her console had burst into fuzz that helixed about her like a swarm of fireflies and then coalesced back into that maddened snarl of hallways. With one key difference – somewhere deep in the belly of that map
was a beacon. Something new in the Palace, bright as a flame.

Makoto turned on her heel. “Oracle, report!”

“It’s a Persona. And it’s intense. Joker firing on all cylinders didn’t set Necronomicon off like this. But this one doesn’t feel like Crow or Joker. I mean, hard to tell, but...”

“Iago, then?”

“Not him, either, that creepy bastard leaves a bad taste in my brain.” Her hands played frantically over the console. “It’s way the hell away from us, too. But it’s something.”

The walls groaned.

“I can smell it,” said Morgana. “Like a rush of fresh air. Oracle, can you plot a course to it?”

“This place is a damn puzzlebox but I can get us started, at least. Uh...” She pointed at a nearby fork in the hall. “Start by heading to the right, over there!”

Immediately, the walls distended and stretched with a sickening tarry fluidity; the darkness behind the planks swarmed as the right-hand fork was closed off. Seconds later there was nothing but another bare wall. On Futaba’s map the corridors rearranged themselves around them.

Ryuji spat. “Well, we know they don’t want us goin’ any further.”

“We may have found the Shadows,” Yusuke mused.

“How’s that?”

“In every Palace, the Shadows take the form of individuals performing menial tasks. Guardsmen, waiters, and so on. We are in a theater, degraded as it may be. Perhaps these Shadows are stagehands. Arranging the scenery, forever out of sight.”

“Sure, let’s go with that,” Futaba said. “But we’re never going to get anywhere if they keep switching around the walls on us. And Skull already showed we can’t just bust through!”

Haru put a finger to her chin, expression thoughtful. “Excuse me, everyone. Our weapons here function because of cognition, correct? They are only as powerful as we believe them to be.”

“Yep, that’s how it works. It’s cognitive pscience 101 stuff. Probably why more expensive weapons hit harder, since you figure that it’s gotta be better quality if you paid more for it. That’s capitalism for you, but-”

Futaba was interrupted by Haru bringing out the China Lake and sighting down on the wall.

“In that case,” she said, “I believe quite strongly in Mr. Iwai’s craftsmanship.”

The gun emitted a hollow *fwoomp* sound and when the grenade struck the wall the resultant inferno nearly crisped them and the explosion had their ears ringing long after the echo died away. Splinters flew out through the backdraft like wasps and Haru’s hat billowed in the burning air. When the greasy smoke cleared, there was a gaping hole where the wall had been, its edges gently smoldering.

Haru pumped the gun. The discarded shell struck the floor like a gavel.

“To whatever is impeding our progress, I recommend that you cease at once. I have plenty of
ammo and very little patience.”

The walls themselves seemed shocked. On Futaba’s map their relentless reconfiguration ceased for a moment. Then, all at once, everything started to vibrate.

“Through the hole!” Makoto shouted. “Go! Go!”

They dashed through just as the walls contorted again but Futaba and Morgana were on it now, Futaba’s scan and Morgana’s nose finding the trail even as the maze swirled around them like a Rubik’s cube. Futaba pointed at a bare wall and the China Lake coughed again and there was yet another newly-made doorway for them to go through. The darkness roiled and seethed. The place was alive with the sound of tortured woodwork.

“Which way, Mona!?”

“Oracle’s map has that Persona near the bottom of this place. We won’t get anywhere fast unless we go straight down!”

“I don’t believe my grenades would be the safest way to open up the floor, everyone, but if you clear some room—”

Ryuji said, “Don’t bother.”

He had his pipe raised high overhead. Behind his mask his eyes burned.

Ann said, “Skull, you already tried that!”

“Then I’ve just gotta try harder!”

The pipe smashed into the floorboards and when the planks cracked they thought they heard a distant howling from somewhere between the walls. Ryuji struck the ground again and again until it finally cratered and broke open, exposing yet another hall underneath.

“Ain’t no reason Noir should have all the fun. I don’t give a shit how tough this place is. You stick Joker on the other end and I’m gonna rip it apart!”

They jumped down before the hole closed up. Around them the musty air began to mutter. If they had strained to hear they would have made out the words but they had better things to do; they built up momentum and tore through the maze as the walls faltered and the corridors struggled to entrap them again.

“...wrong,” came the sound from nowhere at all. “It’s wrong...it’s wrong...it’s wrong...it’s wrong...”

“This wall here, just to our left!”

“My turn. Light ‘em up, Carmen!”

“-it’s wrong, it’s wrong, it’s wrong, it’s wrong, it’s wrong-”

“Down again then to the right! Keep moving, this place is going nuts!”

“Johanna! Show them our rage!”

“Get out here and bring down the house, Captain!”
“-wrong it’s wrong it’s wrong it’s wrong it’s wrong it’s wrong it’s wrong it’s wrong-”

“Everyone, kindly duck or your eyebrows might burn off.”

“We shall carve our own way through this feeble trap! Goemon!”

“We’re closing in but the labyrinth’s going totally berserk. Get ready to change targets at a moment’s notice!”

“That scent’s just getting more intense. We can do this, guys!”

“IT’S WRONG IT’S WRONG IT’S WRONG IT’S WRONG IT’S WRONG IT’S WRONG IT’S WRONG IT’S WRONG-”

And then they finally noticed it, those words without emotion or intonation, bare syllables ever growing in volume and emerging from everywhere at once, and as they stood in this latest stretch of dusty and desolate wood the mantra bled into itself and became a long drone of mindless sound interrupted, at last, by the entire floor ripping itself out from under them.

They fell screaming. The next floor was torn away, and the next, then the next, a fusillade of planks splitting and separating with all the ease of bamboo doors until the ground beneath them was barely visible in the dingy dark. If they hit the floor like this then their remains would paint the walls. The air rushed around their ears and melded with that mad mantra from everywhere and places unseen. Morgana twisted in the air and called out to Ryuji:

“Skull! Grab me and throw me at the ground! Don’t ask questions, just do it!”

He didn’t ask questions. He scuffed Morgana and hurled him like a shotput down to the onrushing floor, and Morgana twisted up again so that he faced the falling Thieves, flames licking the periphery of his bandit’s mask, those overlarge eyes burning like pilot lights.

“Brace yourselves, everyone! Zorro!”

With a sound like an incoming freight train, a great gale whipped up from below and struck the Phantom Thieves, buoying them up with its pressure; Morgana’s slight body was sent rocketing in the updraft, and Haru had to clamp her hands atop her head to rescue her hat. The wind slowed their descent for all of them to safely land, albeit in different ways: gracefully (Makoto, Morgana, and Yusuke, all of whom touched ground with barely a hair out of place), clumsily (Haru, Ann, and Futaba, who staggered a bit before they caught themselves or were righted by their companions), and faceplant (Ryuji).

“Oracle,” said Makoto, as Ryuji groaned and pulled his head out of the floor. “What’s our status?”

“Closer than ever. I guess they were really expecting that trick to splatter us.”

“Is that so.”

Makoto raised her hands high and scraped her knuckle dusters across each other; the metal sparked and then wreathed her fists in Johanna’s azure flame. Morgana mutely pointed at a nearby wall, keeping his distance. Makoto advanced.

The wood creaked, but feebly. The Palace itself seemed exhausted.

“...it’s wrong...”
Makoto gave her answer as a wordless roar and smashed her fist into the planks. The wall burst apart in a cloud of smoking splinters. So did both the walls behind it, the shockwave from her blow shredding the labyrinth like tissue.

“Let’s move.”

She stomped off into the dark. The others followed behind her, as the Palace moaned around them.

* * *

The bus was silent and still, save for the rattle and twitch of Akira’s chains. Lavenza passed the time by reading.

Her grimoire would have been incomprehensible to anyone peeking over her shoulder; in their prying eyes the pages wouldn’t have even shown words, just a faint shimmer like gasoline on water. She nevertheless seemed invested in what she read, carefully turning each page, her body otherwise motionless save for the back-and-forth pan of those unblinking golden eyes.

Without looking up, she said, “You continue to endure.”

“Seems. That way.” Akira’s own eyes had opened a fraction; his words came out in staccato bursts, fighting to talk before the chain on his throat pulled tight again. “Haven’t. Really. Got anything. Better. To do.”

“Yes. Giving up does not appear to be in your nature.” She turned another page. “Which I do not entirely comprehend, anymore.”

“What’s. That. Supposed. To mean?”

“Never mind. I should not be conversing with you at this time. You must preserve your strength.”


“Flatterer.”

He tried to flash that familiar, winning smirk at her, but it was hard going through the pain. “It’s. The truth. When. I was. In Tokyo. Every time. I heard. Your voice. I got. Stronger. It’s. A nice. Memory.”

The grimoire slammed shut.

“You did not become stronger when you heard my voice,” she said severely. “You heard my voice when you became stronger. Do you understand the difference?” Akira’s weak grin was obliterated by her glare. “I thought I had come to understand you during the Usurper’s game. But your contradictions puzzle me, Trickster. Why is your faith so dim? In yourself. In your future. I thought you showed courage when you so casually accepted my master’s task. But now I think that you cast your life so freely into the Dead Sea because you place little value in it.”

He didn’t answer. Whether it was because of strangulation or shame, there was no telling. Lavenza’s voice softened.

“I wish you could see how brightly you burn. You need merely witness the flames you have kindled in others. I would think that any life capable of bringing such light is to be treasured.” She turned to the window, her gold eyes tattooed on the opaque pane. With no change in tone, she said,
“I am sad.”

“Didn’t. Mean to. Upset you.”

“You misunderstand me. I am sad because our time is nearly at an end.”


“Again,” she said, “you misunderstand me.”

The chain around Akira’s neck flashed and burst apart. He let in a great whooping breath that turned into spastic coughing as the bonds around his chest tried to tighten. It was painful, but it far more bearable than before. The bus’s engine roared into life. Through the fogged glass up front the driver’s silhouette jerked in his seat as if awoken from a nap, and grasped the wheel. Lavenza still did not look at him.

“Through rotted seas and empty lands. Through tribulation unknowing and unknowable. The confidants drawn to your spirit pursue you, intent on bringing you home. You are not merely a vessel for their whims. And you are more than just the guardian of their well-being. Though the world’s future may be in jeopardy, your own can still be grasped.” She paused. “Or so that is what I have come to believe.”

His throat was raw. “I’m sorry.”

“Apologies are needless. And my words are hardly gospel. After all, we Wielders of Power are forever apart from humanity. My understanding is limited. I ask only that you think of this when you return.” Then she turned, and her eyes narrowed. “What are you doing here?”

Akira blinked; Lavenza was glaring straight through him. Then he heard a familiar chuckle, reverberating deep in his head.

“I infiltrated. It is in my nature. And my fetters were undone when the First to Fall was summoned. I come and go as I please.”

“How utterly impertinent.”

The chain around Akira’s left wrist glowed white and snapped. He craned in his seat but couldn’t turn. Still, he felt Arsène’s presence.

Greetings, Trickster. Our journey resumes, eh? The end is in sight.

“You know, this’d be a lot less uncomfortable if I could actually see you.”

Aha. A moment, then. Embers flitted around Akira’s head and then Arsène materialized just behind Lavenza, sitting crosslegged on the floor, his heels nearly scraping the sides of the bus. He’d taken off his hat and set it aside and even then he had to hunch. This place really was too small for him. Lavenza looked quite irritated.

“Kindly state your business here. We were in the middle of a conversation.”

I am the mask of this Trickster’s heart. You were speaking to me as well, remember? He laughed again as Lavenza’s brow furrowed.

“Arsène, please stop annoying the nice-” He stopped, suddenly certain that both lady and girl would invite disastrous consequences. “Attendant. If you want to talk, then talk.” A chain tethering
his ankle burst apart. “I’m not going anywhere for a while.”

**Very well. I only ask that you let me accompany you to the conclusion of your mission. I see your intent. You wish to replace me with a more potent mask.**

“The thought did cross my mind, yes. Why do you want to tag along?”

**The force presently shattering your bonds inspires a curious ambivalence in me.** He ran a talon along the rim of his hat like someone turning a wheel. **Antipathy, yet respect. I wish to investigate this sensation further.**

“You’ll have to pull your weight. No offense, but you’re far from Satanael.”

**Worry not.**

Arsène plucked at his waistcoat and tongues of fire licked out from between the folds – not orange or white or blue, but dark as the space between stars.

**My heart is a furnace,** he said. **Within my breast burns a chaotic black flame. You need but kindle it, and it shall blaze hot enough to incinerate God.**

“Interesting,” he said. “Let’s see if you’re more than just talk, then.”

**My thanks. And so I bid adieu. To you, and to this lovely young miss.** He vanished in a burst of sparks and mirth.

After a long moment, Lavenza said, “I am actually grateful for his appearance. I sometimes forget how *impudent* you can be.”

Akira grinned as another chain broke. “It’s part of my charm.”

“Are you confident in your victory?”

“Confident as ever.”

“And what of the days to come?” Akira’s grin faltered. “This ‘hole’ you spoke of will remain. Why continue to struggle, if you do not believe it can be banished?”

The agony the chains had inflicted was already a shadow of itself and yet he fidgeted uncomfortably in his seat. He’d come to learn that all of his usual tactics to evade conversion – silence, sarcasm, wry grinning – shriveled up and died in front of Lavenza. She either wasn’t able to grasp his social cues or didn’t care enough to try.

“I don’t know,” he said at last. “It’s the rest of them, I guess. They all seem to be way more optimistic about things than I am. Why should I try to drag that down? It’s the reason they saved me in the first place, after all. Ryuji and Ann and everyone else. I’d have been lost without them.”

He shook his head. “Call it courage. Call it spite. I might not be hopeful, but that doesn’t mean I’ll stop fighting. If the world wants to be cruel, then let it. I won’t let that change me.”

“Such a perspective is perhaps more valuable than you credit. It would do neither the world nor your friends any good if that perspective were lost.” She paused. “Do they know of it?”

“Maybe. Who knows. I never brought it up.”

“Perhaps you should.”
“Not the best time for it, Lavenza.”

“Is that so?” she said innocently. “Would it be more convenient to bring it up after the world ends?”

Oh no, he thought. She’d learned how to be sardonic.

The only chain left was the one looped around his chest, the links hoary with rust and especially thick. Whatever was breaking him loose seemed to be having trouble with this last bond – the links glowed white and strained and then faded again, as if the metal was fighting back.

“Almost time to go,” he said.

“Yes. It seems that way.”

“Any last words of advice?”

She smiled, and Akira shuddered. For the most part Lavenza’s flat affect reminded him of Justine, always disinterestedly flicking through her clipboard as he toyed with the thousand demons in his heart. But now the look on her face – up-curved mouth and down-curved eyes and all of them bright and sharp as sickles – was Caroline through and through.

“Only this. Your adversary has taken every advantage possible against you. He believes his triumph is assured.” Her smile widened. “I greatly anticipate his defeat and humiliation.”

“Well.” He swallowed. “Glad you’re having fun.”

“This is not the end. I hope to greet you at your hour of victory.” She laid her hands on her book.

“Farewell.”

The last chain shattered.

* * *

Akira jerked upright in his seat, gasping like he’d just emerged from deep water. The blank and splintered room spun before his eyes. At his feet the last of the chain links twitched like dying roaches and crumbled into rust.

He tried to raise his hand and managed it on the third attempt, and, with even more effort, brought it up to his forehead and massaged the skin. The fabric of his glove lay cool on his brow. He’d felt perfectly lucid upon leaving Lavenza, but here his long sleep had filled his head with fog. He hadn’t felt this groggy since he’d been drugged. He tried to tell himself that was why he took so long to notice Akechi.

He was knelt in front of the Akira’s chair, arms up and palms down and fingers oddly crooked – with those talons he almost looked reptilian, an absurd raptor. His helmet was off, his hair askew, and his face was sweaty and deathly pale. Still, he tried to give Akira a reassuring smile when their eyes met.

“Welcome back, Joker. Apologies for the wait.”

“Akechi- no, Crow?” He smacked the side of his head, tried to get his thoughts in order. “I guess we’re still doing codenames. Where-”

“This is Shimizu’s Palace.” Akira’s confused look intensified. “Sorry, Shimizu is the name of the
person who’d hunted us in the Dead Sea. It’s rather a long- wait, wait, don’t get up!”

He managed three steps before his knees jellied and forced him to sit down. Akechi scooted up to him, his hands still frozen in that odd position. Akira’s vision was still a little blurry, but he thought he saw sparks around his fingers, already fading from view.

“I was separated from the others but I’m sure they’re fine,” said Akechi. “After you’re recovered we can reunite with them. It shouldn’t be difficult, you’re a bit of a wrecking ball at the best of times.” He was babbling. “At least here if you bring the roof down on us that’ll only provide a further advantage in the-”

Akira’s hand snaked out and grabbed hold of Akechi’s wrist. He squawked and tried to pull away, but Akira twisted his arm and got a look at his palms. His eyes widened.

“Holy shit. Crow, what did you do to yourself?”

The underside of Akechi’s gloves was entirely gone. Beneath was a nightmare of blackened, suppurating flesh, cracked and riven like a desertified lake bed. In places his skin was oddly shiny and in his numb horror Akira realized that it was ice, the fluid leaking from Akechi’s wounds somehow burnt out and frozen over at the same time.

“Your chains,” Akechi said. “Had to break them. There wasn’t any other way. It’s fine. I’ve had worse.”

“I kind of doubt that.”

“Well, there was the time I died.”

“Okay, no more jokes. Just hold on a little longer.” He released Akechi and started tapping at his mask like someone trying to re-tune a busted radio. “I know I’ve got a medic or two somewhere in here, head’s still kind of fuzzy…”

“Joker. Don’t worry about me. Are you all right?”

“Huh? Yeah, I’m fine. Wasn’t even worried.” He smiled. “I knew you guys would come to save me.”

Akechi’s face froze. He went so still that for a moment Akira thought he’d somehow come unstuck in time, some unseen consequence of allowing so much of that supernatural cold to sink into his flesh. Even his breathing had stopped.

Then, as Akira watched, the corners of Akechi’s eyes welled up. Tears ran down his cheeks.

“Crow?” No response. “Goro? You okay?”

He hiccupped. He bent double. He seemed to collapse inward. Some revelation that his battered frame could hardly bear. Akira grabbed his shoulders.

“All right, I’m gonna guess the pain’s finally sinking in. Just hold still and I can-”

Akechi lunged forward and threw his arms around Akira. Those cold claws dug into his back as he wailed. The sound was high and hoarse and ugly, the hysterical sobbing of someone half his age, and the sound flew up into the eaves of their cell and echoed back in the emptiness. Akira sat stiff, arms out and palms splayed as if in surrender. Then, still uncomprehending, he hugged Akechi back.
The crying went on a long time. Akechi seized and shuddered against him. Akira thought that he must be unwell. A fever from his injuries, maybe. The heat of him burned right through Akira’s gloves. It felt like Akechi was on fire inside.
Chapter 15

The final stretch of their progress was unimpeded. Whatever force had compelled the Palace to reconfigure itself around them had either surrendered or been exhausted; those dingy walls huddled within the shadows of their ruination. They didn’t rush. Futaba kept a close eye on her scans, cautious of any last-ditch attempts by the labyrinth to separate them from the mysterious Persona signal, which itself had almost dwindled to nothing.

“I’m getting Crow and Joker where it used to be, though,” she told them. “So…good news?”

“So long as they’re all right,” said Makoto.

“And so long as they ain’t tryin’ to kill each other again,” Ryuji added under his breath.

Futaba didn’t appear concerned. “Every time Crow tried to square off against Joker he got dunked on. So at worst he’ll just be a little sulky. Here, Noir.”

“Right away.” Haru casually firebombed another wall into oblivion. “Joker could also still be confined, the same as Shimizu’s other captives. But we can cross that bridge when we come to it.”

“That bridge is coming up,” said Morgana, scenting the air. “We’re right on top of them. Queen, will you do the honors?”

Makoto clenched her fist. “Knock-knock.”

The last wall burst apart in a cloud of splinters. Makoto stepped over the debris, her expression resolute…and then stopped. The others stuttered to a halt behind her.

Akira and Akechi were sprawled out in the middle of the room, both of them sitting crosslegged like they’d been caught in the middle of a palaver. Akechi was red-faced, sniffling, delicately holding up the hem of Akira’s trenchcoat. It appeared that he had been using it to wipe away his tears. The two of them froze, wide-eyed. For a long while the only sound was the settling of the walls.

“Yep,” Akira concluded. “I’m never going to live this down.”

Akechi hiccupped. “That makes two of us.”

“See, what happened was, Crow here busted me loose but got kind of emotional over it, and with those dumbass gloves he can’t even wipe his eyes without poking them out, so I figured that until my Personas got warmed up he could at least– oh, God, here they come.”

The Phantom Thieves descended joyously on him; he was swept up in a gale of concern and well-wishing and babbled questions to which he gave a slightly concussed smile and no further answer. That was all cut short by a muffled scream from Haru – they turned their heads and saw her looking at Akechi, both hands clapped over her mouth and horror clouding her features.

“Crow,” she breathed, “your hands…”

Ryuji peered over. He saw what she meant. He backed away, his complexion slightly green. Akechi’s hands were splayed out, palm-up. His injuries hadn’t yet been healed.

“It’s all right,” he said. “A consequence of freeing Joker. I’ll be–”
"You will not be fine! You’re even worse than Fox!" Akechi shut up; in the background Yusuke began to speak and was hastily shushed. “Panther, Mona, if Joker is indisposed then could one of you please assist?”

Morgana bounded over. “On it. Zorro’s all warmed up, anyway. Could the rest of you give me some room to work?”

The other Thieves led Akira a bit further away as Morgana wordlessly commanded Akechi to show his hands. His exaggerated features made it clear what he thought of Akechi’s wounds; his giant corneas shrank down to a pair of fly-sized pinpricks.

“I’d like to say I’ve seen worse, but geez. Even getting blasted by Yaldabaoth wasn’t so graphic. Nothing I can’t handle, though.” His mask flared. “Zorro, get out here.”

Elegant, gold-eyed and top-heavy, the Persona materialized over them and flourished his rapier like a conductor’s rod, then gently lowered it to Akechi’s hands. A soft pale light enveloped the wounds. The pain began to ebb.

“This might take a little bit, so just hang tight,” said Morgana. He looked up at Akechi, then back down at the wounds. “Hey, word of advice. You really don’t want to make Noir mad. You know what happened to the jerk she was going to marry?”

“Er…no?”

“Neither does anyone else.”

Akechi decided not to pursue that avenue of conversation any further. The other Thieves had gathered around Akira, recapping him as best and succinctly as they could, Ryuji using some very colorful gestures for his parts. The room continued to crackle and creak around them. The sound had become constant, almost rhythmic. The hole they’d made to enter the room had already closed over but they paid that little mind. These walls held little terror for them, now.

“Will I be able to play the piano again?” Akechi joked, weakly.

“You’re lucky I’m treating you and not Panther. She’d have gone upside your head for that line.” He paused. “So you freed him?”

“Yes. He was bound to that chair. I had to pull the chains away. Hence all of this.”

“A little extreme, but impressive. Well done.” Healthy flesh began to thread across Akechi’s hands. “We were tracking an unknown Persona signal to this location. A really strong one. Was that you as well?”

“I don’t know. I heard a voice in my head. The same one as in Shido’s Palace, I think. But I didn’t gain any new masks or anything.”

“You sure it wasn’t just a mask you already had? Joker’s said that-”

“…he talks to Arsène, I know. Not surprising that he’d become friends even with his Personas. But I doubt it was Loki speaking to me. We’d just had an argument.” Morgana’s eyebrow went up like a sunrise. “Well, it was mostly just a lot of shouting on my end. I’d rather not get into it.”

“If you say so. What about Shimizu? Any sign?”

“He spoke to me. I don’t know where from, he stayed out of sight. He said he’d come back here
“Well, here we are. And he’s still nowhere to be found, so we shouldn’t dawdle.” He stepped back. “I think you’re all set.”

Akechi flexed his fingers. The palms of his gloves were still scorched away and his muscles were full of pins and needles, but otherwise that craggy mess of burnflesh and frostbite had been undone by Zorro’s healing radiance. “Thank you.”

“It’s what I do. You should ditch the gloves, as well. They’re nothing but a hindrance now, especially with those claws.” He held up a paw and his own claws popped out. “Go retractable or go home, I say.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Akechi said dryly, but he acquiesced, peeling off the gloves and casting them aside, talons and all. He stood up, bare-handed, and limped over to the other Thieves. Akira looked up at him from the floor and his companions’ chattering ceased.

“All good?” asked Akira.

“Ready to go. Mona’s abilities haven’t lost their edge.”

“Flattery gets you nowhere,” Morgana said, completely failing to hide his smug grin.

Ryuji stepped up, something cradled in his hands. “Yo, did you drop this? It’s seen some serious shit.”

It was Akechi’s helmet. The visor had been shattered completely when he’d dashed it to the ground. The crack running along the top of it had grown so wide it was a bit of mystery how it held itself together. Akechi still took it without a word and fit it back over his head, after giving it a quick shake to dislodge any leftover shards. The overall effect was strange; only the bottom half of his “beak” remained, his collar jutting out like an overgrown fang.

“You really oughta just ditch that thing, Crow. It’s hangin’ on by a thread.”

“It’s fine. This is my mask, after all.” He coughed. “Sorry for making such a scene just now.”

“What, you mean how you got all weepy?” Ryuji just shrugged. “It’s cool, man. Kinda nice to see you act like a real person, for a change.”

He didn’t know how to respond to that. Instead he turned to Akira. “How much did they tell you?”

“Enough. Shimizu, Palace, keywords. Collapse the Palace and that should be that. Standard heist, just with higher stakes.” He got to his feet, dusted off his coat. “Oracle, any hint of the Treasure?”

“Nothing. This place hasn’t gotten any smaller and he’s really good at smothering the signals coming from any points of interest. All I’m picking up now are Shadows. They’ve got this room totally surrounded.” She craned her head around. “But I still can’t see any of them. And their distribution patterns are really weird, too, now that I’m getting a closer look. I thought it was because this place was on high alert, but instead of a bunch of blips I’m getting one solid-”

The room suddenly lurched hard enough to make all of them stagger. The walls cracked like ice as wood screeched against wood. They were heading up, and fast, enough for their knees to buckle and air pressure to settle like lead caps atop their heads. Futaba’s map burst into fuzz, fighting to adapt to the labyrinth’s newest shape. When the pressure finally ceased, they became very aware of the only sound that remained. The slow, rhythmic creak. The walls bowed in and out with every
beat. It was like the room itself was breathing.

“Wrong. It’s wrong. It’s wrong. It’s wrong...”

That familiar mantra. That relentless tempo.

“That’s Shimizu’s voice,” said Akechi. “That’s how he sounded.”

“Guys?”

Futaba’s voice quavered. Her console jittered as her hands fought to remain steady atop it.

“Remember how I said this place was full of Shadows, and Fox said that they were probably the ones rearranging everything?” she asked. The Thieves nodded, hesitantly. “Well. Um. I think we might’ve gotten one tiny detail wrong.”

“It’s wrong. It’s wrong. It’s wrong...”

“It’s not full of Shadows.” She looked at the fissured walls. “It’s full of one really, really big Shadow.”

They numbly followed her gaze. Through the cracks in the wood was nothing but black. If they focused, they could see countless golden eyes crawling through that darkness like termites through tar.

It was Ann who gave it a name.

“Shimizu...?”

Her answer came from every direction at once, in mad howling and jagged cackling and snarled and caustic invective, a thousand mouths yammering a thousand replies, and slithering beneath that din, Shimizu’s own toneless, colorless words.

“It’s wrong. This isn’t how it was supposed to be. It’s wrong, it’s wrong...but, this too has value. Cast assembled. Stage set...”

With a snapping of nails and planks the roof peeled away like a scab to reveal the blinding void beyond. Hanging overhead was the black star, a blown pupil in the sclera of the void, bigger than ever – it had gone from the size of a coin to a bloated swamgas moon, so big they could almost feel it sucking them in. But the remaining void still let in enough light for them to see the Shadow plain. A sea of dark coursing in the space between walls like blood through arteries, formless except for the flashes of golden eyes and gnashing teeth.

Ryuji pointed up. “Guys, it’s bigger. Why’s it bigger? And the whole Palace is this kid’s Shadow!?”

“It’s not just that.” Morgana huddled close to the other Thieves, his eyes swiveling madly in their sockets, trying to take in the whole of Shimizu at once. “His Shadow is supposed to be representative of his psyche. If it’s become like this, that means his distortion’s grown to the point where it’s consumed his entire identity. What happened to him?”

“It’s tomorrow.”

They fell silent. Shimizu’s Shadow throbbed and writhed, the insectile buzz of his voice scraping their ears.
“Look above. Do you see it? It’s tomorrow. Tomorrow and all the tomorrows to come. The dying land. And the rising sea. And the money that isn’t there. And the family that doesn’t come home. And the center that does not hold. And the society condemned to unravel. This is the revelation. Come and see. See things as they are. And here we are again.”

The woodwork cracked again. The planks at the upper lip of this chamber popped free and extended to the black star like grasping fingers. Like hands raised in worship.

“Phantom Thieves. Phantom Thieves. This is what you’ve left behind.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Ryuji shouted. “We didn’t cause this! Joker, am I missin’ something here!?”

Akira didn’t answer. He stared at the hole, mesmerized.

“When the Demiurge fell, so too did the fortress of indolence. Empty hope in an empty world. We placed our trust in society to see us through. You broke that faith and called it good. The truth became plain to see. The future we were promised would never come. All that waited for us was ruin. Above is all that remains of our hope. Tomorrow is broken. Tomorrow is nowhere.”

“That’s not true!” Ann cried. “Mementos didn’t offer anyone anything, Shimizu. It was just full of people sitting around and waiting for the end. There wasn’t any future in that, either!”

“There was never any future at all. All that existed was the delusion. The petty pace. The day to day. The endless routine. The tedious pantomime.” The labyrinth rippled and bulged. “People going to work and coming home and going to bed and waking up and on, and on, and on, blind in that faith that tomorrow will follow today. That script persists even after the Demiurge’s fall. But despite their performance, everyone knows the truth. The holes within and without. Look above. Come and see. Even in the Sea of Souls this hole makes itself known. The chains tighten. The despair grows. The world will unmask.”

“That hole is contaminating the collective unconsciousness,” Yusuke said. “So that’s where that pervasive sense of terrible anxiety stems from. The world’s end, echoing ceaselessly in everyone’s minds.”

“Our indolence broken at last. This is a threat that none can ignore. The paranoia claims its victims without quarter or remorse. No running from it. No entreating it. I’ve forced them all to confront the truth of things. Look above. Come and see. Tomorrow it could be you.”

“But that’s not fair!” Haru said. “Paranoia Syndrome is what’s causing all of this. You say the world’s bound to end but the only one bringing it to this point is you!”

The floor beneath them cracked like a sheet of ice and split wide. The countless eyes glared. Shimizu’s voice was shedding its monotone; its volume wavered and dimmed like a failing cell signal, shaking with hate.

“What have I done that wasn’t already inevitable? When you decided to walk away and leave society to fend for itself, what did you think would happen? What made you believe that something as childish as stealing a few hearts would save us? Nothing changed! The old ways persist. The Shadows multiply beyond counting. Did you believe that just because you returned to your mundane lives that the world itself was back in order?” The shadows surged; the voice turned jeering. “No, no, of course everything will be all right, you thought. Tomorrow has to come for you! Your worthless bonds and your pointless routines and the unchanging expectations of society and all of it going nowhere, meaning nothing, and you blinded yourself to all of it because that
ordinary life was the treasure you claimed. It turns to dust in your hands, Phantom Thieves!

“You lie. You masquerade the same as everyone else. You claimed to be society’s guardians but even my actions went unnoticed by you until it touched your own petty little lives. Selfish. Self-serving. You’re no better than the worthless adults you fought.” The whole chamber buckled.

“Where does that leave the rest of us? Where does it leave ME!?”

At that final word numerous planks burst away and shot toward them with lethal speed; Ann’s whip and Morgana’s cutlass flashed and the wood burst apart, but Shimizu’s shadow strained through the gaps, the woodwork around him warping like makeshift jaws. The black star drank away the void.

“I refuse to play along with it. The evils that you fought went nowhere. Everything regresses. Humanity was just looking for a reason to let it all end. And it won’t be long now. The work is done. The ones taken will not awake. And all these rotted empty societies will finally collapse under the weight of their paranoia. The performance ended. The curtain fallen. Unmask. Unmask!”

The Shadow grew restless, its endless eyes whirling around them. The walls draw in. The room grew smaller.

“Guys, I’m not sure how, but we’re gonna have to fight.” Morgana brandished his cutlass, keeping his eye on the dark. “Joker, Crow, are you with us?” No answer. “Skull, what’s up with them?” Still no response. “Someone talk to me!”

Their faces were pale and drawn. Their bravado had left them. Ryuji seemed barely able to hold up his pipe.

“This is the only way it could have ever been.” Shimizu’s voice had dropped again. “There was never any hope for us, even before. It’s too late. It will only get later.”

Akira said, “That’s not true.”

The eyes’ movement halted. Every one locked onto Akira. The other Thieves clustered around him, faces defiant, weapons raised. Akira himself stood with hands in pockets, looking up at the largest crack.

“I get where you’re coming from,” he said. “But this isn’t the only answer.”

The crack spiderwebbed and burst out carried on a wave of screaming sludge. The Shadow snaked amoebic out of the wall, a seething flagellum studded with eyes and gathering the ruined woodwork around it like a derelict huddling in its rags. The Thieves fired a few wild shots at that dark and the round were swallowed without effect. It stopped over Akira, every gold fleck burning.

“You,” he snarled, “can be SILENT.”

Not even a trace of his old indifference now. Shimizu’s voice warped basso, feral. Akira stared him down, surrounded by the Thieves.

“You’re the worst of all, mastermind. I see you. I see you for what you are.” The shadowy tendril bobbed and weaved around him. “You share the same faithlessness. You saw it long ago. The holes within and without. You knew from the very beginning. The very beginning! That there was no future for you or me or anyone else. And still you kept up the façade. Lying, and lying, and hiding your emptiness...is this the Joker’s joke? That the leader of the Phantom Thieves knows better than anyone that they were always worthless?”
Several of the Thieves’ weapons faltered. Akira’s face remained steady but he wouldn’t blink. His fists were balled tight inside his coat.

“Joker,” Ryuji said. “What’s he talking about?”

Mad laughter from all sides. “You never told them! I knew it. I knew it! The true nature of the mastermind. The unjust game you played. How many hearts did you steal, knowing that it was all for nothing? Did you enjoy yourself? Did it keep you entertained?”

“That’s a lie!” Makoto shouted. “He put his life on the line for us over and over again. This was never just a game for any of us! And we’re not finished yet. We will take your heart, Shimizu!”

The tendril retreated back into the crack from whence it came. The wall pulsed, uneven, as if the whole structure was riddled with boils.

“You’re delusions won’t be banished so easily.” His voice calm once more. “Phantom Thieves. You’ve been running from the truth for so long…time to run a little further.”

Behind them, the chamber split open, revealing another stretch of corridor. And in front of them, the entire wall fractured. It roiled. The formless, howling dark churned up the nails and the wood until it was nothing but a solid mass of eyes and inchoate matter.

Then, it began to advance.


Makoto fired off one last, defiant round. It was swallowed whole by the darkness.

“Just run!”

And as the Phantom Thieves turned heel, Seki Shimizu’s Shadow charged forward.

It came at them like a locomotive, deceptively slow but picking up speed and utterly unstoppable; it ran over Akechi’s discarded gloves, and in the instant before they were consumed by the dark, the carnivorous architecture surging through Shimizu’s form ripped them to tatters. The corridor was wide and high and straight and unending. The walls cracked and revealed eyes like masses of ore. The sound of splintering drew ever closer behind them.

“What are you starting to understand? The pointlessness of going on? I’ll take the one who falls behind first. Then maybe I’ll let you be. For a little while. Then I’ll take another. Then another. I’ll inflict on you exactly what you’ve done to me and everyone else!”

Ryuji headed up the group easily but his breathing was already ragged. The other Thieves fared little better. Akira was still weak from his captivity, Akechi from his rescue. At the back of the group was Futaba, her gait already shambolic, her desperate attempts to bring up a map and find an escape route only slowing her further.

“There is no better tomorrow. There is no brighter future! That hope in society was all we had. It was shallow and desperate and fleeting and false, but then you came and stole it away and you left us all with NOTHING!”

Futaba stumbled.

Her high, despairing scream turned everyone’s heads. Yusuke skidded to a halt and doubled back and retrieved her but now Shimizu was right on top of the both of them, close enough to slash their
faces with the splinters of his approach; Yusuke turned on his heel as Futaba gripped his neck vicelike and kept running, past Haru, past Akira, past Akechi-

-who had stopped.

The other Thieves didn’t even notice until Yusuke shouted his name. Then they all turned and saw him there, standing with hands empty and limp, staring down the approaching mass. His name became a chorus, Crow and Akechi and Goro, and Akira swore and held up a hand as his mask began to burn.

Shimizu halted in front of him.

For a time they heard nothing except the blood rushing through their ears. The Shadow had frozen. Even the movement in the walls around them stilled. The wall of dark quivered before Akechi.

“…why are you looking at me like that?” The words weak and small. When Akechi didn’t answer every eye flared. “Stop looking at me like that!”

The other Thieves glanced at each other, bewildered. None of them dared speak. They thought if they did, it would break whatever strange trance Akechi had put Shimizu in.

“Your face. You look like one of them. You’re not supposed to be like them. You’re supposed to be like me!” The clusters of eyes rolled and focused. “You…I thought we were…”

“Friends?”

At Akechi’s reply the entire Shadow recoiled. Broken wood pattered down from the ceiling at its retreat. Then it lunged forward, mere inches away.

“Mock me again and I’ll kill you right now.”

“You could have done that anytime,” Akechi said. “Evidently it was my rescue of Joker that drew the others to this place. You put in all that effort to divert them when just killing me would have been far simpler. Why is that? Were you distracted?” Shimizu’s only answer was another wordless snarl; he looked ready to rush forward again. But then Akechi said, “It’s all right. I know you don’t need anyone.”

The eyes blinked. The movement ceased.

Time and again the Thieves had seen Akira bargain with Shadows. He’d always been terse after stealing a heart, but when it came to negotiation he’d handled himself deftly, skipping from tone to tone and mood to mood to match the Shadows’ mercurial wants. The ebb and flow of Shimizu’s aggression called those negotiations to mind now. But Akechi voice was flat and monotone as Shimizu’s had been. The words heavy with conviction. Recitation and confession in one.

“You don’t need anyone,” he said. “It’s tiresome watching them, isn’t it? Their tedious friendships and petty sense of righteousness. Any justice based on such a hollow society is pointless. Better to just undo all of it. Euthanize civilization. You’re the only one who can. Because you’re alone. You have nothing tying you to this meaningless world.”

“Yes. Yes, exactly.” The eagerness in his agreement was almost hungry. “I knew you understood. You’ve seen it. The holes within and-”

“You try to tell yourself that the loneliness you feel is bearable,” Akechi went on. “A necessary burden. You hide that pain and think that fooling everyone makes you clever. But the loneliness
only deepens. The days become harder to endure. This isn’t how it’s supposed to be, you think. I should be getting stronger. Why does the hole just keep growing?"

“What are you-”

“You arrive at a conundrum. If your life is so empty and society is doomed to fail anyway, then why not just die? It wouldn’t make a difference. But now death feels like an act of surrender. A concession to the world you’ve come to hate. You live out of spite. Your mission consumes you. You feel yourself turning into something unrecognizable. The hole grows.”

“Stop it.” The Shadow started to seethe. “I don’t want to hear this anymore.”

“But you’re strong. After all, dying is easier than living.”

“I said stop it!”

“Now your goal is close. You can almost reach out and grab hold of it. But what happens then, you think? Where will that leave you? And then you realize. If you won’t die and the world you hate is undone, then that leaves you alone. Alone forever with the person you’ve become.” He raised his head and looked at Shimizu fully. “Is that what you want?”

The Shadow burst apart and enfolded Akechi like a flytrap, the broken fragments of the labyrinth it carried a hundred jagged teeth ready to tear him apart. Haru screamed his name and brought up her weapon, ready to fire, but then stopped when she saw the Shadow had stiffened again. Akechi was somewhere in that mass, alive and whole, his hand extended.

Shimizu whimpered, backed away. He fled from Akechi’s touch like it was radioactive. The face that the Phantom Thieves couldn’t see was unsmiling and lined, exhausted.

“We’ve fallen,” he said. “But that doesn’t mean we’ve hit bottom. Even if the world has no future, the same isn’t true for you and me. I’ve found moments that I can still treasure. People who still, for some absurd reason, seem to care about me. Despite everything.” His mouth twitched. “And you’re even better off than I am. After all, you still have a home.”

The entire labyrinth distended now. The hall dilated and expanded like the lens of a camera. A thousand unseen mouths whispered and moaned.

When Akechi spoke, every word was like a bullet loaded into a chamber:

“Seki. We don’t have to do this anymore. I’m tired of hurting people, too.”

Soundlessly, the Shadow fled. It forced itself through the cracks in the floor and in seconds it was gone. Only the debris it had carried along was left, a pile of scrapwood lying like a monument at Akechi’s feet. The eyes all closed. The darkness became mundane.

The Thieves crept forward, hands still on their weapons.

“Crow…you…”

“Did he really just talk that thing down?”

“That still leaves us stranded here, though. I’ll bring up my map again, soon as my hands quit shaking…”

Akechi wouldn’t turn to look at them. He tilted his head skyward, like someone waiting for rain.
“Crow,” said Akira. “What’s he doing right now? Do you know?”

“He’s likely having a moment of reflection,” said Akechi. “What does he see, I wonder.”

A moment later, they received their answer.

The scream that burst forth from the Palace was everywhere and everything. It came up through their soles and fell on their heads like a siege-weapon’s pile of slag and erupted from the walls to entangle them all in great pythonic coils of pressure. It was a sound breathless and endless because its maker had no lungs to cease and no air to draw and it was convulsed with pain and fury and hate great enough so that it tore through anything human they had ever known and came out the other side to become just more mindless noise, noise so fraught with misery and emotion that it was shredded into something animal. As one they lost their balance and slammed into the lefthand wall which became the floor which became the wall and so and so, the maze gone mad, the corridor turning and turning in its widening gyre, gravity become babbling and senseless in the teeth of that shriek; Haru mouthed make it stop make it stop but her voice was buried utterly in Shimizu’s lamentation and all their stomachs lurched from the hallway’s tumble, and just when they thought all their skulls would split the walls split first, the maze walls breaking like windowpanes and bursting apart in a stinging shrapnel of splinters as gravity reached out and seized them all.

They fell. The Palace gutted itself around them. Shimizu’s howl made itself heard over the cacophony of bursting wood. There was no bottom in sight this time; they picked up speed as the slipstream stung at their ears like blades. They fought to make themselves heard.

“There’s nowhere for us to grab hold!” Akira shouted. His coat billowed after him like a veil of ink.

“It’ll be okay, Joker!” Ryuji called back. “Mona’s got a trick for this! We just gotta wait until we see the bottom and- ohh shiiiiiiit!”

His voice cracked and his arms flailed like he was trying to find purchase on thin air and all the Thieves’ faces turned waxy with terror. Because now they saw the bottom and it was no bottom at all. In its spasm the Palace had undone direction. They weren’t falling down; they fell up, into the sky. Ahead loomed the void and the mindless hungering hole therein.

Morgana desperately cried Zorro’s name and another onrushing gale slowed their fall, but they were nearly out of hallway and with no escape in sight. Those with bladed weapons took the chance to anchor themselves. Yusuke jammed his katana between the planks and held on tight as Futaba grabbed him around the waist like someone drowning. Haru grit her teeth and swung her axe and when it planted itself in the wood she nearly lost her grip as Makoto grabbed her ankle. Morgana shoved in his cutlass and a moment later Ann’s whip snapped out and lashed around the blade; as she swung free the weapon bent dangerously. And Akechi, in one smooth movement, rammed his beam sword home and grabbed Ryuji with his free hand.

“Hold on, Skull!”

“Wait, lightsabers ain’t supposed to work like that,” Ryuji babbled inanely. “It’s supposed to cut right through-”

“Not unless I want it to, so don’t make me think about it, you imbecile!” His head twisted ‘round. “Where’s Joker!?”

Near the very bottom of the twisted hall, using his knife as a handhold, feet swinging free over the
void. Shimizu’s scream died away. As Akira looked up, past the other Thieves, he saw the walls bulge out, exposing that hive of hateful eyes.

“Joker! We’ve got seconds at best!”

Akira had even less than that. The woodwork around him fell away. The Palace was being peeled into the abyss. He tore his eyes away from Shimizu and looked down. Into the hole. The welcoming black.

Akira let go.

The Thieves’ cries trailed after him as he fell. From where they hung, with his black coat and black hair and arms outstretched, all that remained of Akira were his gloves. Two splotches of blood, already drying as their color was drunk away.

Then, Akira’s mask blazed.

He called, “Bare your fangs, Seth!”

Two great black wings unfurled as though they had burst from Akira’s own back. But his own fall ceased, and they saw he was perched atop the serpent of chaos, the fratricidal god, bullet-nosed and red-eyed and so dark he seemed forged from oil, a living crawling dark in contrast to the lusterless emptiness of the black star. His long neck reared back and snapped forward and the air was rent as Seth screeched, howling defiance into the void. Then, he turned and flew up. Coming back for the Thieves.

Ryuji saw his approached and grinned. “Well, shit. Two can play at that game.”

He released and fell and called for Captain Kidd. The ship materialized around him, sailing on air, with the Captain himself holding Ryuji in his one good hand and staring at him as if in admonishment. Futaba also took the hint; still holding onto Yusuke, she shouted for Necronomicon, and the saucer spun itself into life and turned sideways and seized them both in its tractor beam. Yusuke’s legs flailed wildly as it pulled them in. Her voice crackled in all their ears.

“Mona! We’ve got room for one more! I mean, not really, but get in here anyway!”

“Yo, Panther, Queen! I’ve got ya!”

Seth’s wings buffeted them as Akira reached out. “That leaves me. Noir, Crow, it’s time to move.”

They dispersed. They re-organized. Makoto and Ann clutched on to the railings of Captain Kidd’s ship while Akechi and Haru held onto Seth’s neck for dear life. Akechi felt a reassuring hand on his back; he turned to see Haru smile and nod. Meanwhile, the inside of Necronomicon was very crowded. It was barely large enough for one person, let alone two plus one cat. Still, Futaba bent over Yusuke’s and Morgana’s crammed bodies, her hands running over the Persona’s controls.

“This place got absolutely wrecked by Shimizu’s freakout. I see the Treasure. It’s dead ahead!”

The corridor groaned around them. Nails popped free. The hole continued to grow. It expanded out like a waterblot.

“Everyone, hold on tight,” Akira said. “It’s the final push!”

The Palace yammered like an asylum as they flew. The hole and its endless dark pursued them in a tarry flood. The maze was swallowed by it. Shimizu’s words were more frantic than ever, wracked
with terror, the Palace fighting to block their way but too damaged by his fit to create any further barriers, straining and shattering in a desperate bid to escape before the hole passed over it and darkened those golden eyes forever.

"-wrong, it’s wrong, it’s wrong it’s wrong it’s wrong it’s wrong...Stay back! Please, no more! KEEP AWAY FROM ME!"

The final wall approached. Ann called Carmen’s name and it burnt to cinders. And as they pushed through that last obstacle and into the darkness ahead and the hole swallowed the rest of the Palace and the Shadow it contained, they didn’t know if Shimizu was speaking to them, or to the black star.

It was dark beyond sight and suddenly they were wracked with vertigo fierce as migraine, their bodies seemingly pulled in every direction at once; the sensation broke their concentration and the Personas dissolved around them to send them tumbling down. They didn’t fall far. They landed on soft carpet or on each other, groaning in a heap.

"Is everyone alive?" Akira asked.

"Regrettably," Akechi answered, voice muffled.

Futaba detached herself from the mass of bodies and brought up her console. Its weak green light washed over them; they huddled around it like a campfire.

"Treasure’s here, all right, but I can’t get many details past that. Another room with no defined upper limit in terms of size. Seems like I keep running into places like that.” She looked up into the cavernous dark. “Also, considering our earlier orientation, we’re below that Palace right now. Below the Dead Sea, below the void, below the Palace…we’re right at the bottom of everything.”

Ann turned. “Joker. Mona. Your eyes are better than ours. Can you see anything?”

“Just need a second before the world stops spinning,” said Mona weakly, holding his head.

“Don’t worry about it.” Akira focused. “I’ll handle it.”

Time passed. In the light of Futaba’s console they saw Akira’s face carefully wipe itself of any emotion.

“Joker? What do you see?”

“Well.” He strived for diplomacy. “There’s some good news. Now we know where the other Shadows are.”

They became aware of a sound. A gentle clinking, near and far and relentless like a swarm of cicadas.

Through Akira’s Third Eye he saw a theater. Luxurious and grandiose beyond imagining, ranks of plush red velvet seats and runners of red velvet curtains that extended out to the infinite. The carpet underfoot was red too, abattoir-bright in his altered vision. The seats were of the same make in which he had been imprisoned and the reason why was clear to see. Dispersed throughout these chairs, randomly, as if they had all been assigned reservations at some time long past, were chained people with monochrome skins and closed eyes and faces rendered into silent rictuses by their agony. In their tormented sleep they jerked and struggled, and produced that endless, soothing chime that flitted throughout the air. In so many words he described this to the Thieves and watched the dread settle upon their faces like shrouds.
“Then this room may truly be infinite, or close to it,” Makoto said. “There’s probably a seat here for everyone on the planet.”

“Tsukiko’s here somewhere,” Futaba said. No one knew how to answer that.

Instead, Morgana pointed with one ghost-white paw. “The Treasure is that way. I’m assuming it’s onstage. But it’s going to be quite a walk. Will Shimizu’s Shadow harass us any more, do you think?”

Akechi looked up. “No. The hole took him.”

“So, what?” Ann asked. “Is he dead?”

“If he were, then presumably it would have affected the Palace in some way. But who can say. Everything here stretches the established rules to the breaking point.”

“I guess. I’d like to know why it got so big so fast in the first place. If Shimizu was trying to use it as a weapon against us then it seriously backfired.”

Yusuke spoke up. “I don’t believe that was his intent. Going by what he said, that hole is a manifestation of Shimizu’s despair. It had already grown potent enough to infect the larger realm of the collective unconsciousness. Our thwarting of his trap, in addition to Crow’s words, may have… tipped him over the edge. It’s clear that his mental state was balanced on a knifepoint.”

“Yeah, you’re right. He definitely wasn’t much of a criminal genius. I mean, he kept trying to kill us but everything he did just brought us closer and closer to the Treasure. Lucky for us, huh?”

Akechi stared up at the dark. He remembered the pound of engines, and the reek of steam, and his own head full of buzzing unhinged madness that had almost, but not quite, covered up the refrain pulsing at the back of his mind.

Oh, God, please help me.

“I think he was confused,” he said vaguely.

“Um, excuse me? Everyone?” Haru, hesitant and small. “I understand it’s a bit morbid, but can we take a rest? I’m… a little fatigued.”

Futaba glanced at her, then back at her console. “This place isn’t exactly a safe room, but I don’t see any hostiles. Should be okay. Assuming the chairs don’t eat us or anything.”

Akira experimentally tested one seat’s cushion with the flat of his hand. The plush velvet upholstery didn’t appear to conceal any horrors. “Should be fine. Let’s go down a few rows, though. I’d like to rest in one that doesn’t have any other occupants. Watch your step.”

“Allow me.” There was a click in the darkness, and then Akechi’s beam sword flared, its cold white glow illuminating the aisle. He guided them down the rows like some Hadean usher.

They sat in a cluster. Akira flanked by Morgana and Akechi. The other Thieves behind them like a jury. They raised their masks, save Akechi, who as always kept his broken helmet in place. The rest of the audience quietly suffered around them. They caught their breath and felt no peace. The tension in the air was palpable.

“So,” said Akira at last. “Does anyone want to ask me anything?”
Guilty silence. The shuffling of shoes on carpet.

“You should tell them, Akira,” said Akechi. No codenames, no pretense.

“Does that mean Shimizu was telling the truth?” said Haru. “You…never believed in the Phantom Thieves?”

His answer was a while in coming. He said, “No. I just believed in you.”

Akira’s head hung low. He spoke in a furtive hush like someone talking during a performance. His fingers plucked restlessly at his gloves.

“He was right. Whenever everyone talked about stealing hearts to reform society, to change the world, I stayed quiet. Because I didn’t want to lie.”

“That so?” Ryuji sounded drained, lifeless. “Guess I’m a real idiot, then. All that time you were just rollin’ your eyes at us, huh?”

“I didn’t mean it that way. I fought Kamoshida because it would help you and Ann. I fought Madarame because it would help Yusuke. Kaneshiro, Medjed, Sae, even Mr. Okumura, even though that went so wrong…I did it for you. Not me. Not society. Just you.” He angled his head to Akechi. “I even thought I could do something for Goro, for a little while. But we all know how that turned out.

“I was lost. I was falling. Then you reached out and caught me. You probably didn’t think that much of it, at the time. But I didn’t know what to do with myself anymore. The world had gone hollow. Everything I thought about how my life would turn out felt like a lie. So, early on, I made my choice. Whatever you wanted me to be, I’d be. Whenever you needed me there, I’d come running. Society never did anything for me. Society can try to take care of itself. But this little part of it around me, I’d protect with everything I had. I know it’s selfish. That it’s not fair to think of myself that way. I’ve gotten plenty of lectures on that already. But it’s how I was back then. I can’t change the way I used to be.”

There was a long silence, as the others processed this.

“I lived with you all that time,” Morgana said. “I was practically glued to your hip. How did I never notice this?”

“Better question, why didn’t you just tell us?” Ann asked. She rested a hand on the back of Akira’s seat. “Did you think we’d just break up on the spot if you just let this all out?”

“I don’t know. I wanted to be reliable. I was good at it. Just didn’t think it was worth the risk.”

“You are not just reliable,” Haru said fiercely. “You are more than our leader. You’re our friend. You do comprehend what that means, yes?”

Makoto shook her head. “I’m training to be a cop, for God’s sake. If I thought the Phantom Thieves had redeemed society for good and all then I’d be looking for another line of work, wouldn’t I?”

“Yeah. I know. I’m sorry.” Akira ran his hands down his face, and then straightened in his seat. His voice fought to remain steady. “It’s just…I know it sounds pathetic, but I wasn’t used to feeling…important. Needed. I know my parents are trying their best, and I’ve got them worried sick too, but I can’t ever tell them about all of this. I’m doing all right. I’m doing the best I can. But the way I feel about all of you, what we did last year…it's irreplaceable. I don’t ever want to lose
it, or spoil it. No matter what.”

His voice cracked. The Thieves were mute with shock. None of them could recall him ever sounding like this before.

“I don’t know how else to say it,” he told them. “You guys mean the world to me.”

A sound from somewhere within. Like a silver chime inside their heads. Bonds being alloyed and snapped taut. Somewhere above their seats, the darker shapes of their Personas loomed in the shadows like an audience from another world entire. They silently transfigured into their empowered forms, and the Thieves felt that new strength in their limbs and their minds, and no one commented, and no one cared, because there were more important things happening right now.

“Hey. Goro.”

They turned to Ryuji. The faded yellow highlights of his hair stood out like caution tape in the murk. The shape of Seiten Taisei faded as he leaned over.

“That stuff you said back there. When you picked Shimizu’s brains. I’m guessin’ that you weren’t just talkin’ about him.” Akechi said nothing. “So, what do you think? You spent a whole year laughin’ in our faces. You still think we’ve all got no chance?”

Akechi shrank in his seat a little. He felt everyone’s gaze on him. But he rallied.

“Understand that I don’t mean to sound self-pitying. But I’ve seen the world from a different perspective than the rest of you. Since I was a child I’ve been privy to the parts of society that everyone just wants to forget. The single parents, the orphaned children…inconveniences, the lot of them. When you’re in that situation you come to understand that you have no place in any future worth mentioning. Let your guard down for a moment and you’ll be discarded like trash.” He gripped the armrests, voice tightening. “And then there are the things I saw during my expeditions into the cognitive world. All those Palaces. You’ve only gotten a taste compared to some of the turmoil I witnessed. It’s truly shocking, how the most seemingly benign of people can conceal such rot inside. And yes, I’m including myself. So perhaps I’m embittered. But I don’t think I’m wrong.

“I truly believe now that all of you are extraordinary. But most people aren’t. People will disappoint you. Our society depends on ignorance. We’re not meant to become so aware of each other’s suffering. Of the ruin that lies in all our futures. Shimizu has proven that. Civilization isn’t coming undone because of Paranoia Syndrome, it’s because he’s forced everyone to confront the fragility of tomorrow. The masquerade is failing. The anxiety is driving everyone mad. And even if we’re victorious today, society will find a way to reset to the status quo, because there’s no other way for it to go on.” He sighed. “They’ll regress. They’ll forget. People will forget every lesson you teach them, until nothing remains to be forgotten.”

There was a rustle of cloth and a creak of leather as Akechi stood up. When he spoke his next words, they were in that same flat whisper, but resonated like a summons to war:

“…even so, I will not let this world end.”

And in response, far in the distance, a spotlight snapped on with a sound like a gunshot report, its beam a thin gash in the surrounding dark. A figure stood onstage, barely a speck.

“It’s him,” said Morgana. “And Iago. I can sense them.”

“Iago. The last great mystery of this place.” Makoto rose. “I can only imagine what diseased part of Shimizu’s mind that thing sprang from.”
Akira lowered his mask. “Are we ready?”

The Phantom Thieves murmured their assent.

“Then let’s go. The end is near.”

They headed down the aisle, quiet, downcast. This was not a place for high spirits. The chains around them chattered like gossipers. Shimizu’s outline became more distinct. Neither he nor Iago seemed to care about their approach. Akira led the group, the others hanging behind, but after a little while Akechi pulled ahead and walked beside him.

“How are you feeling, Joker?” Codenames back. Mission resumed.

“I’m alright. Hell of a time for the truth to come out, but better now than never.” He looked over his shoulder; the other Thieves’ silhouettes were hazy, indistinct. “Right now they’re focused on the heist. But after…who knows how they’ll feel about me.”

“Nothing will change. Your bonds don’t break that easily.”

“How about you?” Akechi fell silent. “Sounds like you’ve really changed a lot in the last couple of weeks.”

“Yes. I think so, too. Can’t seem to hold on to my masks anymore. I’m not terribly fond of the person underneath. But it’s still…relieving, not to pretend so much.”

“That was some speech you just gave. If I didn’t know better, I’d say I was rubbing off on you.”

“Is that really so strange? It’s not as if I’ve had a surplus of good role models.” He lightly elbowed Akira. “Considering how dysfunctional our relationship was before, I’d say this is the best it’s ever-”

“Yo, sorry to interrupt.” They both felt a hand on their shoulders. Akira turned and saw Ryuji there, his mask catching the spotlight’s gleam, so that it seemed far more solid than the rest of him.

“Skull. About what I said back there, it wasn’t-”

“No, it’s fine, it’s not about that. Listen.” His voice was hurried and low, like someone with a deadly secret. “I’ve gotta ask you something. Just real quick. All that stuff you said, about how messed-up you thought everything was…did you always think that way, dude? Or was it just after Shido and Kamoshida got through screwin’ you over?”

“It was after. But even before that, it’s not like I-”

“I know it’s more complicated than that. I ain’t gonna be able to wrap my head around it. But that’s fine, that’s enough.” He turned to Akechi. “And I don’t even gotta ask you that question. Seems like just about everyone you ever met made it a full-time job to mess with your head. Not like you ain’t responsible for the shit you did too, but yeah. This makes sense. I can work with this.”

“Skull, what’re you talking about?”

He released them and walked ahead. “I’m gonna show you what the Phantom Thieves are really about.”

They looked puzzled as Ryuji picked up speed. Then Akira motioned to the others, and all them hurried after.
The stage itself was mundane and that felt surreal in itself when compared to the rest of the theater – this simple crescent of varnished wood overlooking the black infinity of the seats beyond. Shimizu stood stock-still in the spotlight’s beam. Not even his shackles made sound. Iago hovered at his side, in his usual pose, sword raised high, that enormous book in his free arm redolent with those rotted sewerlike colors. His cravat glowed like a pestilential sun. His mask’s gaze was fixed on some vague point in the theater’s upper reaches. Neither of them acknowledged the Thieves’ cautious approach.

“Is he even conscious?” Ann whispered. “I mean, after what happened to his Shadow…”

“The fact is that he’s at a disadvantage,” said Morgana. “No traps to lay. Nowhere to drag us down again. We may be able to resolve this without a fight, if we play our cards carefully. Joker, if negotiations begin, you should be the one to-”

Ryuji stepped forth and swung up his shotgun.

Morgana clapped both paws over his face. “Why.”

“So much for pacifism,” Yusuke said. He gripped his blade as Haru and Futaba glared daggers at Ryuji’s back. “Everyone, prepare. The moment we make a move, Shimizu will-”

“You guys need to get your eyes checked.”

There was no anger in those words. Ryuji almost drawled them out. And the rest of them blinked, and looked again, and finally saw where his shotgun pointed.

At Iago.

“Shimizu, I get it,” he said. “I really do, man. People drive you crazy, don’t they? No one wants to wake up and see the shit that goes down around them. Makes you want to break something. Make some noise, just to snap ‘em out of it for a second. And that’s what you’re doing, isn’t it? You’re makin’ too much noise for everyone to ignore. Hell, I’m almost impressed, except for the whole end-of-the-world thing.” He shook his head, licked his lips. Suddenly he was the star of the show and the attention was not entirely welcome. “It’s just…to take it this far…I can’t believe anyone’d want to hurt people like this on their own. Call me stupid or naïve or whatever, but that’s what I think. ‘cause it ain’t the world that screws people up. It’s them.

‘Those shitty adults we fought,” he said, anger boiling up in his voice. “All those worthless goddamn people fillin’ us up with poison. We get told all our lives that hey, the world sucks, better buckle in, better learn how to play the game, because that’s just the way things are. But things ain’t like that for no reason. It’s because of those pieces of shit hiding from the consequences and hiding in your head and always making everything worse!” Full steam now; froth gathered at the corners of his mouth. “They’ve got every game rigged on their side and they think they’re invincible, but we showed them. Just a few of them, just for a little while, but we reached out and hit them where it goddamn counted! And all the people they’ve hurt, everyone they coulda hurt in the future, they all got a little peace and quiet. Maybe it won’t last. Maybe society really can’t be reformed. But even if I got to do everything over, knowin’ what I do now, and how bad I’d…” he glanced over his shoulder at Haru, “how bad I’d mess up sometimes, I’d still do it all again. Just to bring those sons of bitches down and help someone, just for a little while.” He redoubled his grip on the shotgun. “And I believe that now more than ever, ‘cause I’m seeing another one of them right here.”

The others took a hesitant step away from him. Ryuji’s anger had burst out and then rendered down into something even more fearsome; his voice had turned calm and measured, but in the way
a volcano was calm and measured just before it blew its top and lit whole villages on fire.

“We’ve been inside your head. We saw your Palace, your Shadow. The only thing out of place is this guy right here. Everyone else thinks he’s just some weird exception, but I think it’s simpler than that. Guys, how the hell did Shimizu know so much about us? Mementos, Yaldabaoth, even the shit Joker was thinking. Where’d he get all that from?”

Akechi spoke like the words were being dredged out of him. “He said it was whispered in his ear.”

“Yeah? Who wants to bet we just found what was whispering?” Iago floated placidly in place. “You’re so quiet now! But I bet you’ve been fillin’ up this kid’s head with all sorts of evil shit. How’s about you share with the rest of us? Why don’t you confess?” He thumbed back the hammer on his gun. “Talk, you fucking monster!”

No one responded. Ryuji stood alone. Even Shimizu’s single eye was half-lidded and amused. He nearly lowered his gun. Then, the clack of heels beside him. Ann stepped up and wordlessly leveled her SMG at Iago. She was followed by Akira and Akechi, the latter twisting the intensity setting on his ray gun as high as it could go. Shimizu’s eye widened. The others joined in. Akechi’s weapon glowed and keened with energy.

The Phantom Thieves assembled, holding up Iago. And a second later, chains started jingling. Shimizu’s shackles. His hands had begun to shake.

It started with the sound of tearing gristle. The sickening crack of long-mortified sinew. Iago’s gently smiling mask turned to face them.

“Have you finally pieced it all together?”

Their aim faltered and Ann cried out loud. The voice was male, smooth and pleasant, almost congenial, but the words were somehow invasive, they skittered like spiders on the insides of their skulls. The moment their weapons dropped Iago rushed them, his shroud of chains already flaring out, sword raised high.

A blinding flash. A brief alarum. And then Iago’s blade clattered to the stage as he lurched back, his hand raised to the gaping hole that Akechi’s gun had drilled through the center of him. The edges glowed. Unspeakable parasites wriggled and fell from the muck within.

“I’ve dealt with far more troublesome voices in my head than the likes of you,” Akechi said. He held out his free hand to Shimizu. “Seki. Step away from him, quickly.”

And for a moment, it looked like Shimizu would.

But then Iago blurred behind him and the chains wrapped around them both, interlocking, deflecting the flurry of gunfire that rang out. Akira held up his hand. “Stop! Stop shooting, you’ll hit Seki too!”

“I applaud your feats of deduction, little thieves.” Shimizu shivered and quaked as Iago bent over him, wound dripping, his one arm still clutching that book. “It may have been inevitable that the truth would come out, after you made it this far. However, you are mistaken in one small detail. I did not corrupt this boy. He sought my aid of his own free will.”

“Enough,” said Yusuke. “Your ruse has fallen. You shame only yourself by continuing to lie.”

“Then perhaps we should let him decide the truth.”
Iago’s free hand, grey and fleshless at the fingertips, reached out and stroked Shimizu’s shackles. They broke open and fell to the ground.

“Seki, my boy. There’s no need to be ashamed. It appears that neither of us can face them as we are now. You know what must be done, if you wish to see your task through.” He bent low to Shimizu’s ear. “Release me from the cage of your heart.”

“Seki, don’t do it!” Futaba cried.

“Stop hiding behind that kid, goddamn you!” Ryuji shouted. “Show us what you really are. Take off that mask!”

“Mask?” said Iago, as Shimizu raised his hands. “I wear no mask.”

Shimizu gripped the underside of his mask and pulled it loose with a shriek and a tearing of skin and as they glimpsed the reddened horror underneath that pustulent membrane of Iago’s cravat that twist of yellow fabric that gleamed like skin itself leapt and ballooned and grew and seized Iago and Shimizu both and now the sound of chewing of mastication of bone crunched beneath teeth and the fabric flowed over their forms like candlewax and it flowed over the chains as they gathered and knotted and the chains reshaped they took true form they became tentacles, innumerable tentacles, tentacles with neither origin nor terminus expanding outwards a behemoth anemone and those tentacles were studded with translucent barbs like butcher’s knives and those tentacles instead of suckers bore lidless cephalopodon eyes and chattering lipless mouths with the teeth of men and they were color of baked earth of old paper of flesh sloughing from the bone and from that slimeslicked flesh emitted a choking deepsea scent an asphyxiating perfume endless salt putrescent seagrass whale carcass rotted to bursting and it was bigger than the stage and the theater and the world but still it kept growing even as its upper reaches disappeared into darkness because the black star the black star returned here lies the end of all they’d ever known and it was consuming even this space in the cellar of everything and they noticed not they saw only that the abomination saw them and knew them and they were rendered wordless and someone somewhere screamed like a hurricane but still that unspoken unspeakable question rang in the tainted air: What are you? What are you? What are you?

And in that gentle voice, like skeletal fingers pushed into the meat of their brains, came its answer:

“I am the strangled word. I am the pathogenic truth. I am the shepherd guiding the desolate to the end of days. I am that which suckles the refuse at the underside of the kingdom of God. I am the voice of dim Carcosa and the shadow of Aldebaran, and I am Kaiwan after the feast of secrets hushed and terrible. I am the jaundiced monarch. I am the inverse revelation. I am that I am.”

The hole fell over them and mercifully erased the apparition from their sight as it devoured everything there ever was, and even still, that voice remained.

“I am Hastur,” it spoke. “And this, little thieves, is the final curtain.”
Too dark to see the stage. Too dark to see each other. Too dark to see their hands. Too dark to see the shapes which flitted like anglerfish through their own hearts. The Phantom Thieves each huddled frozen in a capsule of impenetrable black. There was no temperature but they shivered to the bone, their ragged gasps pulling sawtoothed across their throats. In the depths of the black star they felt the abomination’s presence, drifting cetacean around them, swimming peacefully through the despair eating mankind whole.

“The fall of the Holy Grail left a hole in the minds of humanity. An absence where once a pedestal had been. Through that fissure I arrived, dreaming. In my dream I touched the dreams of a boy wracked with fear of a future turned calamitous. And I spoke unto him, Do you desire justice? Do you seek recompense for the cruelties of this world? Yes, he answered. And so.”

No light to see but somehow they still saw glints in the fathomless distance, stray scales of those tentacles glinting at them like camera-flashes. Like the cameras of the mob. The hands raised high over the bodies of the fallen, a compulsive ritual.

“The boy set off to exact his toll against those distorted by their wickedness. Early sacrifices to the great paranoia. From within the confines of his heart I nurtured the despair that had called to me. It rang like a bell and found sympathy in the hearts of so many others. For this boy’s despair was not his despair but that of everyone who had ever been. Humans bearing the weight of an unspeakable truth, that their attempts to build a future for themselves had ended in failure. That the end of all they had ever known was imminent. I am that imminence. I am that truth. Can you not hear the message I bring, ringing in your ears?”

That flat telephone hiss. Anti-sound, noise without meaning or purpose. Besides the thunder of their own breath and blood and that gentle insidious voice it was all they could hear. Ryuji tried to shout it down but couldn’t find the air. He fell to his knees, the flat of his hands pressed up against a cold plane of dark that was neither the stage nor anything else he could recall. Like marble sheathed in old skin.

“Little thieves. You, who have plumbed the darkest recesses in others’ hearts. Do you not think that man is such a fascinating beast?” Its words were companionable, its curiosity genuine, but those spiderlegs in their skulls had grown barbs and their heads throbbed with migraine. “Beset with contradictions. A strangely self-correcting creature. Filled with yearning for his own annihilation and willfully ignorant of this fact, even as his ignorance drives him ever closer to ruin. His every virtue is a poisoned one. His every invention is twisted to degrade him further. His desires burn bright. Do you know what flames do? They consume themselves, and then, they go out.”

This was the voice that had taken a child’s mind and warped it into a shrieking fungus entombed within the walls of his own neurosis. Formless dark spewing this same apocalyptic gospel, telling of a future that was promised and would never come. But it hadn’t been wrong, that Shadow. It had been hateful and pitiable and insane nearly beyond the point of coherence, but it hadn’t been wrong.

“The beautiful wreckage of your consciousness summons forth such wonders. The Holy Grail
was far from the first broken god to plot your end. There was the killing moon. The beast at
the gate. The fog that swallows reason. All this and more, an entire bleak pantheon dredged
from the black seas of your twisted souls. Mere props, forged of your own urging to let your
crippled existence come to a peaceful conclusion. You bat away these demons of wire and
crepe and briefly think yourselves champions. But the true monster is one you can never face.
It dwells within you all. And it hates you beyond any imagining.

“Do you believe there was something unique about that boy, to have lent me his sympathetic
spirit? He was but one candidate of billions, all of them equally suitable. The darkness in
which you find yourselves roils in every soul. In these final moments, recall the faces of
everyone you’ve loved. Take note of the emptiness behind their eyes. Each of you is a limitless
wellspring of despair.”

“Not…true…”

Akira spoke to himself. None of the other Thieves rose their voices in assent. His own jaw felt like
it was made of stone. He tried and tried to call forth his Personas, but his mask wouldn’t seem to
light. The hole drank away everything.

Those lightless glints multiplied as the tentacles surrounded them. There was the wet and slippery
sound of decomposition. From its abyssal refuge, the creature embraced them. Its voice was
lethally soothing. They felt their senses fade. Unseen by all, Morgana desperately waved his hand
before his chest, as if trying to coax out a flame.

“Be at peace, little thieves. Your role is done. Your endeavors bore fruit. Without you,
humanity’s dismal lurch towards the end may have yet continued a while longer. All that
pain and struggle, for a future that was nothing but dust.” Countless eyes augured through
them. “This is better. The unspoken truth is made known. Civilization will unravel, and this
grim farce will at last be over. Sleep now. Sleep.”

“No!”

A single denial, knifing through the dark. The lights’ slow orbit stopped. The Thieves jerked
awake. Akechi’s voice was fragile, he was barely able to stand, but his cry was their first
acknowledgement that, even in this cosmic terminus, they still weren’t alone.

“Interesting.” It sounded amused. “Resistance from you, of all people? This ending was the
same one you wished for when you first threw your lot in with the Holy Grail. You contradict
yourself, Detective.”

“I’ve made…a habit…of that.” Fighting for air. Fighting to stay upright. Whatever this Palace had
become, every part of it wanted to grind him down to nothing. His helmet feebly sparked as he
struggled to call out his Personas.

“You are a tragic figure, Detective. Had you simply died within your father’s distorted heart,
you could have at least believed that your efforts had some meaning, however trivial. Instead
you suffered in the gray wastes of man’s discarded cognition, ever deluding yourself that a
brighter future awaited. Here is where your path has led. Your bonds are weak. Your
mission is ended. You stand forever apart from these little thieves.” Akechi heard the tentacles
slither ever closer to him, their scales ensnaring him in their wicked constellations. “If you insist
upon interrupting their rest, it is only fitting that you perish apart from them, too.”
The others were too weak to even call his name. Innumerable barbed limbs teased at his skin; they parted his armor like rice paper. There would be no lengthy torture, this time. Once those tentacles seized him he would be torn apart. Shivering to his core, his blood pounding through the blind circuits of his capillaries, Akechi focused, groped madly for anything, any mask to be found within the void of his soul—and grabbed hold.

Here we are again.

The air rent gold and screamed with sharpening and the tentacles recoiled, diced and gashed and oozing ichor. The sound Hastur produced was not that insidious croon but a horrific broken screech like a failing windup toy. The Thieves saw Laevaeteinn’s silhouette hang in the dark, then fade. Akechi grit his teeth against the inferno in his head. The pain was expected, now. It fought back the black star’s cold.

“No more games,” he said. “Come to me.”

There is no need. You have reached the end of your long road. The crossroads are past. The choice is made. Heads or tails, black or white…it is time to find peace.

“No. I won’t accept that! I’ve endured your tedious prattle long enough. Whatever you are, fall silent and come to me!”

You have only the one choice! You dare defy this essential truth? The echo in his mind warped with outrage and nearly split his skull down the middle. His helmet split instead, it flared blue and cracked like an egg, the halves clattering at his sides. The mantle of rebellion ill suits you, vacant one!

“I don’t care!” Screaming now, before the pain wired his jaw shut. “There has to be more than this! The world might be trash and I’m no better, but even here, I’ve still found things worth treasuring. I’ve spent so long in the dark. Falling into one hole after the next. If I have to spend the rest of my days in atonement for what I’ve done, then I can bear it. If the world’s justice demands cruelty, then I’ll spit in its face! Even this dying, rotted civilization still has things worth living for!” That coin was so close now, glimmering in a light unseen, bright enough to blind him. He reached out his hand. “I don’t know what they look like, or even if I’ll find them…but I still have to try! I know they’re out there!”

He closed his hand over the coin. And although he grasped nothing solid, a small patch of his palm seared hot.

…So be it.

For a moment, the Phantom Thieves heard nothing save for the distant mewls of Hastur. Then, another sound from Akechi. A frail, hoarse whimper, that built and leapt into agonized and cacophonous screaming that made them shiver even more than the unnatural dark gripping their bones. Akechi shrieked like his throat would burst, and his presence was made known to all of them by wisps of blue-white fire springing up around him like departed spirits, illuminating the mask that had appeared over his face, a glassy reflective contrivance like crystallized quicksilver.

There was nothing like this pain. The previous fires in his head were a brief itch compared to it. It was molten iron in his eyes, it was venom in his throat, it jabbed its stingers in his brain and went straight to the core of him so that every cell in his body keened like fresh burnflesh. His scrabbling fingers fought for purchase on the mask’s edge and found none. It was as though it had sunk right
into his skull.

**This is the tribulation you sought**, spoke the voice, and somehow, beyond belief, the agony intensified at its words. **Is it painful? It is nothing compared to what awaits, should you choose to go on. But, here and now, at the end of all things, let our contract be forged anew.**

The flames flared brighter and Loki stood in their glow, perched on his blade, his eyeless face casually watching the distant form of Hastur. The abomination wouldn’t approach them at all now; it seemed terrified of the flames, and as Akira and the others crept closer, they could see why. The tentacles lost their shape wherever the light struck – they turned translucent, gelatinous, like dreamstuff upon waking.

**Vacant one, here is the truth: your past is broken. Even if you should escape this darkness, the stain of your crimes shall cling to you forevermore. Knowing this, do you accept me?**

He fought to still his screams long enough to cry out, “Yes!”

The rest of the Thieves had crept nearer to him but they could only get so close; the heat around Akechi was tremendous. Still, they warmed themselves around the bonfire of his agony, the sensation in their limbs returning. Haru called out his name and could barely be heard over his wails.

“What’s going on?” Makoto cried. “Who’s he talking to!? I can’t hear anything!”

“It sounds like a Persona awakening,” Futaba replied. “But that doesn’t make sense. I’m pretty sure Joker didn’t have to go through this every time he got a new mask!”

Yusuke shielded his eyes from the blasts of burning wind. “Either way, this fire is the only thing keeping us alive at the moment. And that creature seems to be deeply afraid of it. Everyone, we must attempt to regain our Personas while we still can!”

**Vacant one, here is the truth: your future is empty. In penance for your sins you shall stand forever apart from humanity. Everything you cherish will be tainted. Your every treasure will crumble in your hands. Knowing this, do you accept me?**

“**Yes! I do!**”

Loki brandished his blade and turned it around, so that the point pressed upon his chest. The fire intensified. Akira’s coat billowed in the pressure it pumped out. Hastur retreated further from that obliterating light. Morgana was now thumping his own chest like someone in the middle of a heart attack.

**Child of emptiness. Paradoxical existence. You wretched fool who bears the name ‘Justice!’**

**Ascertain your will, and let your false selves be immolated in the light of your conviction! I ask you a final time: do you accept me into your heart?**

Akechi howled his final affirmation and without delay Loki plunged Laevaeteinn into his heart and his whole form fissured like a smashed mirror. The flames became a conflagration that devoured them both head to toe; in the midst of the fire's roar they heard Akechi’s cries become impossibly even louder, saw his form thrashing in the blaze limned with blue and running like tallow at the edges.

“**Joker, you have to stop him!”** Morgana shouted. “This isn’t a normal awakening. He’ll die if he doesn’t stop!”
“Stay away!”

He’d been struck blind. He couldn’t feel anything of himself anymore. But there still remained something at the core of him. In this searing light, the hole was illuminated fully, and deep within the vacancy of himself, he reached out to grasp what shone there.

His fingers caught at the edges of the mask.

“This is nothing,” he told them, though he had neither teeth nor tongue nor throat. “And I know there’s worse to come. But I don’t care. I can’t lose here!”

He started to pull.

“This worthless life…these pointless people…this cruel and awful world…I don’t want to lose any of them!”

With a final shriek and a freshet of blood that shot skyward and became invisible in the surrounding dark and pattered down in a warm and soothing rain, Akechi pulled the mask free. The fire around him leapt with a roar like a grateful audience, it became a nova that pushed all the Thieves back on their heels. In the dim glow that remained, they saw what had become of him.

In a way he bore marks of the people he’d used to be. The straps across his vest were the same military braiding as his Robin Hood garb; his limbs were wrapped in the same studded belts as his black-masked armor; the mask he’d wrenched free had been a glossy silver thing that tapered down like the beak of a bird of prey. But the true inspiration for his clothing was obvious. His trenchcoat was tattered and bloodstained, his collar was cut lower and his gloves were a deeper and arterial red, but Akechi’s thief garb, his ideal image of rebellion, resembled, more than anything, a smoke-grey replica of Akira’s own.

It is done. I am thou, and thou art I.

To you, who wields courage enough to spite the futility of his own existence: stand tall, and speak my name. My wrathful light shall purge all delusion from this world, until naught remains save bleak and maddening truth!

The Persona beside him was in the shape of a man, spindly-limbed, unnaturally tall, dressed in a pinstripe suit whose fabric seemed more like a hole cut in the world and into dimensions unseen; the stripes coursed and undulated like the patterns across Loki’s hide. The face beneath his broad-brimmed hat was a featureless pane of mirrored glass. In one hand he flipped a coin, endlessly, the gesture precise, metronomic, mechanical. In the other he held a black attaché case like a slab of polished obsidian. On the side of that case was inscribed a pearly circle, and the single initial: “Z.”

It looked on with neither interest nor pity as Akechi struggled to stand straight again. The flames began to die. Hastur crept back toward them.

“An awakening, here of all places.” The voice seemed unperturbed by these latest events, but with Hastur still twitching and snapping from his fresh wounds, it now sounded as though it was coming from somewhere else entirely, an obscene ventriloquist act. “You little thieves remain entertaining until the very end. But it matters little. The detective’s spirit already wanes. It is as I said. Flames consume themselves, and inevitably they must…hm?”

A new light, shining behind them all. They turned and saw its source. Morgana stood there, his pelt turned iridescent. A veil of prism that spilled forth and beat back the dark. It was the same way he’d looked when Mementos had burst forth from the earth, the light that had turned the tables
against Yaldabaoth.

The Thieves’ masks sparked as that light washed over them. The grins that several of them bore were downright predatory.

“Finally. Took me forever to turn this on again. Thanks for buying me time, Crow.” He glared up at Hastur. “I was born from the hopes of mankind, remember? It’ll take way more than a little shadow like this to snuff me out!”

Hastur loomed. **“You insufferable speck!”**

A ghastly tide of tentacles bore down on them, an incoming wave of bladed viscera swooping in to crush Morgana flat – and then the air snapped cold, and the tentacles jerked as they were sealed in a gemlike sheen of ice, ice that ran like liquid down their length and enfolded the grim entirety of Hastur even as it emitted that windup screech and fought to escape the frost’s grip. Yusuke and Akira stood side by side, Kamu Susano-O and Black Frost looming behind them.

“He certainly makes a big target,” Akira remarked. Behind him, Black Frost threw up a rude gesture.

“Poetic, is it not?” Yusuke said. “Feel now the chill that permeates whatever malformed tumor you call a soul!”

The ice splintered as the raving amoebic silhouette of Hastur thrashed within, already breaking free. But Akechi straightened, and approached, and the Persona fell in line with his footsteps.

The Persona stepped in front of him. With that same animatronic precision he held up the attaché case and snatched his coin out of the air and fed it into an unseen slot in the case’s back. It made a jolly little clatter as it fell in. That “Z” insignia slid aside with a whirr, and bursting out from the black hole it left behind came a gunbarrel the color of mercury and telescoping out to impossible proportions, riddled with lenses and dynamos and crackling with energy like the heart of a reactor, and as Ryuji swore in shock somewhere behind him the weapon charged, and flared, light building in its barrel until it seemed as though the case must have contained its own sun within. The ice fissured and Hastur broke away, but too late.

Akechi flung out his hand.

**“Shoot to kill, Zenigata!”**

The blast was heralded by a high whistle like someone calling him home. The light fired out in a single pulse so bright that even as they covered their eyes the Thieves could briefly see their bones through their limbs, everything turned x-ray, and as the air stank of ozone the light ripped a hole straight through Hastur’s writhing mass. The insectile din it unleashed at its wound was unholy, a harmonic that drove them all to nausea, and its unending limbs thrashed and seized as the hole Akechi had torn in its form extended out, out, the edges glowing red like burning projector film, and as Hastur struggled and spasmed and filled their heads with its chthonic deathcries in moments it had burnt away to nothing. There was a hollow thud as some vague shape tumbled from its vaporous remnants and stuck the shadowy ground, and then, silence.

Zenigata dispersed. Akechi turned back to them. His new mask was completely opaque; his expression was difficult to discern.

“Dude,” Ryuji breathed. **“You one-shotted him.”**

“He inflicted a similar wound upon Iago earlier,” said Yusuke. “For all their power, these entities
are rather frail. Perhaps that is why they—"

He was cut off as Haru rushed forward and hugged Akechi, beaming ear to ear. Either he lacked the will or the energy to resist as she pressed him to her chest, laughing brightly. “Crow, that was amazing! You saved all of us!”

“Thank you, Noir. Please let me go. I’m feeling a bit unwell.”

“Getting set on fire can do that to you. But you toughed it out. Pretty good awakening,” said Akira. He tried to stay deadpan but couldn’t hide his grin. “Eight out of ten, easy. Oracle, Mona, what do you guys…”

He trailed off. Futaba had her console up; Morgana still gleamed like an ingot. Both their faces were pinched and grim.

Morgana’s nose twitched. “Can’t you sense it? We’re not done.”

Slowly, the Phantom Thieves turned to where Hastur had fallen, the periphery of ravenous dark beyond Morgana’s glow. The void had fallen silent again. The telephone hiss. Please stay on the line. Your party will connect shortly.

Where that unseen shape had struck the ground they heard a faint and silky rustle. It lifted itself up, hovering in the air. A simple rectangle crawling with hallucinogenic and chaotic colors, green-blue-black-yellow, vile and gangrenous.


From the outer dark and within their heads the voice returned. No speech now, just a low chuckle that rasped across their minds. And it echoed, it multiplied, it became its own audience, and as the book began to convulse they were enveloped in a hurricane of demented mirth, a yammering cacophony that still did not conceal the visceral tear and crunch emerging from the book itself as it began to open. Corrosive ichor oozed from between its pages and sizzled when it struck the unseen earth and the laughter seized their brains like clay in clutching hands and squeezed tight.

“Oh, no you don’t,” Futaba growled. “Rise, Prometheus!”

Her own black sun emerged from the ether, the great seamless sphere threaded with burning pictograms illuminating stolen mysteries, and as the Thieves backed away from the book, Prometheus embraced Futaba and carried her up into its innards. The frantic machinegun clatter of her keys drowned out that invasive hysteria with its own rhythm.

“I will not tolerate any of this final-form second-wind extra-lifebar bullshit! Hold on, everyone. I’m about to hit you with every buff I’ve got!”

The console flashed red and Futaba raised her fists and smashed down hard, and Prometheus broke open, it configured itself like a puzzlebox and cracked along new seams and consumed them all the radiance that spilled forth from within, and when that light struck them they all felt for a moment as though their limbs would fly off from that surge of new strength. The book cracked open. Their unseen assailant’s laughter rose ever higher.

“It’s coming!” said Morgana. “Fox, you’re with me!”

And the book split-

—and from the book emerged a tsunami of tentacles barbed and toothed and blindly seeing, a
reeking conglomerate of ichthyoid tissue, this jaundiced accumulation of bone and viscera that crested into the utmost reaches of the void before falling upon them all to rend them limb from limb-

-and the tentacles shredded, they were seized in a storm of blades and a storm that bore blades within, Yusuke’s phantasmal sword and Morgana’s cutting gale knotting around them and reducing them to a rain of sea-stinking gobbets and pustulent fluid that dissolved into smoke long before it ever touched them.

“Disgraceful. You could at least accept defeat with dignity.” Yusuke turned to the others, and Morgana followed suit. “Queen, I shall leave it in your capable hands.”

Morgana raised his paw. “Same to you, Panther. Do the Phantom Thieves proud!!”

Their palms smacked together and Ann and Makoto stepped forward, the laughter unabated, the book changing chapters-

-and from the book emerged a legion of horribles, chained and marble-masked with their gently smiling facades cracked and flaked away to show slivers of undulating grotesquerie beneath, flesh that crawled like centipedes, eyes like beetleshells in the tarry ruin of their flesh, these quasimodo parodies of Iago bearing down on them with blades and chains and teeth countless and unseen and pushing the stench of their decayed pelts before them like ill tidings-

-and the legion burned, it was seized in twisting knots of flames red and blue serpentine around them, and the flames were intense enough to reduce bone to ash and ash to atoms, a blaze that threaded through the mob and spread between them like a rumor until not even a wisp remained.

Ann blew the remaining vapor a kiss. “Bye, now.”

“Frankly, I’m disappointed.” Makoto’s heels sparked as she turned and approached Haru. “Noir. It’s on you.”

Ann did the same for Ryuji. “Do what you do best, Skull!”

Their handslap cracked like thunder as the book faltered, then rallied, its loathsome pages turning once more-

-and from the book emerged abominations without limit: emaciated ravenous things that danced on the edge of space and sight; things with fangs that grew clean through their bellies; things that shed their own webbed and crippled limbs like maggots as they clawed across the expanse in their blind and hungering need; a decomposing and tartarean menagerie that stormed towards them like the vanguard of a nation that should have never been-

-and the things broke, the very air turned glassy and they ran into those barriers and were shattered by the rebounded weight of their own terrible momentum, the pressure reverberating through their bones and gels until they burst, and what chattering remnants remained were shattered by the strikes of a staff moving with such vicious quickness that it was scarcely seen at all, and as their remains fell like rain a single projectile sailed gaily through the gobbets and struck the book directly and erupted in a gout of flame and noise that finally, mercifully silenced the laughter in an agonized cry and left the book itself smoldering and twitching like a brokenwinged moth.

Ryuji fist-pumped. “Fuckin’ A! Nice shot, Noir!”

“Thank you, Skull.” She pumped the China Lake. “Let’s send this repulsive parasite to Hell.”
They turned and there were Akira and Akechi. Expectantly, they raised their hands as Ryuji and Haru sauntered toward them.

Ryuji’s grin was fierce. “Wreck ‘em, dude.”

Haru’s smile was gentle. “I know you can do it.”

The final handclap formed a sonic boom that set all their clothes fluttering and made even the formless shadow tremble. The two of them walked to the book, casually, hands in pockets, as it struggled to right itself.

“Hey, Crow,” said Akira. “I think I’ve got someone who wants to meet that new Persona of yours. Do you mind?”

“Not at all. Are you ready for this?”

“Yeah. Let’s throw the book at ‘em.”

“Couldn’t keep that to yourself, could you.”

“Not on your life.” He stopped. “And I just wanted to say…thanks for saving me. I’m really glad I found you again.”

“Likewise,” said Akechi. “On both counts.”

They smiled at one another and then turned to the book, faces set. They raised their hands. Their masks blazed.

“Pillage him, Arsène!”

“Purge him, Zenigata!”

Those hidden pieces of their souls pulled loose and walked free. The two Personas continued their masters’ stride, walking up to the book as it hung smoldering and stunned. When their footfalls stopped, they exchanged a brief glance. They tipped their hats. They appeared to reach an understanding.

Then Arsène reached up and tore his waistcoat loose and exposed a raging onyx inferno within that spilled out as an even deeper and more vibrant black than the innards of the despairing realm in which they’d all been sealed, and Zenigata held up his attaché case and the locks popped loose like gunshot and out spilled a searing white tide of fire that poured across the void and obliterated it like ink being washed off a page, and the flames met, they embraced, the flame that scorched the corrupt and the flame that burned away falsehood, and as the Phantom Thieves watched those twin fires compressed into a sphere no larger than a marble or a walnut or a grain of sand until at last it burst free and consumed them all in a soundless silver exhalation disturbed only by the book and its infernal voice’s final, high, despairing cry of dissolution.

When the light faded the world had returned.

They were back at the stage on which they had confronted Iago. Neither Shimizu nor his Persona were anywhere to be found. There was only the book, lying open and lifeless, burning. Whatever non-euclidean typography its pages held were obscured and erased by a greasy and stinking flame the height of a man, and within its tarantellasmic sway they saw a figure, something amorphous and studded with leering masks.
It spoke to them, in the crackle and crisp of paper. Its words were in the same smooth and congenial harmonic Hastur had possessed, but they lacked that diabolical potency that forced them into the Thieves’ minds. It was merely noise.

“A splendid performance,” it said, as they approached. “Truly. From you most of all, Detective. Such a pity that we could not have crossed paths earlier.”

“I disagree,” Akechi said tersely.

“Haha. So it goes, eh?”

Yusuke glared. “You seem rather unconcerned about your loss. Humiliating though it was.”

“This is not the first time I have tasted defeat. It is my nature to drive humans to despair. Occasionally, they rally. An unfortunate eventuality, but one I have come to expect.” The flame was losing fuel; it shrank before their eyes. “Still, you are correct. This is your victory. Another hollow foe is undone. What will the next one be, I wonder? And the next, and the next? The wound from which they spring persists in all your souls, remember.”

“Bring it,” Ryuji said. “We’ll kick your ass no matter how many times you come back.”

“Come back? Yes…perhaps I will come back. Another name, another face…there may yet be time for further diversion. But it matters little. More than ever, I know that my ultimate victory is assured. That twist in your souls cannot be banished. Humanity’s craving for the end of days grows ever stronger. It took scarcely any effort at all to bring everything to the very edge of ruin.”

“But we pulled back,” Makoto said. “And we’ll keep fighting, right until the end. We won’t make it easy for you. Maybe platitudes and wishful thinking are all we have left, but those will do, for now.”

The flame was now scarcely higher than their knees. Akira looked down at it impassively.

“Disappear,” he said. “You’ve lost.”

“Ah, such high hopes. Burning so brightly.” Nothing left but coals now. “I look forward to the day when that fire is extinguished forever. But fear not, children of man. When the last feeble embers fade, and darkness enfolds you once more, you will not be alone. I shall remain at your side. For I am thou…and thou art I.”

The glow faded. The ashes were ashes and nothing more. And then they heard something behind them. A gentle sound, like innumerable wind chimes.

Seki Shimizu’s captive audience was shedding its chains. The Shadows’ pained struggles ceased and the links broke and clattered at their feet. They floated up like untethered balloons, their splayed and sleeping forms turned indistinct, until only that single bright point of light at the core of them remained. Soon, those lights faded as well. But at the moment, they looked out from the stage at a sea of glittering stars.

Two figures were seated at the edge of the stage, staring out at that audient void. The one on the right was Shimizu, still in his rags, mask gone, hair spilling over his shoulders. The one to the left was also Shimizu, monochrome and flickering faintly at the edges, dressed in rumpled slacks and vest. A discarded memo pad lay at his side.

“Is that his Shadow?” Ann asked. “What’s it supposed to be?”
Futaba rubbed her chin. “It doesn’t look like much. This place has a theater motif, so...a director? A playwright?”

“I believe he is a critic,” said Yusuke. “One who sees through the sentimental pretensions of the performance, and judges its true worth...or so that may be what he wishes to think.”

They said nothing to that. Akechi broke away from the group and walked to the two boys, his own shadow stretching lean over them.

Morgana called, “Guys, look!”

The stage curtain pulled away with an oiled rustle. Behind it was the Treasure, a shining golden thread. Akira stepped up to it, treading in the book’s ashes as he went. He plucked the Treasure from the air, held it between his hands. They all recognized it straight off – it was a thick length of braided gold rope, the kind that might be pulled to raise or lower a curtain.

“Guess that means the show really is over,” Ryuji said.

That dry, thin voice: “Just take it and leave me alone.”


They turned back to Akechi and Shimizu. Akechi stood over them both, staring down, unspeaking. They didn’t acknowledge him as he raised his hand to his face and pulled away his mask. It came loose with no effort at all.

“I’m so scared,” said Shimizu. “Of everything.”

“I know,” said Akechi. “And I can’t tell you how to make that feeling go away. Everything I tried only made it worse.” He sighed. “I don’t know if there’s a way out for people like us. This fear of whatever’s in us, or missing in us. That emptiness can be unendurable, at times. But, Seki...it’s so much worse when we’re alone. The only time I ever felt any reprieve was when I was around them. First because I forced myself, then because I allowed myself. Even the end of everything can be less frightening if you face it with others at your side. I only learned that because of you. You can follow my example. And you have a head start on me, don’t you? There are already people waiting to welcome you back.”

Shimizu said nothing.

“Go home, Seki,” Akechi told him. “Your mother’s worried.”

Nothing, for a while. It was Shimizu’s Shadow that moved first. It placed its hand over Shimizu’s own. At its touch, he raised his head. They gazed at each other. Some unspoken affirmation seemed to pass between them. They shimmered like a mirage, and in the moment before they disappeared completely, the Shadow transfigured, its outline stretching into something altogether new.

Akira put a hand on Akechi’s shoulder. They nodded and left the stage.

The theater quietly dismantled itself as they moved between the seats. Nails and boards popping free and floating up into the void, the seats breaking loose, the carpets and curtains unraveling. The entirety of the Palace’s architecture unspooled like yarn around them. Before long it was just them and the void, and the distant smudge of the black star. It had regained its old size, and become oddly distended, oblong, almost punctured. The blackness ran down as if it was leaking.
“I suppose that’s it,” said Akechi. “Well done, everyone.”

Futaba tapped her goggles. “Beacon’s still up. Getting back should be a breeze.”

“God, we usually party when we take out a Palace but I just wanna go home and sleep for a million years,” Ryuji groaned. “Ain’t like it’d worth it, anyway. Joker’ll still be in the hospital. And Crow…” he trailed off. “Anyway. We can all deal with that shit tomorrow, yeah?”

“A moment.” Yusuke tilted his head. “Do you hear that?”

It was felt more than heard. A distant rumble, only noteworthy because it was in a realm that should have no sound at all. Several of them turned back to the black star, the only visible landmark. That dark trickle spilling forth from it looked a bit wider than before.

It was easy to tell which of them figured it out first. Their faces turned milk-white. Morgana’s pupils shrunk until they nearly disappeared.

Akira said, “Mona. Now.”

“On it, I’m on it!”

“Huh?” Ryuji looked around at them. “The hell’s everyone freakin’ out about? Or are we just in a hurry to- whoa, hey, lemme go!”

In a brisk and businesslike fashion, Makoto and Ann each hooked an arm under Ryuji’s and dragged him over as Morgana transformed. They tossed him into the van. The rest piled in. The rumble grew louder. Ryuji groaned and sat upright, rubbing at his eyes under his mask.

“Is it somethin’ I said? You guys gotta let me know when I screw up if you want me to-”

A gash ripped itself open and Ryuji yelped in shock as black water poured out with a deafening roar; it struck the nonexistent ground and geysered up and turned the void photo-negative wherever it struck, and in that spray could be seen bricks and glass and masonry like half-chewed food pulped and thrown free, and behind them the black star distended further, bleeding freely. Makoto slammed on the gas. The engine’s rev was barely heard over the new waterfalls.

“Can someone please fill me in here? The hell’s goin’ on?”

“This void was a Palace too, remember?” Morgana said. “The real Palace. And now it’s disappearing, but instead of falling apart, it’s filling up. The Dead Sea is coming through!”

“It’s coming- you mean that place is gonna fall on us!?”

“IT will if we stick around much longer,” Akira said. “Oracle, keep our bearings. Queen, hold the wheel steady.”

There was little the rest of them could do but watch as the collective unconsciousness forced its way back into the empty space that had once been Seki Shimizu’s distortion. The noise was unreal. Water punched through the upper reaches of that whiteness like tissue paper, carrying the ruins of the Metaverse with it; entire buildings tumbled through and struck the ground with a boom that made their teeth rattle in their sockets. Somewhere further off the Q-Front building engaged in a slow ballet through thin air and when it landed its glass façade exploded into shards that sprayed for half a mile in every direction; from somewhere else Tokyo Tower fell and bent like something in a blast furnace when it hit ground, enough to make the van quake from miles away, screws and girders popping free and flying off like party favors. The ground began to puncture; geysers of
black water shot up and in some of those gouts they saw corpses, the cognitive bodies of old Palaces pinwheeling gaily through the air, and Makoto swerved to avoid them and then straightened her course as the water rushed in to claim them all. No one spoke. Even Ryuji had pressed back into his seat, eyes bulging out of his head.

“Beacon spotted, Queen!” said Futaba. “Approximately two hundred meters to go!”

“Understood. Mona, give it everything you’ve got!”

The engine revved again as the swirling ink of the Dead Sea pursued them, choked with the smashed and brutalized remains of the warped cognition it bore. Behind them a vast wave arose churning with masonry and the drowned. The black star had disappeared entirely in this flood.

Akechi pulled away his mask and pulled down the rearview mirror. In its reflection Akira sat, arms crossed, eyes shut. He might have fallen asleep.

“Joker!” he said. “I just want to say…in case we don’t make it, I-”

“We’ll speak again.”

“One hundred meters…eighty meters…sixty…”

Akira opened his eyes. “That’s a promise.”

Akechi grinned into the mirror – nervous, disbelieving, but genuine. “I’ll hold you to that.”

The sky around them became a starless night and the whole of Yongen-Jaya poured through from above – the theater, the bathhouse, Leblanc Café and the wide flat planes of the roads connecting, burying them all in its shadow, ready to smash them flat, and the whirling waters cocooned them all and the Dead Sea’s fatal embrace drew closer, closer, and then-

*             *             *

“Navigation complete! Thank you for your hard work.”

*             *             *

Makoto woke up and immediately wished she hadn’t.

The hard floorboards of Akira’s old room pressed against her face. She stayed there on the floor a while longer. Her body promised deep trouble if she attempted to move anytime soon. It felt like someone had taken her every bone and, with great precision and care, struck them very hard with a hammer. They’d emerged from the Metaverse at such speed that she’d had the sensation of smashing clean into whatever unseen barrier separated the real from the cognitive, and then there’d been nothing but darkness.

Eventually she groaned and pushed herself upright. The others were sprawled out around the attic, unmoving. She shook them awake until they were blinking and wan in the lightbulb’s glow. Morgana stayed on his side, stomach rising and falling.

“No more,” he whimpered. “I’ll stay a cat forever and ever. Just no more car chases. No more high-speed getaways. No more, no more.”

“Gonna be sore in the morning,” Ryuji said, rubbing his head. “And I’ve got track tomorrow. That oughta be fun.” He perked up. “Hey, where’s the Treasure at?”
Haru saw it among their tangled bodies and held it up. That gold braid had transformed into a thick length of black woven fabric. One end was tied into a loop. The other bore a small metal clip, shining like jewelry. She frowned at it. “Is this a noose? I certainly hope not.”

“No, look at that clip,” Ann said. She pulled her hair away from her eyes and peered closer. “I think it’s a dog leash.”

Silence at that.

“Can’t believe the world nearly ended ‘cause some kid’s dog died,” Ryuji muttered.

“I can buy it,” Ann said. “Anyone would get depressed from that. But he just kept it to himself, and it must’ve kept eating at him all that time, until…”

“Instant apocalypse, just add tentacle monster,” said Futaba. “Looks like your original guess was on the money after all, Goro.” No response. She looked around. “Goro?” Growing panic. “Where’s Goro?”

Akechi was nowhere to be found. The realization jolted them all awake. Even Yusuke seemed frantic.

“Oh, no. Did he fail to cross over?”

“He’s the one with the Meta-Nav! If any of us made it over, it should’ve been him!” Morgana looked under the bed and saw nothing but dust bunnies. “We were going really fast. Something might have gone wrong. Maybe…maybe it was like Kaneshiro’s Palace, where I dropped out a little further away than the rest of you. He might not be in Leblanc at all.”

“So, what, he’s just lyin’ face-down in the street somewhere?” Ryuji got to his feet and headed for the stairs. “Man, screw that!”

They all followed him as he went down the staircase, taking the steps two at a time. The fusillade of their footsteps filled the silent café – and then, they stopped.

Sojiro was behind the counter, face stony. He glanced at them, then turned back to Akechi. He stood before Sojiro with his gun resting in his palms and his briefcase open on the counter between them. As they watched, struck mute, he put the gun inside and closed the lid. The twin pops of the clasps shutting were very loud. Heavy with finality.

Akechi took the case by the handle and turned to them. He still looked a little shabby – clothes wrinkled, face pallid, one side of his haircut uneven with bed-head – but his eyes were clear. He’d lost that lifeless glaze in his face that had followed him from the Dead Sea. He regarded them all, unsmiling.

He bowed, turned around, and left. The door shut. The bell jingled.

They stayed like that for a while, in a rough cluster at the foot of the stairs. None of them moved as Sojiro lit a cigarette and dragged deep. The plume of smoke rose and hung over them all.

“You saw the look in his eyes,” he said. “He’d made his decision. Probably for the best that he woke up before the rest of you.”

“How long?” Makoto asked.

“Five, ten minutes. It was enough. He said that it was done. Is it done?”
“Yeah. It’s done.”

“Okay.” He sighed out smoke. “Too late for the trains. He’ll have to take a cab to the police station. Tomorrow morning, I bet there’s going to be a driver with quite a story to tell the news. As for all the others…the hospitals will have their hands full. It’ll probably be a couple days before we hear how this all shakes out.” He looked at them. “For now, I’d like to hear everything.”

“He didn’t tell you himself?”

“He was in a hurry. Just stayed long enough to leave you that. Over there.”

He gestured to one of the stools at the counter, the same one where Akechi had often sat last year, cheerfully greeting an increasingly irritated Akira. They crowded around it. On the bartop was a napkin with something written on it. When he read it, Ryuji’s face twisted like he’d bitten into something sour.

“Tch. Dumbass couldn’t have just said it to our faces?” He turned away. “Whatever.”

It was the most somber victory they’d ever celebrated. They sat at the booths with Sojiro presiding, and explained their heist as best they could. Makoto and Yusuke did most of the talking. Futaba and Ryuji mostly brooded. Ann spend the time with one arm around Haru, who remained silent, head down. Morgana had perched on the stool with his head over Akechi’s note. He seemed hypnotized by it.

Eventually there was nothing left to say except goodnight, and they dispersed from the café and went their separate ways; Futaba left holding on tight to Sojiro’s arm. The lights clicked off and Leblanc was left in murk like something beneath a glass jar. In that blue-tinted dark Akechi’s note gleamed like mother-of-pearl, left reverently in his old place at the counter.

The message was brief. In Akechi’s neat penmanship, it read:

*Thank you for everything.*
- *Crow*
Chapter 17

When he awoke for the final time the bus had gone silent. The engine not stalled, but ceased. There was a certain contentedness to the way it settled, like a dog in front of a fireplace. He worked a kink out of his neck as Lavenza beamed.

“And so we come to the end,” she said. “My master awaits. He will guide you to the waking world.”

His last impression had been of the falling sky, the dilapidated false Tokyo smashing through nothingness just overhead. Roaring water, panicked chatter, Ann silent beside him but hyperventilating like a train engine. He knew it wouldn’t have helped anyone if he’d lost his cool and so he’d shut his eyes and waited for whatever would come. Until Akechi had called out to him.

He stretched out in the chair, arched his back, felt his vertebrae pop. He still felt the soreness from those grasping chains.

“How much time has passed since we stole the Treasure?” he asked.

“Barely a day. Your awakening should coincide with that of the other victims.”

“Good. I don’t want to worry them any more than I already have.” He relaxed again. “Though I guess it was for the best, in the end. If I hadn’t gone into the Dead Sea, then everyone else wouldn’t have been spurred into action like that.”

She nodded, but hesitantly. Akira’s thumbs traced abstract patterns in the plush of his armchair. His expression was thoughtful, almost grim. Even she could tell it was inappropriate for someone who had just saved the world.

“Does something trouble you?”

“I’m just thinking about what you said before,” he said. “The days to come. Where we go from here.”

“You are doubtful of humanity’s future?”

“Always. That’s just how it is. It’s like what Goro said. People will forget about all this, eventually. They have to. Until we find ourselves back at the same place again, and again.” He leaned forward, steepled his fingers. “Don’t worry. I’m not going to despair, like that chatty book wanted. But I’m wondering what to do, between now and then.”

“Whatever you choose, I am sure that your efforts will bear fruit. You are one who has completed his rehabilitation, after all.”

“I’m not sure if rehabilitation ever ends. For any of us. That thing, Hastur or Iago whatever it was, said there was something twisted at the core of humanity. Something irreparable. It might have laid things on a little thick, but I don’t believe it was completely wrong. I mean, I just spent the last couple of weeks splashing around a giant graveyard of distorted thoughts. It probably got smashed to bits when Shimizu’s Palace collapsed, but there’ll be a new one. At another time, in another shape. Nothing stays gone, and nothing stays fixed.” He met her eyes and his gaze was steely. “So that just means I have to keep trying to help, wherever I can. And I think I just came up with a good place to start.” He flashed that wry grin. “Sorry. I know you already chewed me out for that attitude before. Old habits die hard, right?”
Lavenza didn’t answer right away. Her smile had gone. She laid her hand on the book between them.

“Trickster,” she said. “Please forgive me.”

“Huh?”

“As I told you before, I am a Wielder of Power. A being created to serve humans, yet forever placed apart from them. Our understanding of the human heart is limited. I thought I had gained some knowledge during our time spent in the Velvet Room, but as I accompanied you here, I came to realize that this knowledge was very shallow. Sparse. Bereft of the myriad contradictions that at once hinder the heart and guide it forward. For example, observe yourself. That incorrigibly selfish altruism.” She smiled, but it was unlike her other, uncannily stiff expressions – her whole face trembled, like she was struggling to keep it in place. She ran a finger across the book’s cover and sparks trailed around her touch. “I suppose that I, who was divided by the Usurper and then rejoined, resurrected through contradiction, have become fascinated by such paradoxes. And there is still so very much to learn. So forgive me. Even though your journey is concluded, I wish . . .” Her voice shook, then broke. “I wish that we had more time . . .”

Akira watched dumbfounded as she sniffed and clumsily wiped her eyes. For all his social graces, he had little experience with comforting little girls. “Hey. It’s all right. For all we know I might wind up back here again.”

She lowered her hands and shook her head, smiling through her tears. “No. You have been a cherished guest, but I truly hope this is the end of your time here. You have suffered tribulation enough in this realm. Better that you expend your efforts in the waking world from this point forward.”

She stood up from her seat, stepped to the side of the table. After a moment, Akira followed suit, looking down at her.

“Nevertheless,” she said, “the Velvet Room shall remain open. In time, another guest will come. One who rises to challenge the monster known as ‘thyself.’”

Akira nodded, and held out his hand. Lavenza stared at it, puzzled. Then she took it and gently guided it up, pressing it to her cheek. She shut her eyes as if his palm were a pillow, about to settle in for a night’s rest.

“Such warmth,” she said. “I do not understand how you can bear it.” She released him and stepped back. “Please remember to treasure that flame within you. Humanity will have more need of it than ever in the days to come.”

“I will,” he said. “Thank you for everything, Lavenza.”

She curtsied. “And best of fortune to you, Akira Kurusu.”

He walked past her and through the fogged glass barrier separating the two of them from the driver. The driver himself turned out to be a slim and sharp-faced man, his slicked-back hair resting under an old-fashioned driver’s cap. His overcoat and gloves were the same deep blue as Lavenza’s dress; he shared that white-blond hair, those eyes of beaten gold. He turned his head the merest fraction towards Akira as the partition’s door hissed shut behind him.

“Good evening, sir. I trust the ride was a pleasant one?”

“Very. Got a little bumpy towards the end, though.”
“My deepest apologies. I shall strive to do better in the future.”

“That’s all we can hope for, right?” He waved and turned to the stairs. “Good night.”

“To you as well, sir.”

He stepped off the bus and into darkness so thick it was almost solid. But this wasn’t the hostile, carnivorous dark of the black star; it embraced him like a blanket, softly pushed him forward. He followed that pressure towards a distant sound that became clearer as the walls solidified into pitted blue stone. Applause.

In the prison Igor stood behind his desk. Between the tuxedo-clad twigs of his legs and his frozen expression and his body motionless except for his wild clapping he came off as some nightmarish cousin of a wind-up cymbal monkey. But as Akira approached and he settled back into his chair, the delight in his voice was full, genuine, and contagious.

“What remains to be said?” He spread his arms wide. “You were absolutely magnificent.”

Akira grinned. “I do my best.”

Then he looked up, and his grin faded. The stark chandelier of Akechi’s cage hung above them, now attached by just a single chain whose links were badly rusted and creaked dangerously with every breeze. Akechi himself was curled up at the bottom, still in prisoner’s fatigues, sleeping deep.

“Do not mind him,” said Igor. “His confinement will not last much longer, but it should hold for the duration of your stay here.”

“Would you say he’s been rehabilitated?”

“That, I believe, is largely up to him.”

Akira appeared satisfied with that answer. He stepped up to the desk. Igor regarded him, steepling his fingers.

“Seems like forever ago since I woke up here,” he said. “Right after Futaba called me, right?”

“Indeed. You will depart from this dream shortly, and once this Velvet Room’s own guest next awakes, the room itself shall have served its purpose. In all likelihood, you and I will not meet again.”

“I thought about that, actually.” Akira interrupted. His tone was pleasant but there was a certain sharpness in his stare that held its own against even Igor’s pop-eyed expression. “If I hadn’t come here when I did, and decided to go to the Dead Sea, all my friends never would’ve been so determined to look into Paranoia Syndrome further. All the research they did, the way they came there to save me, let alone everything involving Goro...it all happened because I wound up in a Velvet Room that wasn’t even my own. That’s one hell of a coincidence.”

“You do seem to attract them, yes.” Igor stayed jovial, but there was a note of caution in his voice.

“So I have a question for you.”

Akira placed his palms on the table and leaned down, almost close enough for his nose and Igor’s to touch.
“Was it really a coincidence?” he asked. “Did I come here of my own free will, or was I summoned?”

Complete stillness. For a long time that high sweet note hanging in the air was the only sound. A vibrato string filled with tension.

Then, Igor laughed, rueful and low.

“Dear, oh, dear.” He shook his head. “Was it so obvious?”

“Not really. But I had plenty of time to think, after Shimizu got ahold of me. I thought it was strange enough how the Phantom Thieves got started just because we bumped into Shido at some fancy buffet. There’s only so much that can be left to chance.”

“A fair assumption. Indeed, I confess. I elected to draw you into this Velvet Room, at a time when I thought you would be most amenable to confronting that malicious paranoia.” He sighed. “From the beginning, I had my suspicions regarding the true nature of your latest foe. An entity I have encountered before, and one I detest even more strongly than the Usurper. I believed it vital to unravel its schemes with all possible haste. Nevertheless, it was an unacceptable overreach of authority on my part. I expect to be reprimanded for it later.” He held out a hand. “And my deepest apologies to you, as well. You have already been deceived once by the Velvet Room. I knew that it would be a terrible sin to further betray your trust.”

“It’s okay,” said Akira. He straightened again. “It’s not like you didn’t warn me what would happen. And it all worked out in the end, right?”

Igor relaxed. “We are in agreement, then. I am most pleased that this has not tarnished our relationship any fur-”

“But,” he added, “I’d like to ask you a favor.”

Igor’s eyes somehow widened further, which placed them in serious danger of exiting his malformed skull entirely. The bony rattle of Akechi’s cage punctuated his surprise. Then, he tented his fingers, tilted his head.

“Well. This, too, is most extraordinary. I would be glad to hear your request. Though I must warn you, my influence outside of this room is rather limited.”

“I’m sort of making this up as I go along. But it should work.”

“Tell me, then.”

Akira told him. It took some time.

Igor remained motionless for his entire explanation. When at last he finished, one of those emaciated hands rose and curled contemplatively under his chin. The hand was all that moved. As if his consciousness had come to reside fully in that single limb.

“Fascinating,” he said, finally. “A bold proposal, to be certain. But do you know what he wants?”

“I have an idea, but I can’t be sure. I need to confirm it. If you’re watching me as closely as I think you are, we’ll both get our answer. And we’ll both know what to do next.”

“The effect will be quite limited, of course. Quite brief. But if preparations are taken, it would surely be sufficient…and what better way to purge the Usurper’s influence for good and all? To
desecrate his memory so?” He chuckled, but there was a hungry undercurrent in his laughter now –
the whole room seemed to ripple from it. “How utterly tantalizing. I shall have to seek dispensation
for this, Trickster. But I accept.”

“Good. Then we’re even.”

“Indebted to a guest. What a novel sensation. I have seen many champions come and go. But
please believe me when I say that, even by those lofty standards, you have been truly exceptional.”

The prison grew indistinct. Akira didn’t feel tired, or that he was waking, but the world around him
became harder to hold onto; every point of focus skittered away to the edges of his vision. The
cells, Igor, Akechi high above, all of it started to run like wet paint, until there were only whorls of
deep blue and the wordless song in the panopticon’s highest reaches.

“The seas are calmed. Your task is complete. And our time has, regrettably, come to an end.” In
these last moments, as Igor joined the blurring blue, Akira had the sensation that he was much
taller than he first appeared. “Soon, my observation of you will cease entirely. But I believe that
you will continue to make yourself known in the waking world. I need only look for the souls you
kindle in your wake.

“We in the Velvet Room bid you farewell. In this uncertain future, may you grasp happiness.”

* * *

“And now, the news.

“Several days after the mass awakening of those suffering from Paranoia Syndrome, hospitals
across Japan have at last begun discharging patients. According to the Ministry of Health, Labor,
and Welfare, an initial group of approximately one hundred patients was released from various
care facilities across the nation, after they were examined and determined to be in good health. A
spokesman promised to provide updates as events develop.

“A total census of Paranoia Syndrome victims is still not available at this time.

“Hospitals worldwide, already in disarray from the difficulties of caring for these patients, were
strained even further from the shocking recoveries of all those afflicted. Reports are still ongoing,
but at present it appears that all patients suffering from the disease – which rapidly gained infamy
due to its idiopathic origins, rapid onset, and symptoms resembling an untreatable coma –
recovered between 11 p.m. Monday evening and 1 a.m. Tuesday morning.

“In a recent interview, Dr. Tae Takemi, a clinical physician particularly renowned for her work in
pharmaceuticals, remarked that in this timeframe, brain activity markedly changed even in those
patients who did not immediately awaken from their comatose states, suggesting that recovery was
indeed uniform and near-simultaneous across all those afflicted. Dr. Takemi declined to speculate
further, only stating that her own medicines did little to affect the sickness.

“The WHO continues to investigate, as nations tally the financial cost and tensions gradually wind
down from the tensions of-”

*click*

> anon: We live in a senseless world.
> anon: government conspiracy it fukken has to be
> anon: it was aliens. not the illegal kind, the probe kind
> anon: Uuuuugggghhhhh I’ve gotta go back to schoooool
> anon: my brother’s ok that’s all i give a shit about
> anon: DR TAKEMI STEP ON ME
> anon: I’m thinking about how health insurance will work for this and it’s turning my hair white.
> anon: at least no one’ll go to war now, I guess?
> anon: I was all worked up for a good apocalypse and then I got blueballed at the last second, FUUUUUUUU
> anon: Remember all of this, don’t just let them bury it

*click*

"-days after the initial rumors, the Tokyo Metropolitan Police have at last issued a confirmation. Former celebrity and ‘child detective’ Goro Akechi, age 18, turned himself in early Tuesday morning after being presumed disappeared since last November. Mr. Akechi reportedly handed over a loaded and illicitly modified firearm, and confessed to between twenty and thirty counts of first-degree murder performed to further the campaign of former Prime Minister Masayoshi Shido.

“Mr. Akechi, who had gained celebrity status for his work in the police department, his frequent talk-show appearances, and his long campaign against vigilante group the ‘Phantom Thieves,’ maintained a significant fan following even after his disappearance. These shocking developments have stunned a country already reeling from the sudden dissipation of Paranoia Syndrome, with numerous theories regarding his crimes and confession already appearing online. Further details regarding the killings are still forthcoming, but a TMPD spokesman stated that Akechi presently claims he used poison provided to him by Shido’s co-conspirators, while simultaneously leveraging his connections with the police to hinder investigations, falsify evidence, and mislead other detectives.

“These allegations, if true, would make Mr. Akechi the most high-profile juvenile criminal in decades, guilty of premeditated mass murder as well as conspiracy against the state. According to several legal experts, a full conviction would almost certainly lead to the death penalty. The police refused access to Akechi himself for comment.

“As the Paranoia Syndrome epidemic slowly resolves, it may be said that Goro Akechi’s fate is one of the most hotly discussed topics in Tokyo, dredging up memories of incidents everyone had thought concluded last-”

*click*

> anon: BULL. FUCKING. SHIT.
> anon: alright fess up, which one of you fangirls wished on a monkey’s paw
> anon: I always hated that guy
> anon: this is a frameup there’s no way goro would do this there’s just no way
> anon: Where the hell was he hiding all this time? I thought he was dead. I mean, he’s obvs gonna die NOW, but
> anon: goro did nothing wrong
> anon: i’m refreshing my feed every ten minutes hahahahaha everything is completely on fire
> anon: Fuck Paranoia Syndrome this is the new hotness
> anon: oh my god his little fans are literally crying in the streets imma die laughing
> anon: r.i.p. japan, killed by cute high schooler
> anon: [Comment deleted by moderator]
> anon: Ok, what kind of poison makes people leak black goo from their eyes and drop dead? That
actually happened, right? We got it on tape and everything!
> anon: Has anyone even seen him yet, this could just be some viral marketing thing
> anon: fuck the police
> anon: [Comment deleted by moderator]

* * *

The black star’s influence was gone, but trepidation still lingered in the air. That sense of inescapable doom wasn’t forgotten so easily. People spoke more, but furtively; their laughter and smiles were nervous and quick, as if too much open happiness would invite Paranoia Syndrome back into their lives. Shujin Academy, which many believed to be the flashpoint of the epidemic, was no different. Many of the students clustered in corners and filled each other’s heads with rumor.

The faculty, for their part, made a commendable effort to try and return things to normal. Ms. Kawakami organized a small but enthusiastic celebration for Tsukiko Minami’s impending return – her hospital room was so mobbed with get-well cards and floral arrangements that it was difficult to see the girl herself.

Futaba hadn’t sent her anything. She wasn’t really up to date on the whole concept. But even after all this time, she couldn’t get that initial image out of her head – Tsukiko sprawled out and dead-eyed on the floor across from her, the desklegs like cell bars across her face. It kept nagging at her, until she’d finally retreated to a secluded spot in the school courtyard, and taken several deep breaths, and finally dialed a number with shaking fingers.

She was used to texting. She hadn’t invested many ability points in actually talking on the phone. That was probably why it had taken her about thirty seconds of agonized stuttering just to tell Tsukiko her name. But things had smoothed out, after that.

“You’re the first one to call, you know.” Tsukiko’s voice was still weak, but either she was enjoying the conversation or doing a good job of faking it. “I mean, I’ve got plenty of cards but that’s, like, impersonal. Easy to figure out why, I guess. I pissed too many people off. Too much shit-talking behind their backs.”

“It wasn’t that bad.” She was hunched on the ground, out of sight, knees pulled up to her chin. She spoke quickly, firing each sentence off like a rocket before it could blow up in her head. “I’ve seen way worse.”

“I bet. I must’ve freaked you out bad when I collapsed. Sorry about that.”

“Not your fault.”

“I kept telling everyone you were a real freak, you know.” A long pause. “Maybe I brought it on myself.”

“Do you mean Paranoia Syndrome or no one visiting? Actually, don’t answer that. Both are wrong. You’re fine. And you had a point, anyway. I know I’m weird. But I’m cool with it.”

“Yeah. You are kind of cool, aren’t you.” Futaba nearly dropped the phone. “Hey, you into movies?”

“I. You. Mm. I mean, what kind?”

“Any kind. I was into horror for a while but I’m in the mood for something light and fluffy. Get my
“I know. I mean, I don’t know. I know but I don’t know. I’ll think about it. We can talk when you come back. Face to face. With eye contact.” Steady, steady. Tension meter at maximum.

“Uh...yeah, sure. That works.”

“Are you into Akihabara? I know some cool spots.” Interesting. Her mouth had made those noises with minimal input from her brain.

“Oh, hell yes. You know those little cat dolls they started selling? I’ve got, like, ten of them.”

Roll with it. “Yeah. I made my own.” She’d stitched it over the summer to keep her hands busy, black with blue button eyes, a sloppy imitation of Morgana.

“ Seriously? I’d like to see that.”

Special move. Extra points. “Okay. Okay, sure. We can do that. Do stuff.”

“Cool. Talk later, I...hey, wait. How’d you get my number in the first place?”

“Asked Ms. Kawakami for it,” she lied. “Just wanted to get in touch. I was worried. About you.” That, at least, felt like the truth.

“Well...thanks. And I’m sorry for all the crap I said about you. Even if you, uh, apparently didn’t notice any of it.”

“It’s fine. I’m fine.”

“Alright. Nurse is giving me nasty looks. I’ll see you around, Sakura.”

“Yes. We can do that. I’ll hang up now. Goodbye.”

She jammed her finger on the disconnect and held her phone to her chest until her heart stopped jackhammering. She hadn’t gone out that far into enemy territory since Akira had first taken her to Akihabara. This quest had been way above her level. Still, she’d muddled through somehow.

Next up, checking in with Ms. Kawakami. She left the courtyard, went up the stairs, made her way to the teacher’s lounge. Several people waved at her. After a moment, she remembered to wave back.

She was just outside the door when her phone buzzed again. She fished it out and squinted at the unfamiliar number. Then the messages popped up.

AK: Hey.
AK: Texting from my mom’s phone.
AK: This place smells funny.
AK: How are you?

A complicated moment passed.

Kawakami flung open the door and charged out into the hall, looking even more frazzled than usual. From the noise she’d expected to see someone being attacked outside, or worse, comatose again. Instead she found Futaba, jumping out and down in place with her phone in her hands, squealing with joy.
“Futaba? What on Earth are you-”

She held out the phone. “Akira’s awake!”

Kawakami blinked. She grinned. Then she joined hands with Futaba and started jumping in place with her. The squealing became stereo. The other students stared at this display of jubilation for a moment, and then, as one, they turned away, the same thought on all their minds – God, what a messed-up school.

* * *

“...has gone dark once again, and most likely for good. After promising a major revelation regarding Paranoia Syndrome, the hacker group Medjed gained the largest following they’d seen since their public feud with the Phantom Thieves last spring. However, the promised date has come and gone, and Medjed themselves have fallen completely silent. Their social media accounts and homepage have likewise been erased, now bearing only the message, ‘Close Sesame.’

“Response has been swift. Hospitals across Japan have decried the breach of security, and the Diet has promised harsh repercussions should Medjed resurface once more. As their followers and supporters dwindle almost to nothing, it now seems likely that Medjed, as it currently exists, will not return again.

“Public attention has largely moved on as Paranoia Syndrome’s victims continue to return home, with focus on Goro Akechi’s impending trial remaining the most prominent-”

*click*

> anon: guys, i think we got trolled
> anon: Heard a rumor they got smacked down by some government white hat, RIP
> anon: wonder what they were going to drop
> anon: probably just had the total number of PS victims or something, who even cares
> anon: pretentious dicks, glad they’re gone
> anon: lmao their followers dropped by like 50k in two hours
> anon: Anyone know when Akechi’s court date is supposed to be?
> anon: GORO DID NOTHING WRONG

*click*

* * *

The trickle of regulars slowly returned to Café Leblanc. Older folks, most of them, sampling Sojiro’s coffee for the nostalgia more than the taste. They’d smelled his roast before the world had briefly flipped upside-down and he watched them scent it again as if they hoped it would help them forget the paranoid days. Their gossip was disjointed and vague, and they didn’t linger as long as they used to. Sojiro wasn’t worried. He knew the status quo would take hold again, in due time.

He closed the store at dusk and stepped out onto the streets of Yongen-Jaya, still in his apron, cigarettes crinkling in his front pocket. The day had been drizzly and grey and he shielded his cigarette from the wet as he lit up. The smoke curled about him as he walked, his silhouette thin and bent like a crippled vulture.

On the day they’d received the news that Akira had fallen unconscious, about two weeks and a thousand years ago, Makoto had stepped into Leblanc and thought of it as Sojiro’s private refuge
from the march of time. Unchanging, in defiance of the future. In truth, Sojiro sometimes thought
the same way, but about Yongen-Jaya in general. This huddle of streets was always the same place,
the same thing.

The pool of condensate under the air conditioner next door.
The blots of rust on the shutter after the pawnshop closed.
The rhythmic cracks from the batting cages.

People, people, people.

He blew smoke and pondered. Everyone assumed the future meant progress, but it seemed to him
that it brought regression just as often. The march of time fought to drag them back to something
familiar, no matter how much the world tried to degrade. A downward spiral. You end up at the
same place again and again, but with every revolution you sink a little lower. The rain fell harder.
Droplets glistened on his beard.

His phone buzzed. He took it out of his pocket and answered it without checking the number.

“ Took you long enough,” he said.

“Sorry. Wanted to get in touch with everyone else first.”

“Makes sense. All I did was feed and board you for a year.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Lighten up, kid. It’s a joke.”

He turned toward the bathhouse and ducked into the laundry as the rain fell harder. He took refuge
among the silent machines, his cigarette smoke trailing after him like a stray animal.

“So how’re you feeling? Any after-effects?”

“A little stiff, that’s it. They’re going to release me in a couple days. Good thing, too. My parents
were missing work. They wouldn’t leave me alone.”

“Think they feel guilty for last year?”

“ Maybe. I don’t know. I’ll talk to them about it.” A pause. When he spoke again his words were
more hesitant. “I know it’s a weird time to ask, but…it’s just, they didn’t visit before. Even when I
got sent to juvie. Do you think I disappointed them, somehow?”

Sojiro hissed out smoke through his teeth. He’d gotten in touch with Akira’s parents a few times
during his stay at Leblanc, but as the year had progressed, his feelings regarding their seeming
hesitance to actually contact their son had gone from understanding to bewilderment to something
very close to fury. If he tried hard enough he could sympathize with them. Maybe even flatter
himself into thinking that they’d stayed away because they’d trusted Sojiro himself to handle it.
But he hadn’t spoken up about it, because it wasn’t his place, and as that uneasy cold war between
them all had continued, it had clearly frostbitten something inside Akira himself.

“You should ask them,” he said at last. “I’m serious. You’re the only one who’ll get a straight
answer from them. But in any case, they clearly still care about you, if they didn’t leave your side
after all this time.”
“Yeah. I worried them.” He sighed. “Seems like we’re always letting someone down, no matter what we do.”

He really must have gone through hell, Sojiro thought. The kid was almost never this open with him. Outside, the rain became a downpour.

“Your cat’s still here, by the way. According to Futaba he isn’t thrilled with the idea of hitchhiking back to your place, either. She suggested that we take him back ourselves. All of us.” He tapped out ash, kept his voice gruff. “That sound okay with you?”

“Huh? Yeah! I’d have to run it by my folks, but…yeah, that sounds good.” Sojiro grinned. “But I think it has to wait. Until after Gor- I mean, Akechi’s trial.”

The grin left. “Is that so?”

“Wouldn’t want it hanging over my head, is all. Hey, have you heard anything about how it’s going so far? I know you’ve got old friends in the government and police and stuff and the media’s kept a pretty tight lid on things. I’m curious.”

“You gonna try and influence the verdict somehow?”

Akira made a sort of discomfited grunt and Sojiro ground out his cigarette on one of the machines, feeling a pang of bitter triumph. The kid was usually so opaque that it was an achievement to actually suss out what he was thinking.

“It’s not what you think.”

“I sure as hell hope not. I heard he helped you out a lot during whatever you were doing, but since he tried to kill you too that’s pretty much just balancing the books. And it doesn’t wipe clean all the other evil shit he did.”

“I know. I know that.”

“Let the wheels turn, Akira. Justice has to be served.”

Akira barked laughter at that, and Sojiro’s eyes widened. “You know, one of the things I couldn’t stand about him was how he kept going on about justice. It was like some kind of tic.”

“Probably didn’t help that he wasn’t a fan of the justice you kids were dishing out, either.”

“That’s the thing. He kept trying to guess what my definition of ‘justice’ was, too. Drove me crazy. What the hell is justice supposed to be, anyway? Courts and trials and prison sentences? The stuff society approves of? I don’t care about any of that. It never did anything for me.”

“Maybe. What’s your alternative, then?”

“I don’t know. I’m still putting it together.” He sounded vehement, almost cornered. “Everyone goes on about rehabilitation like if you just shove someone in a cell for a few years they’ll come out all clean and ready to take on the world. But that’s not how it works, right? Everyone just forgets about them. There’s too many people and they all want to forget and they keep shoving everyone in holes so they can ignore them. We can’t ever totally rehabilitate ourselves. We’re always making mistakes and trying to make up for them. I think that’s how we move forward, now. We need as many chances as we can get to change. That’s all I want. For people to have chances. People just need to do what they think is right. And try not to hurt anyone.” He stopped, and laughed again, a little sheepishly. “This all sounded a lot cooler in my head.”
“I bet,” said Sojiro. “People speak a different language inside.”

“And I know it’s not as simple as it sounds. But that’s what I’m doing, Mr. Sakura. I’m doing what I think is right. And believe me, I’m really, really trying not to hurt anyone.”

Mr. Sakura. That’s what Akira had called him in the early days, before Sojiro had started insisting on ‘Boss.’ He remembered how the kid had looked when he’d first taken in the attic loft that would become his bedroom. Full of clutter, patinaed with dust. Until that point his expression had been inscrutable, but in that moment, he’d looked like someone standing on a high ledge in a strong wind. Sojiro had felt a tinge of satisfaction at the sight – finally, he’d thought, the consequences are sinking in. He still hated himself for thinking that, sometimes.

Fast forward to now. The kid had stepped away from that ledge and somehow established a web of contacts through the whole of Tokyo, people who would happily light themselves on fire for him. Even now, Sojiro felt those strands tighten. He wondered, not for the first time, how different the world might be if everyone had that kind of determination.

With his free hand, he deftly extracted another cigarette, stuck it in his mouth, and lit up. Akira waited patiently on the line.

“All right,” he said around the smoke. “As it happens, I have been keeping my ear to the ground on this. And I’ve heard a couple things you might find useful. But Akira, I’ll make this clear now – whatever you’re planning to do, whatever he does will be entirely on your head. If the police somehow get wind of this crap and come to me again, I won’t protect you. Do you understand me?”

“No cops, got it.”

He snorted. “God, you’re such a smartass.”

“My ass is no smarter than your ass,” he said serenely. “So what did you hear?”

“It’s about a couple of mutual acquaintances of ours. One friendly, the other…less so.”

“Tell me.”

The drumming of rain on the laundry roof became deafening. Drops forced their way through the boards and dribbled cold on Sojiro’s shoulders as he talked. The weather and his cigarette cloaked him, pushing his face and voice deep into this little forgotten corner of the world, and by the time he stopped and left, the downpour had ended and left the city shining with wet as if wrapped in plastic – everything, at least for the moment, washed clean.

* * *

“-patients report no lingering symptoms from the illness save those caused by short- to medium-term loss of consciousness, such as stiffness, weakness in the muscles, and disorientation. Most symptoms have cleared up within several days, though medical professionals advise all discharged patients to seek medical attention immediately if they recur.

“The Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare also emphasized that, despite its sudden dissipation, many cases of Paranoia Syndrome have not been so benign. Several unconscious patients who may have been suffering from the disease died from cardiac arrest in the intervening weeks between Paranoia Syndrome’s occurrence and disappearance, and investigations are still ongoing. Others have reported minor audio and visual hallucinations, and remain under hospital care.”
“In particular, an anonymous source at St. Luke’s hospital reported an incident in the Intensive Care Ward concerning one of Japan’s earliest Paranoia Syndrome patients. Seki Shimizu, age fifteen, had resided in the St. Luke’s since late August, and woke up in a state of what the source described as ‘hysterical distress.’ Allegedly, Shimizu confessed to nurses on the scene that he had been responsible for the Paranoia Syndrome outbreak, and showed disquieting knowledge of the sickness’ symptoms and breadth of effect, despite being among the first afflicted.

“When asked for comment, several neurologists could not offer a full explanation for this behavior, though they did cite it as evidence that the ‘comas’ displayed by Paranoia Syndrome patients may not have been typical, saying that Shimizu may have subconsciously obtained information about the sickness from news broadcasts playing in his or adjacent rooms. Shimizu himself showed no physical abnormalities, and has since been placed in psychiatric care. The Tokyo police have stated that he is not under investigation for any crime and they do not intend to follow up on these claims.

“Shimizu’s parents declined to comment on this alleged incident, stating that they were just happy that their son could return home.

“In related news, the ‘mental shutdown’ and ‘psychotic breakdown’ incidents which similarly rocked Tokyo in previous years may have found a culprit in Goro Akechi, who still awaits trial for-”

*click*

> anon: give us a court date alreadyyyyy
> anon: Heard they’re gonna televise it. I’m taking off work
> anon: my niece wound up in the hospital because of that subway crash, i hope he hangs
> anon: [Comment deleted by moderator]
> anon: that prick shido was the mastermind behind all this, why the hell are they throwing gororo to the wolves
> anon: So wait, does that mean all the cases he solved were fake? jfc
> anon: someone should ask that other kid detective what he thinks of this. he? she? fuck i forgot
> anon: [Comment deleted by moderator]
> anon: [Comment deleted by moderator]
> anon: [Comment deleted by moderator]
> anon: Friendship ended with Paranoia Syndrome, now Goro Akechi’s execution is my best friend
> anon: You people are sick.

* * *

A featureless concrete cell. A single table. A bare lightbulb buzzing overhead. Once upon a time he’d shot what he thought to be Akira Kurusu dead here, watched his blood and brain paint an abstract pattern on the tabletop. Now he sat in Akira’s old chair, hands in his lap, hair in his eyes, an emaciated sculpture in his prison fatigues.

The door clanged open and shut. Heels clacked crisply across the ground. The chairlegs scraped and scraped again as someone sat down.
“How have you been?”

He looked up. Sae Niijima sat across from him with her hands folded and a plain plastic binder at her side. The look on her face was not a reassuring one, but that was likely due to lack of practice more than anything.

Sae had privately expected some gesture of shock from Akechi when she’d appeared as his defense attorney – it had been shortly after he’d turned himself in, before the news had even reached the general public. It hadn’t been difficult. Defendants in Japan had a hard enough time of it already, and Akechi had strode into the police department and provided both hard and soft evidence that he was an enemy of the state. Most lawyers didn’t need that kind of publicity. But when she’d had her first meeting with him, in this same room, he’d barely acknowledged her at all. The same thing happened now. He seemed dormant. Quietly waiting for the jaws of the future to close over him.

She cleared her throat and flipped open the binder.

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She cleared her throat and flipped open the binder.
tried to speak and she held up a finger, shushing him. “But here’s the truth. I’m here because no one else can be. Because you have no other lawyer who grasps the facts as I do.”

“And what facts are those?” he croaked.

“That you already spent what is effectively a year in solitary confinement, under extremely cruel and unusual circumstances. That you’ve undergone a fairly extraordinary act of community service. That you’re repentant, Akechi. Maybe none of that is admissible in court, but you can be well assured that it influences my decision.” She paused. “I know you saved Makoto’s life at least once.”

“After trying to kill her and all the others repeatedly.” He shrugged. “I appreciate the gratitude. But it doesn’t matter anymore. The truth is out. I made sure of that. You needn’t worry about the precedent for juvenile court, either, since I’ll certainly be tried as an adult.”

“About that. It’s already been decided you’ll be tried as a juvenile.”

“What? But…that’s just pointless! Issuing the death penalty in the context, it would—”

“You likely won’t be receiving the death penalty.” She thoughtfully drummed her fingers on the table. “Frankly, as things stand, an acquittal may not be out of the question.”

Akechi stared.

Sae’s expression was, as always, unreadable – her career had trained her to ensure that no one could guess what she was thinking if she didn’t allow it. But she didn’t appear to be joking. She rarely appeared to be the sort of woman who was capable of telling jokes.

“You certainly made things difficult for yourself,” she said, in response to his muteness. “That pistol alone all but guaranteed a conviction. And then you tied yourself to Shido, neatly answering the question of resources and motive. However. I think we both know the way you really killed those people can never be spoken, correct? The Metaverse, the mental shutdowns…all of it completely untraceable. It’s provable that you possessed an unregistered firearm and likely defrauded the police department as well. But the murders? You were too good at your job. All the evidence against you is circumstantial.”

“That doesn’t matter,” he said, but he felt his certainty crumbling under the pressure of her gaze. “It’s enough. People need someone to blame.”

“Yes. They do.”

She took out her phone, held it up like a badge. “Authorities are still going over the details of Shido’s conspiracy, you know. That man had his fingers in everything. You were one of the few pawns on whom he kept no evidence. No blackmail. Likely because he planned to kill you from the start.” Akechi bared his teeth, but Sae went on. “Obviously when you dropped his name, the police decided to go straight to the source. I called in a few favors, and, well…” She deftly navigated her phone screen. “We can skip the introductions in this, they’re rather tedious. But the rest, I think you deserve to hear.”

She set the phone down on the table, tapped the screen. For a moment there was nothing. Just the hiss of dead air.

Even in his numb incredulity Akechi had expected the voice that emerged from the phone’s speaker. It made his heart jump all the same. Smug, slightly nasal, completely self-assured. Everything that voice had spoken for years he’d bottled up in his mind and replayed over and over
before he slept, waiting for the day he could make it collapse. He clutched his knees like a scolded child as it talked.

“-value of loyalty,” said Masayoshi Shido. “Can men like yourselves even comprehend it? He showed up at my headquarters one day. This was back when I was still laying the barest groundwork for my campaign — a few private speeches, a shaken hand here and there, nothing terribly dramatic, but apparently he’d stumbled across one of my initial rallies. He’d told my guards he wanted to work for me. That he’d been inspired by my vision. Very flattering, but I hardly had time for some unwashed orphan boy’s flattery, so I had him sent away. Then he came back, and I had him beaten black and blue. As soon as he could walk he came back again. And that’s when I realized. Loyalty. I let him into my office and he looked at me like he’d just seen the face of God. Gutter trash like him would burn themselves to cinders in service of something they believe in. Because they have nothing else to live for, you see.”

No, he wanted to say, but his tongue had petrified in his mouth. That wasn’t the way it had been.

Someone else spoke on the recording. The interrogators, probably. The sound was poor and all that could be heard of them was a low murmur, like distant waves.

“Of course I couldn’t depend on him for too much. A child is still just a child, after all. I set him running errands. Delivering messages. As time went on those messages became more confidential, and eventually I had him dropping off parcels of a more…shall we say, extra-legal nature. I worked him to the bone. I scarcely gave him time for sleep. He ate it all up and asked for more. As I expected, he was just an empty vessel for my will.”

Shido chuckled. “But it wasn’t until I stumbled over some news puff piece about that idiotic Naoto Shirogane character that I found a better use for him. Child detectives…what an absurd idea. But I was in need of extra eyes on the police. And a bit of extra publicity never hurt anyone.”

Murmur, murmur.

“You imbeciles never even questioned it, did you? I instilled some proper manners into the boy and dropped him off on your doorstep, and you let him run roughshod over you. He never solved a single case that I didn’t rig in his favor, and yet the ignorant public fell at his feet. I had even intended for him to start speaking in favor of my campaign, when the time was right…though, of course, the Phantom Thieves derailed all of that. Hardly a surprise that he failed at the crucial moment. I don’t know why I expected anything better.”

Wrong, thought Akechi. The word rang in his head like Shimizu’s ranting Shadow. It’s wrong, it’s wrong, it’s wrong…

The phone again muttered indistinctly.

“Haha. Yes, that pistol was rather a stroke of genius on my part. The little idiot thought it was a sign of trust. But the model that I modified came straight from your armory. If he were ever incriminated, I could cut all ties with him and use that gun as evidence of the police force’s own recklessness. Arming a child? With a suppressed weapon, no less? My, my, yet another sign of this nation’s moral degeneracy.”

Murmur. Murmur, murmur, murmur.

Shido burst out laughing and the sudden noise made Akechi flinch back in his seat. When Shido spoke again every word was dripping, positively saturated with contempt; Akechi could practically see the sneer twisting up his words as he said them.
“I know this must be difficult for the likes of you, but do shut up and think for five seconds,’’ he said. “We’ve had this conversation before. Obviously there were a few inconvenient persons who had to be eliminated for the sake of my ambitions. Once I set my eyes on them they never had a chance – I had men in pharmaceuticals, in the media, on your streets and in your courts, and while that Wakaba Isshiki woman’s research turned out to be so much science-fiction babble it still had its uses in certain limited ways. Still, each one constituted an enormously delicate operation. Windows of opportunity that could be measured in minutes, incredible amounts of money spent. Do you honestly believe I would entrust that kind of task to some halfwit brat with stars in his eyes?”

Akechi felt like he was trapped in the middle of a great wind. There was a howling about his ears. He breathed and breathed but couldn’t get enough air. Sae reached across the table to him and he viciously smacked her hand away.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if that gun of his was never even fired. I’d planned to dispose of him after my election anyway, but once he saw me arrested he must have quietly slipped away in disgrace. Just as well, the Phantom Thieves had thoroughly torpedoed the reputation I’d so painstakingly built for him, so he had no prospects remaining here. I thought he would either walk into the sea or do something more sensible with his remaining days instead. That boy, h-he-”

Shido’s voice broke.

Just a fraction. Just for an instant. He disguised it as a stutter and then as a coughing fit. Even Akechi probably never would have heard it if all his senses hadn’t been so keyed up with shock. But they were. And he did.

Shido finished coughing, breathed deep, and went on. When he spoke again, his voice was calmer. More intense. Like he was directing the words at someone besides his interrogators.

“That boy could have had a bright future ahead of him,’’ he said. “Unlikely, given his upbringing, but stranger things have happened. If nothing else, he showed a work ethic far beyond most of his indolent peers. Instead, he found me. And it seems he was stupid enough to return to me, almost a year after he’d escaped.” His voice dropped further; Akechi had to lean in to hear clearly. “I don’t know what he wanted from me, if anything. If he’d had an ounce of sense he would have realized there was nothing to gain from dealing with me in the first place. I’d beat him bloody if he showed up now, for failing as he did. And I’d tell him, go. Forget me. Even this blighted country must have something better for you than what you’ll find here.” His voice picked up again. “Well, feel free to hang him, in any case. Japan would be much improved if stupidity were punishable by death.”

Murmur. Murmur, murmurmur, mur-

“I have nothing more to say to you. It’s late. Bring me back to my cell, at once.”

The recording cut out. Akechi was left staring at the phone. It was a long time before Sae dared to speak again.

“He outplayed you right until the end, didn’t he?” Akechi’s glare was molten. “He outplayed all of us. Now it’s his word against yours. And which do you think the police are more likely to believe? The killings were orchestrated by either a notorious criminal mastermind who’s already in their custody, or a high-school celebrity who somehow evaded them for a full year. Which would mean less humiliation for them? Which would create the more convenient narrative?”

“But it’s a lie,” he whispered.

“Yes. A lie. Masayoshi Shido was always a practiced liar. But Akechi, between you and me?” She
leaned forward and returned his glare. “I personally consider it to be more truthful than what you told the police. What I have here is official testimony. That means it’s admissible as evidence in court. And I will be admitting it.”

He shook his head. “No. You can’t. I…I’ll tell them about my true relationship with Shido. A simple blood test will-”

“reveal that the child Shido abused and manipulated was actually his orphaned son. Do you really think he didn’t anticipate that? It would just reinforce his narrative further.”

“Then I’ll just have you removed as my attorney.” Getting louder. “Yes, that’d be simplest. If you go then this…this obscenity goes, too. I’ll represent myself, and the courts can-”

“You know, I’ve never heard someone quite so upset to literally get away with murder.” Sae stayed calm but she’d developed a distinct tic under her eye. “Your gluttony for punishment is something to behold.”

“This isn’t about punishment, damn it!”

“Then maybe you could enlighten me, Akechi!” Sae shouted back. “Because for the moment, I am still your attorney, and right now I’d say that information would be tremendously helpful to-”

She was cut off by the buzzing of a phone. But the one on the table between them was silent and dark. She froze, jaw still hanging open. Then she sighed, and rolled her eyes, and fished a second phone out of her pocket. Akechi’s features shifted into confusion at the sight of it – he recognized its casing. It was Makoto’s.

She put it to her ear. “Yes. …speak up, the reception here is poor. Yes, it just finished. Impeccable timing, as usual. …about how you’d expect. Fine, go ahead. But don’t take too long. I can only buy us so much time down here.” She slid the phone across the table. “It’s for you.”

He opened his mouth but before he could ask anything she took her own phone back and moved to the far corner of the room, staring at its screen. Granting him some privacy. The other phone’s screen was already darkened. After a moment, hands shaking, he picked it up.

“Hello?”

“How’ve you been?”

She was right; reception really was awful down here. The voice on the other end was so smeared with fuzz it was almost unrecognizable, like a reflection viewed through bad glass. But he recognized it all the same, and straightened in his chair, eyes wide.

“Akira? How did you-”

“Didn’t I promise you we’d speak again? Sorry about the cloak and dagger stuff, with the two phones and all. Thought it’d be safer to call Makoto’s, just in case.”

A lump formed in his throat. “Well. That's very considerate of you. How much do you know, about…all this?”

“A little. I know Shido’s trying to take the fall for you. I guess you’re not happy about that?”

“No. I’m not.”
“Yeah, figured. I’d hate feeling indebted to that asshole, too.”

“It’s not that. I mean, it is that, but that’s far from the whole of it.”

“Then what? Back in the Dead Sea you seemed like you didn’t care whether you lived or died.” He paused. “I was…kind of hoping you’d changed your mind about it.”

“It’s not that, either.” He glanced at Sae again and then leaned over the table, speaking quieter. “I don’t care what the courts do to me. But if what Nijijima says is true, and Shido’s testimony somehow exonerates me…God, it’ll be Shido’s change of heart all over again. A criminal being excused and adulated by an ignorant public. Akira, I’m not a detective. I’m not innocent. The idea of stepping out of that courtroom and having to smile and wave at a cheering crowd again…” His skin grew clammy at the thought. “I don’t want everyone to believe that’s who I am, anymore. I can’t keep up that lie. I can’t.”

“Unmask, huh?”

“Yes. Unmask.”

“So what would you prefer, then? What should those people see? Because I don’t believe you’re some unrepentant killer, either. Not anymore.”

“I don’t know. I’m still working it out. All I can tell you for now is what I’m not.” His mouth twitched. “Maybe you could tell me. You and the others. You’ve seen my mask slip more than anyone, by now.”

He’d partly meant it as a joke but Akira’s voice was serious. “Hmm. I kind of thought it’d go like this anyway, so…we’d have to thread the needle a little, keep the wording vague, but setting things up should be straightforward.”

“What?”

“If people expect truth, that’s what they’ll get. We just have to fill in the gaps.”

“Akira, what the hell are you babbling about?”

“Just thinking out loud. I remember something Morgana told me last year, after Mementos disappeared. That the Metaverse isn’t just monsters and distortions and Palaces. It’s all of us. Everything we think. Everything we want to believe. He said that the whole world changed to fit our perceptions.”

“And did you believe him?”

“No,” he said simply. “If you could make the world a better place just with positive thinking, then kids like Seki wouldn’t have a reason to be so scared. But maybe it works for smaller things. What we’re close to. What we care about. Like that courthouse. The news has really been blowing up ever since you came back. While you’re on that stand, in that moment, with all eyes on that room… anything might happen.”

He smiled wearily. “I’m starting to believe that, myself.”

“Good. Hold on to that.” Another pause. “Oh, right. You had something you wanted to tell me before? Back when the Palace was collapsing?”

It was a clumsy change of subject but he seized it gratefully. “I’m actually glad you cut me off the
way you did. It would have made for terrible last words.”

“Well, we’re still alive. Might as well spill it.”

“It’s. You see, I thought that, erm.” He paused, feeling heat rise in his cheeks. “It had just occurred to me, what with our impending deaths back there and everything, how little time we’d spent together since we’d reunited. Properly. Me and you. I spent our first several days just trying to get under your skin, then Seki kidnapped you, and the rest was largely spent fighting for our lives, and, well…” He sank into his chair. “I know it sounds selfish, but I wish we’d had more time. That’s all.”

Silence on the line. Akechi tried to laugh.

“You know, I just realized,” he continued. “All that time, I never actually met the real you. It was just an especially detailed cognition. We haven’t met face to face since that encounter in Shido’s Palace.”

“It was close enough for me,” Akira answered. “Still, you’re right. I’d like to fix that.”

“What?”

“I mean that I feel the same way.” He still had to speak up to be heard, and so Akechi noticed the way his voice faintly shook. “I don’t want this to be goodbye, Goro. Whatever you’ve changed into, whoever you are under all those masks… I want to know that person better. I want to see him again. Under better circumstances, next time. So don’t just throw your life away. Because you’ve got people waiting for you to come back, too.”

His vision doubled and trebled. His lungs tightened up. Sae studiously avoided looking in his direction as he struggled to keep his breath steady.

“Maybe I’ll give you a call sometime,” he said. Another weak joke. And again, Akira took it seriously.

“You do that,” he said. “Doesn’t matter where or when. I promise, I’ll come running.”

Hold it steady, he thought. Breathe. Don’t break here. Please, let me have this one last bit of deception. Let this be happy.

“Well then,” he said, voice upbeat. “I suppose I’ll talk to you later, Akira Kurusu.”

“Yeah. See you around, Goro.”

He waited for the disconnect and then dropped the phone and buried his face in his hands, face burning, cheeks wet. He didn’t look up as he heard Sae’s footsteps again, or heard her gently pull the phones away. He spoke through his splayed fingers.

“Do whatever you please,” he said.

“All right.”

She took his wrist and lowered his hands. He was pallid, red-eyed. Sae’s own face wasn’t any softer, but that came as a relief. Pity was more than he could stand right now.

“Before I go, let me clear the air,” she told him. “I could never stand working with you. You were rude, entitled, self-important… not to mention a constant drain on my ego. I had enough difficulty
being taken seriously at the SIU without having to indulge some high schooler playing detective. But, it seems I gave you too little credit. You ran rings around me, in the end. In a strange way, I respect that.” She brushed hair away from her face. “And even back then, it was clear to me how lonely you were. It might have taken you a while, but I’m glad you finally made some friends.” She gave a curt nod. “That’s all.”

She gathered her documents and left. A little while later, the camera feed resumed. It showed Akechi sitting at the table, hands folded, head angled up. Like someone stargazing. Watching an incoming meteor, perhaps, and waiting for it to either burn up or smash the earth and put an end to everything.

* * *

“-date has been set for December 2\textsuperscript{nd}, almost one year after the dramatic confession of former Prime Minister Masayoshi Shido. Sources confirm that Goro Akechi’s trial will be presided over by a lay judge panel, owing to the socially volatile nature of the charges present.

“Court officials declined comment on the startling news that Akechi will be tried as a juvenile, rather than an adult. Legal experts are divided on the implications of this decision – some say it may indicate a favorable outcome for Akechi, while others speculate that it may in fact be an attempt by the courts to institutionalize harsher punishments for minors over particularly grave offenses. We will continue to update as news develops.

“Mass gatherings are already being organized at the courthouse on the appointed date, as civil rights activists and former adherents of the ‘Charismatic Detective’ unite to-”

*click*

> **anon:** Greetings, everyone.
> **anon:** We would like to ask you a question.
> **anon:** Do you still believe in the Phantom Thieves?
Mr. Akechi,

My name is Yuichi Shimizu. I understand that you paid my wife a visit not too long ago. I regret being unable to meet you in person. More so than ever, now that it appears we will not cross paths anytime soon. I do not expect a response to this letter. I’m not certain how it can reach you, in your present circumstances. I may well be implicating myself in something just by writing this. However, even if the message goes nowhere, I felt it needed to be written.

People are saying a great deal about you. I don’t know what to make of it. The accusations against you are serious, as I’m sure you know. But try as I might, I can’t bring myself to care about them. I think that even if hard evidence of your guilt were placed in front of my eyes, I would turn away from it, and continue to believe what I wished.

Is that selfish of me? So many of the rumors around you are ambiguous. The truth is difficult to see. I can only rely on what I know for certain. My son fell ill. No one would come help him, no matter how we asked or what we did. In my cowardice, I hid in my office and watched my marriage decay. We drowned in that silence for months. Then, one day, you arrived. The next day, Seki woke up. That is what I know. That is the truth.

I wonder if you’re at all concerned about Seki’s welfare. Maybe he was just one person of many you tried to assist. I wish I could tell you he was doing well. He sleeps poorly. He cries often. He has confessed to things my wife and I cannot understand – disturbing, impossible things. I see this new side of him and wonder how I could have failed to notice it. Then I think back through our time spent together, and wonder how many times I truly saw him at all.

For years we watched him hide this reservoir of pain and mistook it for strength. We dismissed whatever fears he had for the future as small and childish things. I believe now that this is a sin many parents commit, even those who mean no harm. We attempt to smother our children’s anxieties and blithely tell ourselves that they will eventually overcome whatever the future holds, because we do not wish to face the enormity of those challenges ourselves – or to admit our own culpability in creating a future that seems so bleak. The world has felt like it hung on a thread, these past few months. Beset by that awful illness that touched my son before it touched so many others. The fear and dread of those few months nearly destroyed my wife and I. Do you think Seki has labored under that fear? For how many years? For all his life? What does it say about me, that I refused to contemplate it until now?

It’s shameful.

What a shameful excuse for a father.

I apologize. I appear to have resigned myself to this letter never being read. That is no excuse for self-pity.

The two of us have rarely left Seki’s side, since he woke up. At first his mental state was so troubled that I thought he may harm himself. I suppose he saw that concern in my own face – he is and always was a perceptive child. He tried to reassure me. He told me that he had suffered through a long dream. A nightmare that only grew worse as it went on. But at the very end, he saw someone in the dream who told him to go on, even if it was pointless, or painful. He said that he took that lesson to heart, before he woke up.
It sounds absurd. A comforting fiction, a children’s story from a child’s mouth. But, it’s strange. I asked him to describe this person. And the description he gave sounds a lot like you.

Nothing has been fixed. There is no guarantee that my family will not falter again. But there is honesty between us now. Our weaknesses revealed for all to see. I want to believe that’s enough. I want Seki to know that no matter how cruel or unbearable the world around him becomes, my wife and I will keep a place for him, for as long as we’re able. That is what parents are meant to do. We burn our futures to light our children’s way.

Mr. Akechi, do you have someone to keep a light for you?

Your own history is well-known, and I am aware my wife asked if you had anyone to take you in. She tells me that she never received an answer. This may be presumptuous of me to say, then, but as I write this I have made up my mind. We will be watching your trial. Waiting for the truth, like so many others. And regardless of what happens, on the day you walk free, we intend to find you again, so long as we are physically able. You may not remember us. You may have other people waiting to welcome you back. But even so, I promise that we will find you, if only so this message can be placed in your hand.

Thank you for bringing our son home.

Y.S.

* * *

“This is the news.

“Officials have announced that security around the trial of Goro Akechi, a.k.a. the ‘Charismatic Detective,’ will be heightened in response to widespread rumors concerning the return of vigilante group ‘The Phantom Thieves.’ Akechi, who stands trial for numerous self-confessed murders, fraud, impersonation of a police officer, and conspiracy against the state, had spent much of the previous year in a protracted grudge with the Phantom Thieves, lending further credence to claims that they will materialize once again when he takes the stand.

“The Phantom Thieves gained infamy during their brief period of activity from last April to December, in which they allegedly used a combination of psychological manipulation and blackmail to force ‘changes of heart’ upon those in positions of authority. Those whose hearts were ‘stolen’ then engaged in public and dramatic displays of repentance, before turning themselves over to the authorities for their crimes. Their targets included former Shujin Academy gym teacher and Olympic medalist Suguru Kamoshida, artist Ichiryusai Madarame, and gangster Junya Kaneshiro, with their most well-known victim being former Prime Minister Masayoshi Shido himself. Kunikazu Okumura, former CEO of Okumura Foods, was also believed to be one of their targets, but later investigations suggest he was in fact the target of an assassination by Shido’s conspiracy – and possibly Akechi himself – made in part to tarnish the Thieves’ image. Nonetheless, the Phantom Thieves remained highly controversial figures, and rumors of their return have only stoked public furor over what is already an extremely high-profile event.

“Little is known of the Thieves’ true identities, and they are assumed to be at large. In December, an adolescent male, whose identity will remain anonymous at his family’s request, was indicted as the group’s mastermind, but charges were dropped due to lack of evidence, and he was confirmed to have later fallen victim to Paranoia Syndrome in mid-November. His parents, when reached for comment, flatly denied any involvement on his part, and stated that he continues to recuperate in hospital.
“Goro Akechi himself remains silent regarding this development, and any attempts at an interview have been rebuffed.

“The Diet and the TMPD have both made statements that the trial will continue as scheduled, and as the number of hospitalized Paranoia Syndrome patients continues to dwindle, authorities remain on guard for any.”

*click*

> anon: I’ve been in a coma since October, what the hell is going on?
> anon: the government did PS, this is all a distraction, WAKE UP
> anon: It’s just some rando spamming news sections and message boards, it doesn’t mean anything
> anon: I heard people tried to trace the IP of whoever posted the Phantom Thieves comments and got nothing, it’s either some asshole hacker or it’s legit
> anon: what are they gonna do? steal akechi’s heart?
> anon: totes gonna steal akechi’s heart
> anon: STEAL HIS HEART LIKE HE STOLE MINE PHANTOM THIEVES
> anon: nah they’re gonna steal the judge’s heart or something, he didn’t do it
> anon: Where the hell is Shido in all this?
> anon: PHANTOM THIEVES RIDE AGAIN
> anon: gonna get their revenge after all this time
> anon: dunk that punk, phantom thieves
> anon: “Psychological manipulation?” Does anyone else remember last year, that shit was straight-up magic
> anon: PHAN-TOM THIEVES! PHAN-TOM THIEVES!
> anon: when’s the calling card coming?
> anon: Gotta be a calling card, right?
> anon: It’s not the Phantom Thieves without a calling card.
> anon: We’ll know it’s really them when the calling card shows up.
> anon: PHAN-TOM THIEVES! PHAN-TOM THIEVES!
> anon: So does this mean he’s really guilty?
> anon: they can’t steal the judge’s heart you idiots, there’s like ten judges at this thing
> anon: bastard’s guilty as sin, HANG HIM HIGH
> anon: they’ve got no leg to stand on, they’re no better than he is!
> anon: Waiting on that calling card
> anon: WHERE’S THE CALLING CARD
> anon: is he guilty or innocent, Phantom Thieves!?
> anon: One thing’s for certain. When that trial begins, all of us will learn the truth.

* * * *

The dusty attic perfume. The sweet unchanging song above. Cold stone beneath his palms and against his face. Akechi opened his eyes to a prison flipped on its side.

“Welcome back.”

That was an unfamiliar voice. He pushed himself up, blinking owlishly, and saw a young girl
standing over him – gold-eyed, pale-haired, her smile gentle but strangely stiff, as if painted on. Under one arm was tucked a book almost half as big as she was, an unsettling reminiscence of Iago. But her other hand was held out to him, and after a moment he took it and let her pull him up. Her fingers were dainty but her grip was surprisingly strong.

He was surrounded by the wreckage of his cage, the bars scattered and broken. There was no trace of the other artifacts of his imprisonment – the extra chains, the loops of barbed wire. They had all simply vanished into the ether. He craned his head up and noticed the original chain, the one that had borne up the cage, still dangling free. It was a long way above.

“You fell quite far,” said Igor. “But not every fall needs to end badly. Don’t you agree?”

He looked back at the warden’s desk where Igor sat, now flanked by the girl. “It seems that way. I’m sorry, but you are…?”

“Lavenza, my assistant,” said Igor. “You have met before, though she was in a more…divided state of mind back then.” For a moment, the girl’s smile turned impish, and in her face Akechi glimpsed the echoes of the two young guards flanking their imposter-master years ago. “Another victim of the Usurper’s machinations. But she has recovered. As, it would seem, have you. My, my…your world has grown quite a bit.”

The claustrophobic dark of his original cell was already a dim memory. He breathed deep of that antique air, batted grime off his clothes. He cautiously approached the desk, his bare feet kicking up bits of metal.

“When we first met, your prison was a fearsome thing,” Igor continued. “But you dismantled it with remarkable speed. Replaced it with new and far less restrictive bonds. It is as I suspected. Your heart never wished for the isolation you foisted upon it. All you needed was the opportunity to finally break those chains.”

“I had that opportunity before,” Akechi said. “But I wasted it. Thank goodness for second chances.” He looked at Lavenza. “I understand that you accompanied Akira?”

She nodded, still smiling. “That is correct.”

“I apologize if he was a handful. That dry wit of his can be aggravating.”

The smile soured at the edges. “On that, we agree.”

“His personality aside, his good intentions are clear,” Igor chuckled. “And that includes his wishes for your own future. Know that, regardless of what awaits you beyond this Velvet Room, you do not face it alone.”

“At this point, all I can hope for is that the others might remember me a little better than they did before.” He shrugged. “Let the chips fall where they may. To be honest, I’m still worried about being proven innocent more than anything.”

“So imprisonment is what you desire? You seek freedom in captivity?” His head tilted. “Paradoxical to the very end.”

“At least it would show a truer side of me than complete exoneration. But it’s all right. I’ve already come this far. It’d be foolish to wish for more than I’ve already gained.”

“Then be foolish,” Igor retorted. “The future is uncertain. But why must that uncertainty hide only despair? Wish for everything. Grasp at anything! These broken systems, these rigged games –
struggle ever onward, in spite of the tribulations they place on you. Perhaps the world you shall inherit has been ill-treated. Would you surrender to that injustice? I think not. That is not the person you have shown yourself to be.”

“Very inspirational.”

“Haha. What can I say? You Tricksters have awakened a passion in me.” Igor tucked his hands under his chin. “I leave you with a final piece of advice. It has never been my place to judge humanity. But it seems to me that so many people cling far too tightly to their loneliness. They build cages around their hearts and forever lament their inability to connect, though they seal each other against each other all the while. The challenges you face are already great. But isolation may render them unendurable.” He extended a hand to Akechi. “Now that you have experienced the liberation of bonds, do not forget this lesson. One day, someone unexpected may reach out a hand to you. It is my fervent hope that, when that day comes, you choose to grasp it.”

Akechi stared. Then, he stepped up to the desk and held out his own hand. Igor stared at it as if unsure of its solidity, then chuckled again, and gripped it, and shook. His spindly fingers felt like insect legs clamped around Akechi’s palm; whatever he hid beneath his gloves was too rigid and unnaturally cold. But he held on, all the same.

“Our time is at an end,” he said, and released Akechi. “The Velvet Room will now go dark, in anticipation of its next champion. Your visit was much too brief. The service we offered you was unacceptably poor. But before you depart, know this – you were truly a remarkable guest.”

Akechi smiled, his body now shimmering around the edges. In his vision, the Velvet Room’s colors ran and swirled together. “Thank you for everything.”

“And the same to you,” said Igor. “Farewell.”

As the attendants watched, Akechi became more indistinct, a television image tuned to a bad channel, until he at last dissolved into motes that swirled up to the Velvet Room’s topmost reaches and were gone. The prison was empty and still. The shadows grown eyeless and sleepy in their cells. Only the faint rattle and sway of the chain punctuated the seconds. Igor and Lavenza remained in place as the darkness overhead slowly descended – a soft and gentle dark, bearing the chamber down into sleep.

As time passed, Igor produced a deck of cards like a conjurer and spread them out on the table. A configuration like a broken star. He flipped them over, one by one, and sighed. Lavenza turned her head to him, unblinking as always.

“What do the cards say, Master?”

“That the future is in doubt. As it must always be.” Those slender fingers gathered them up and reshuffled. “Every victory is fleeting. And every loss could be fatal. Even the shadow of the Usurper still lingers over us…though not, I believe, for much longer. The remnants of that corrupt power may find a better use.”

“Is that what he suggested?”

“Indeed. Such an unfair game. But such marvelous players! How can I not remain hopeful for the future, after what I have seen? These guests, these champions, arising one after the next. Burning so brightly…” He raised one hand high, fingers operatically curled. “So long as they continue to defy the inevitable, hope must remain.”
The dark at last covered up the walls, black curtains draped over the blue, and irisèd around the
desk itself. It flowed over Lavenza, and for a moment only the pale moon of her face lingered in the
shadows like a tragedian’s mask before it disappeared.

“Oh, Tricksters. You, who defy corruption with your every passing day. Remain strong. For this
world – doomed and full of potential, wracked with cruelty and beauty in equal measure – shall be
yours.”

And just before the darkness swallowed up Igor as well, he closed that upturned hand, and snapped
his fingers.

* * *

> anon: PHAN-TOM THIEVES! PHAN-TOM THIEVES!
> anon: God, this chanting bullshit spam is worse than the trolls.
> anon: PHAN-TOM THIEVES! PHAN-TOM THIEVES!
> anon: admin ban plz
> anon: trial’s tomorrow and still no calling card…..should be fun anyway
> anon: Hope the fucker dies.
> anon: the PT are probably gonna hi-five each other when that guilty verdict comes down
> anon: So what did Akechi actually do? How did he do it? Does anyone actually know? IT’S
       KIND OF A BIG FUKKEN DEAL
> anon: jfc my sister’s been bawling her eyes out for a week now, she’s got posters of this
       douchebag and everything
> anon: And just like that, Paranoia Syndrome’s forgotten. Man, fuck this earth
> anon: PHAN-TOM THIEVES! PHAN-TOM THIEVES!
> anon: JESUS FUCKING FUCK STFU
> anon: mods are asleep at the wheel today
> anon: is someone’s heart gonna get stolen or what?
> anon: goro’s heart was probably stolen already, why else would he confess
> anon: where’s he been all this time? why haven’t we seen him? what’s going on?
> anon: no one’s telling the truth
> anon: screw guilty/innocent I just want the truth
> anon: No one’s going to be straight with us except the Phantom Thieves
> anon: CALLING CARD NOW
> anon: The Phantom Thieves will show everyone the truth.
> anon: PHAN-TOM THIEVES! PHAN-TOM THIEVES!
> anon: the phantom thieves wouldn’t blueball everyone the way PS did, right?
> anon: oh goro, what have you done
> anon: We can’t trust anyone but the PT
> anon: society’s just as corrupt as ever, the Phantom Thieves never helped anyone
> anon: send the calling card!
> anon: TELL US WHAT HE DID
> anon: I believe in the Phantom Thieves!
> anon: The Phantom Thieves will show us the truth!
The following is an account of the trial of Goro Akechi, which commenced at 11 a.m. on Friday, December 2nd.

The scene: outside the courthouse, the crowd is gathered a dozen deep. There are signs, chanting, bitter rivalries on both sides. Adherents of both Goro Akechi and the Phantom Thieves clash bitterly. Civil rights activists decry the showiness of the trial, vainly attempt to swing attention back to Paranoia Syndrome, whose dying echo continues to reverberate across the world. Bystanders snap selfies as the police, which have the building surrounded, look on stonily. The crowd is under siege by news cameras, everyone awaiting a verdict. Those unlucky people who have court appointments unrelated to Akechi’s trial must elbow past this assembly and into the building proper.

The courthouse itself: in the halls where Sae Niijima’s heart was once invaded, one could be forgiven for thinking that Akechi’s trial had been postponed. Sepulchral quiet. The shuffle of papers and of feet on carpet. The door to the courtroom is shut; beyond it the room is far too cramped for the cameras mobbing the back. The audience sits upright and silent, like stakes pounded into the earth. Goro Akechi sits flanked by Sae Niijima. He wears an unremarkable charcoal suit. His face is unreadable.

The judges file in and sit down. In the center, Takahashi Asai, greyhaired and weathered like something carved into a cliffside. The other judges are buried under the shadow of his eminence. The lay judges, six citizens chosen to lend the people’s voice to this verdict, likewise defer to him. Asai gazes at his courtroom and disapproves of what he sees. He is not a superstitious man but over the years has come to view trials with a certain degree of holiness; were his heart distorted, a temple may manifest. Prior to this he bore quick dislike towards Akechi himself, thinking that the boy was attempting to use his telegenic persona to tilt public opinion in his favor. Yet now he glances at Akechi, sees his huddled posture, like he is attempting to use Sae to hide himself from the cameras’ stare. Asai feels no sympathy, but he makes a note of it.

Across from Akechi and Sae, Haruki Shirakawa prepares his paperwork. He is a plain-looking man, stocky, with a prominent mole under one eye. Despite Sae’s earlier assessment of him, he does not preen or sneer at the defendants; his face is unsmiling, with faint traces of bruiseflesh beneath his eyes from lack of sleep. This case has taxed him. He gathers himself, nonetheless.

The trial is called to order.

Opening statements begin. Shirakawa rises. As Sae predicted, his voice is professional but his words are grandiose. He speaks of morality and decaying social fiber. He predictably draws an analogue between Akechi’s crimes and the Kobe murders. He emphasizes that the future rests in the youth of Japan, but acts of depravity among those youths grow ever more common. We must redouble our grip upon the reins of this nation, he says. How can Japan endure if its own children
plot against it? This is no time for sentimentality. An example must be made. History is watching.

He sits. Sae rises. As is usual, she struggles with certain prejudices inherent to the legal profession. Many in the audience expect a woman to deliver an emotive, perhaps even tearful appeal to Akechi’s character. They are surprised when she speaks in clipped sentences, each one cold and direct as a thrown knife. She immediately raises her prior history with Goro Akechi. Yes, she worked with him. In that time, did she doubt the integrity of his character? Yes. He interfered with investigations. He ultimately plotted to frame her. He should be tried under the full extent of the law, and so he is. But is he a cold-blooded murderer? An enemy of the state? That, Sae says, is in doubt. She asks rhetorically: why, then, would he confess to such a thing? That is what we must prove today. We are not here today to condemn or to punish. We are here to find the truth.

Shirakawa listens to this impassively. His expression is wooden. Unknown to most, he has struggled with this case far more than he first anticipated. The most damning evidence against Akechi was brought in with him to the police station; everything else is vapor and fog. Forensic analysis to determine the murder method is unavailable – the bodies are all buried, many of them quietly whisked away by Shido’s conspiracy. Many of the victims were so deep in crime and foul play themselves that attempting to dredge up memories of them would just obfuscate his case. Even proper witnesses have eluded him. Akechi had virtually no close family or colleagues to provide character witness for or against; one of the few people who could happen to be his attorney. Shirakawa’s brief investigation of the two most pertinent witnesses relating to the victims themselves – Sojiro Sakura, former relation of researcher Wakaba Isshiki, and Haru Okumura, daughter of Shido’s political rival Kunikazu Okumura – quickly showed that bringing them in, let alone subpoenaing them, would backfire. Both denied knowledge of Akechi’s involvement. Both seemed vaguely hostile. He’d had a brief meeting with Okumura personally, and while the girl had been quite genial, Shirakawa for some reason had felt the need to look over his shoulder the entire way home.

Goro Akechi is the first one called. He stands with his back to the cameras; their equipment strains to capture his voice, which is monotone and low. His testimony is unsatisfactory. His description of the victims and the timeline relating to their deaths is broadly correct but vague on the particulars. He claims to have spent the year south of Tokyo, in homeless communities around Yokohama, but falters when asked on specifics. Sae questions him about the nature and delivery of the poisons used and he demurs to Shido’s own instruction, which he cannot fully recall. Shirakawa’s cross-examination is yet harsher. He grills Akechi on motive, on compensation. Why did you kill these people? he asks plainly. At what point did you decide murder in Shido’s name was acceptable and why? Akechi mutters something about justice, his own childish morality, and Shirakawa leaps on it, shouting about what kind of warped justice could rationalize the deaths of dozens and suffering of dozens more. Sae objects; Asai sustains. Shirakawa takes his seat, emboldened.

Shirakawa calls his first witness, a pharmaceutical researcher who was in Shido’s employ; he still serves jail time for his role in the conspiracy. His purpose in the trial is to assert the veracity of Akechi’s presumed method for the killings. The researcher is a mousy man who wrings his hands perpetually. Under Shirakawa’s questioning he admits that Shido had many exotic drugs developed for a variety of purposes (the suicide pill he had taken for the Phantom Thieves’ assault is implied, but goes unmentioned, the name of the Thieves themselves remaining verboten in the courtroom, as though speaking it will summon them to the floor). Fatal poison could have been applied to the victims through any number of means. Yes, varying doses could affect timing greatly. Yes, similar drugs could also incite the “psychotic breakdown” incidents – he rattles off a series of polysyllabic words that fly past the audience like darts. What of the black fluid from the victims’ eyes and mouth? Shirakawa asks. Possibly discolored lymph expelled due the poison’s effects, replies the researcher, but he has nothing else to offer on the topic. Sae has no questions. He is thanked and
The defense calls a witness – Ichiko Ohya, a journalist who spearheaded investigations into Shido’s conspiracy. She approaches the podium looking uncomfortable in her sober blazer and skirt; for that matter, she looks uncomfortable sober. Nevertheless, under Sae’s questioning, she lays out the specifics of Shido’s conspiracy, from its participants to its victims to its collateral damage, with punishing, eidetic detail. She confirms that someone close to her suffered a similar “poisoning” for meddling in Shido’s affairs. And in all your research, Sae asks, did you come across any mention of Goro Akechi? Ohya says she did not. Who, then, is responsible for the killings? Ohya claims ignorance, but does state that Shido also had deep ties with the Yakuza, including an infamous “cleaner” who quietly slipped out of Tokyo shortly before Shido’s confession. Shirakawa’s own questions are fumbling – he mainly attempts to draw aspersions on Ohya’s reputation and that of her magazine, and Ohya huffily states there’s no connection between the two. She says she has a book planned on the Paranoia Syndrome incidents as well, but Shirakawa will have to pay for that himself. She leaves the podium to laughter and a rebuke from Asai for her behavior.

Realization settles over the audience. They had expected Sae to attempt, however impossibly, to justify Akechi’s actions. Instead, she appears to be arguing whether Akechi’s confession was true at all. As this sinks in, Sae rises again, and announces another witness.

Masayoshi Shido enters the courtroom.

Shock ripples through the audience and people stare agape at their television screens as Asai calls for order. Shido enters with swagger, clad in his prison fatigues. He has aged little – the only major difference is that his goatee has been shaven, leaving him bald as a bean. He takes the stand with a disinterested, regal air. As Tokyo watches, Sae submits the testimony obtained in his interrogation prior, and plays it for all to hear. They are riveted to every word. Shirakawa seems to deflate within his suit as Shido confirms the veracity of his account. Just like that, Akechi’s own confession is turned on its head. Not a killer, but a coerced victim, one of many under a greater criminal.

Shirakawa’s cross-examination is like a mouse trying to battle a lion. Shido mocks and belittles his every weak question, heedless of the judges’ admonitions. Shirakawa resorts to asking him why Akechi would bother to turn himself in after all this time. Ask the fool yourself, says Shido, he is no longer of any concern to me. Don’t you have anything to say to him? Shirakawa asks desperately. Nothing whatsoever, Shido replies, and then says that if they’re done wasting his time, he has a prison cell awaiting his return. He leaves to face the roaring, livid mobs outside. Throughout all of this, he does not look at Akechi once. Asai once again regards the boy; he sits with head down, fists clenched and shaking.

Asai calls a recess.

The courtroom relaxes by inches. Sae murmurs vague words of encouragement into Akechi’s ear and steps outside along with Shirakawa. The two of them chat in a stairwell, Shirakawa holding a cigarette in one shaking hand. Their conversation is tense but civil – Shirakawa, above all, does not want this case to stain his reputation any more than necessary. Akechi asks to use the bathroom and is escorted outside. He retreats to one of the stalls and is quietly sick. He looks at himself in the mirror. His face is haunted and hollow.

When the recess concludes, Asai asks if any further witnesses remain. None do. He consults with the other judges. They appear to reach a conclusion.

He calls Akechi to the stand.
Takahashi Asai: You appear to have created quite a stir, young man.
Goro Akechi: Yes, Your Honor.
TA: I do not appreciate the way this trial has been conducted. This spectacle is inappropriate. We are not at one of your talk shows, do you understand?
GA: Yes, Your Honor. I’m sorry. I didn’t expect things to go this far.
TA: What’s done is done. You’ve placed yourself in an interesting position. So far it seems that the person most convinced of your guilt is you, yourself. You do comprehend the severity of the charges against you, correct?
GA: Yes, Your Honor.
TA: Mr. Akechi, have you perjured yourself at any point during this trial?
GA: Have I…No, Your Honor, I wouldn’t say so.
TA: Then I will ask plainly. Do you agree with the testimony we have just heard? The confession from Masayoshi Shido?
GA: No, Your Honor.

The audience mutters. Sae tenses in her seat.

Asai calls for order, and continues.

TA: With which part do you disagree?
GA: The part about me. The assessment of my character.
TA: Explain, please.
GA: I wasn’t some naïve young idealist who threw my lot in with him to make a better world. I served his vision because I wanted to destroy the society around me.
TA: To destroy-
GA: Yes. I had no love for it. I still don’t. How could I? You know my history. Without Shido I would have been just one more invisible person of many, forgotten and left for dead. I didn’t know or care whether he would succeed. Only that his attempt would cause the damage I wanted. That’s why I went along with him, no matter how atrocious his demands became. I had no future. No aspirations, no hope, nothing outside of this goal. I’m not alone in feeling this way. But of all those forgotten people, I was the one who found Shido.
TA: Are you the one who committed the murders under Shido’s conspiracy?
GA: I was a key figure in it. I bear responsibility as much as anyone.
TA: Did you, or did you not, commit the murders for which you are charged?
GA: I was responsible, Your Honor.
TA: Mr. Akechi, I deal with lawyers for a living. I know when someone is attempting to play word games with me. At the moment, I can believe you turned yourself in out of guilt for your actions. But vague notions of responsibility aside, you have failed to provide evidence for your most severe crimes and your own confession has been placed in serious doubt. To attempt suicide via the law is not something I-
GA: That’s not why I confessed, Your Honor.
TA: Excuse me?
GA: I realized it too late. Whether society was destroyed or repaired would have made no difference for me. It’s something inside. When you feel like trash then trash is all you can see. Under Shido I constructed that false persona for myself until I was caged by it. After he was imprisoned I had no other reason to exist. It took me a long time to realize my only chance was to break free of that part of myself completely. To repudiate it. The world might be irreparable, or irredeemable, but that doesn’t mean it’s unendurable. It’s something inside.
TA: Mr. Akechi, I will not deny that you are clearly in need of therapeutic treatment. But this courtroom is neither the place for therapy nor philosophy.

GA: I’m sorry, Your Honor.

TA: Do not think you are getting out of this scot-free. Right now, I see a troubled young man who was victimized by the actions of men with considerably more power and considerably fewer scruples. But that is all you are. And it does not excuse wasting this court’s time as you- what is it?

At this point during the examination, Akechi grows agitated. He casts repeated glances over his shoulder, as if feeling unseen eyes on his back.

GA: There’s something-

The camera feeds cut out.

From here on, we must depend on rumor.

The events that follow are assembled from various testimonials in and around the courtroom. The incident lasts no more than five minutes, and yet details vary wildly on every particular. The full story is little more than a series of lines plotted through a constellation of data points, an attempt to reach consensus.

For example, many, but not all, of the people in and around the courthouse mention a feeling of sharp disorientation at the moment the cameras go dark – a sensation similar to vertigo. Fewer remark on the stinging taste of bile in the backs of their throats. Of those who had their phones out at the time of the event, not everyone reports on the seething red eye that appeared on their phone screens – blink, and it’s gone – or the sudden pulse of pressure in their ears and beneath their feet. And no one at all recalls the sound. A fingersnap, ringing in the air. It is drowned out, or dismissed as a trick of the ear or something in the ventilation. Nevertheless, it is there.

The news crews continue to film, unaware that the cameras have gone blind. The audience shifts uncomfortably in their seats, having experienced any number of the sensations above. Only Akechi seems aware of the implications – he turns this way and that, eyes wide. Asai calls his name again, sharper.

Outside of the courthouse the crowd goes quiet and looks around, uneasy. The city of Tokyo has acquired a dreamlike sheen. Something is wrong and it takes them a moment to realize what it is. There is no more noise. No crowds beyond. No traffic. No passing planes. Only the wind. In the city proper, civilians are dumbfounded, because it looks as though the entire throng around the courthouse in which Goro Akechi is being tried has disappeared completely from the Earth.

Back to the courtroom. Akechi clutches the podium, still facing the entrance. Asai’s own face turns puzzled. The audience, as one, follows their gaze. Slipped under the courtroom doors, bright as a bloodstain against the bland carpet, is a card. Its bullseye pattern and burning logo is unmistakable.

The card is joined by another. Then two more. Then a dozen. With a sound like dry hands rubbing together in anticipation more and more cards shoot beneath the door, and the door groans, its hinges creak dangerously, and all in attendance scream and cover their faces as it bursts open and unleashes a swirling maelstrom of cards innumerable that washes over them all. Across the courthouse doors burst open in fusillade and let through the cards swirling noiselessly down the halls like a swarm of ghosts. Trials halt. People take cover. Cards erupt from the ventilation grates. They plaster themselves against windows. Those in the bathrooms suddenly find themselves knee-deep in paper. And outside, the crowd watches agape as calling cards fall from the sky as if in celebration, a sleet of crimson confetti that coats the pavement around them.
In the days to follow, accounts would be taken of the message written on the Phantom Thieves’ calling card. As with many details concerning this strange incident, the particulars vary – phrasing and vocabulary is broadly similar, but many readers disagree on the specific words used, and the full text seems too long for the card itself to bear. Some of those interviewed would state that it was like reading in a dream; the words themselves were meaningless shapes, but the message was nevertheless conveyed.

So, one may imagine Akechi himself picking a card from the multitude with trembling fingers. He begins to read:

_Goro Akechi. Fallen prince, avatar of emptiness._

_Let your true self now be exposed for the world to see. You stand accused of despicable acts committed to fill the hollowness within you. In your anger and desperation, you have deceived, betrayed, and murdered, all while masquerading as an ally of justice._

_However, in your repentance, and of your own free will, you have chosen to turn yourself in and confess your crimes with your own mouth. Furthermore, you took up arms and helped to banish the malevolent paranoia threatening this world. Though you may not recognize it, your remorse is sincere._

_Your innocence or guilt shall be judged by the society you once despised. But at this time, and in this place, let it be known that your distorted desires are no more._

_We thank you for your aid, and wish you luck in your rehabilitation._

_Your friends,_

_The Phantom Thieves of Hearts_

The above text is one synthesized from numerous recollections by those who read the Phantom Thieves’ calling card; only the final two lines are unanimously agreed to be accurate. Nevertheless, this must be considered the “definitive” version, for no physical evidence of the cards remains. Mere minutes after the strangeness settles over the courthouse, the hazy sensation in the air dissipates. The cards are nowhere to be found. Most people say that they simply disappeared, leaving no trace of their passing – all doors once again shut, grates clear, papercuts healed. Some people say that the cards dissolved into scentless red smoke. And one particularly imaginative man swears that the cards folded themselves into origami birds and took off skyward, sounding like a murder of crows.

But there is no disagreement at all on what is seen when the cameras resume – Goro Akechi, leaning up against the podium, laughing uproariously, tears streaming down his face, as we return to the world of real things once more.

* * *

> anon: WHAT WAS THAT!? WHAT THE FUCK WAS THAT!?!?!?!?!?!?!
> anon: holy shit holy shit holy shit holy shit
> anon: IS MY PHONE WORKING AGAIN CAN ANYONE HEAR ME
> anon: is anyone near the courthouse? what just happened?
> anon: All those people got zapped into the Shadow Realm or something
> anon: AKECHI’S GUILTY? BUT HE’S INNOCENT?? BUT HE CURED PARANOIA SYNDROME????? CONFUSION??????
> anon: ok what the FUCK did they put in the air around here
> anon: i, uh, guess the phantom thieves showed up?
> anon: yeah ok i’m going to bed i don’t have the energy for this
> anon: did anyone see that prick shido come back?
> anon: wait, what’s this about akechi curing paranoia syndrome
> anon: there were calling cards EVERYWHERE, where’d they go?
> anon: look there is a perfectly rational explanation for all of this. mass hallucination. mirrors. fucking aliens from spACE I DON’T KNOW
> anon: PHAN-TOM THIEVES! PHAN-TOM THIEVES!

* * *

> anon: I can’t believe they actually finished the trial.
> anon: “Ladies and gentlemen of the court: you saw that shit, right?”
> anon: the phantom thieves THANKED him, this is nuts
> anon: i’d say the cards were counterfeit but uhhhhh
> anon: So Akechi fought the Phantom Thieves but he worked with the Phantom Thieves so he was one of the Phantom Thieves but the Phantom Thieves sent him a calling card but they didn’t steal his heart but he confessed anyway and oh no I’ve gone cross-eyed
> anon: PT: FOR OUR NEXT TRICK WE’LL WRITE OUR CALLING CARD ON THE SURFACE OF THE FUKKEN MOON
> anon: so what’s going to happen to akechi? the calling card basically said he did all that shit, right?
> anon: it also said he’s the reason PS is gone and it was kinda literally murdering the world, it balances out
> anon: calling cards? what calling cards? there aren’t any calling cards
> anon: I’ve never seen Goro look so happy before…
> anon: there’s got to be a mistrial
> anon: that judge’s face was like the dictionary definition of Over This Shit
> anon: Shido said outright that he set Goro up, screw what the Phantom Thieves think
> anon: Over/under on that prosecutor jumping off a bridge because of this case
> anon: I’m so done with this viral advertising crap
> anon: some of these newscasters look like they’re ready to cry
> anon: They’ve got to announce the verdict today, right?

*click*

“Breaking news.

“The ‘Charismatic Detective,’ Goro Akechi, has been sentenced. Judges announced that Akechi has been convicted of several charges relating to fraud and unlicensed possession, the primary charges including: possession of an illegal firearm, breach of trust, concealment of documents for government use, and obstructing performance of public duty. It has been determined that he shall serve three years in a juvenile correction facility, without possibility of parole.

“The conviction is highly unusual, and has already drawn comment from legal analysts. Akechi, who had recently turned himself into the police confessing numerous counts of first-degree murder and crimes against the state, was expected to receive the death penalty, particularly given the high value of confessions during legal proceedings. But numerous mitigating circumstances were taken into account over the course of the trial, in particular a second, further confession from former Prime Minister Masayoshi Shido, in which he described a lengthy campaign of coercion and psychological abuse meant to craft Akechi into an agent for his conspiracy. While Akechi himself
denied Shido’s interpretation of events, it reportedly made a considerable impact on the lay judges, who argued for clemency in his sentencing. Shido himself, who is already serving life imprisonment without work, is expected to receive further penalties and revocation of privileges, which will be detailed at a later date.

“Civil rights activists have prepared to use Akechi’s trial as further evidence of the dangers related to Japan’s reliance on confessions to obtain convictions, arguing that the entire system of juvenile justice could have been made radically harsher on the basis of a confession that was determined to be false.

“Akechi declined comment, but his attorney and former colleague Sae Niijima stated that he is satisfied with the conviction and does not intend to appeal.

“The trial was a contentious one even considering the unusual nature of Akechi’s charges, as the dramatic appearance of vigilante group ‘The Phantom Thieves’ left authorities reeling—”

*click*

> anon: There. It’s done.
> anon: who cares about this douchebag, get to the phantom thieves already
> anon: oh my god are they seriously going to pretend it never happened
> anon: If they’d tried to hang Akechi but not Shido there would’ve been riots.
> anon: of course the pretty-boy celebrity gets off light, fuck this country
> anon: GORO I WILL WAIT FOR YOU
> anon: God, can you imagine being under Shido’s thumb every day for YEARS
> anon: Sooooo, who did kill all those people?
> anon: PHANTOM THIEVES. CALLING CARDS. TALK ABOUT IT YOU FUCKS

*click*

“-denied a mistrial despite the prosecution’s request. Senior Judge Takahashi Asai argued that there was no existing trace of procedural wrongdoing or wrongfully submitted evidence. When asked about the Phantom Thieves incident, he stated that he would not legitimize such events through recognition in a court of law. His fellow judges and lay judges denied that the incident affected their ruling.

“Authorities are still investigating the Phantom Thieves’ latest appearance, in which the courthouse and surrounding area was suddenly vacated for approximately five minutes. People ‘vanished without a trace’ according to nearby witnesses, and returned claiming they had just witnessed hundreds of the Thieves’ infamous calling cards in and around the building.

“While previous calling cards the Thieves issued to their victims were known to be strictly condemnatory, often spelling out the target’s alleged crimes and announcing the group’s intent to ‘steal their heart,’ witnesses on the scene say that these cards were unusually contradictory, both condemning and exonerating Goro Akechi. While details are still being gathered, the cards allegedly confirmed Akechi’s confessed charges of murder in the first degree, but went on to say that he, along with the Phantom Thieves themselves, was responsible for the ‘mass awakening’ of Paranoia Syndrome victims, and ended on a conciliatory note.

“The Phantom Thieves are no strangers to spectacle. Last year, their leader was assumed to be captured during an assault on the same courthouse in which Goro Akechi was convicted, after which reports stated he had committed suicide in custody. He then returned alive and well alongside his cohorts to condemn Masayoshi Shido across every public television and terminal in
Tokyo. Shido’s confession and the dissolution of his conspiracy followed mere days afterward. However, while that announcement was eventually determined to be the result of a highly sophisticated hack of the city’s television broadcasts, sources within the TMPD say that they are at a complete loss regarding an explanation for this latest calling card.

“The fantastical nature of events reported and the lack of physical evidence for the cards themselves have led police to suspect some nature of chemical attack on the courthouse, though forensic analysis is expected to take-”

*click*

> anon: omg the arbitrary skepticism is so good I want to eat it up
> anon: “chemical attack” lolololol IT WAS MAGIC YOU STUPID BASTARDS. Not a magic “trick,” FREAKING MAGIC
> anon: So Akechi cured Paranoia Syndrome? What did he do, arrest it?
> anon: the PT saved all our butts again and they’ll get none of the credit AGAIN
> anon: bless you, phantom thieves. blantom thieves
> anon: How can calling cards be real if our eyes aren’t real
> anon: goro akechi fixed PS. sure. fine. whatever. great. lovin it!
> anon: This was a really bad year to give up drinking.
> anon: So either he got mindfucked into confessing to murders he didn’t commit, or he did commit the murders and saved the world. I’d call that a wash.
> anon: bless you, goro. bloro
> anon: When the cameras came back on was Goro happy-crying or sad-crying? Can anyone tell?

*click*

“-less than one hundred patients remaining. While casualties are still being investigated, the majority of hospitals across Japan are happy to report that all Paranoia Syndrome victims have been discharged.

“The Diet has begun drafting a series of financial initiatives intended to mitigate the costs related to the epidemic, which resolved without warning or explanation. Other nations are following suit, though the exact details are still being outlined. The WHO has announced that a taskforce has been created to ascertain the exact cause of Paranoia Syndrome and its resolution, though critics remain skeptical that an explanation will be found.

“Diet councilman Toranosuke Yoshida, who himself was recently discharged from the hospital following an assault at one of his public appearances, has taken up a key role in the Paranoia Syndrome initiatives, while sternly rebuking his fellow politicians for their lack of response during the epidemic itself. Yoshida, who once bore the epithet “No-Good Tora” due to a series of embarrassing scandals that severely hobbled his political career, has experienced skyrocketing popularity due to his outreach and outspokenness during this crisis, and is expected to-

> anon: tora for prime minister now plz
> anon: ALL-GOOD TORA. EVERYTHING-GOOD TORA. THE BEST OF ALL POSSIBLE TORAS
> anon: good to know there’s someone in government who’s not sitting on their ass
> anon: “Other nations are following suit,” yeah ok. Good luck Americans
> anon: pretty sure tora was on the PT’s side back in the day too, he knows what’s up
> anon: there’s literally a candlelight vigil for akechi less than half a mile from my apartment, what is my life
> anon: goro redeemed himself
> anon: Can’t wait for the next calling card.
> anon: could the world start ending again soon, i’m so bored

*click*

> anon: Any more news lately?
> anon: stocks are back up again, sweet
> anon: ugh i hate work, my manager had paranoia syndrome and it didn’t mellow her out AT ALL
> anon: Entrance exams are God’s punishment upon a sinful Earth.
> anon: glad that apocalypse is over, now back to the dozen other ways we’re all completely fucked
> anon: They’re never going to find out what happened to that courthouse, are they?
> anon: wonder how goro’s doing right now……
> anon: new season of featherman looking raaaad
> anon: Going to bed. See you jerks tomorrow.

*click*

“-economy has begun to stabilize after the lack of confidence brought about by the Paranoia Syndrome epidemic. While international tensions persist, threats between major nations have likewise ceased, as focus shifts to dealing with the fallout of the sickness.

“We will continue to update as events develop.

“And now, the weather: clear skies and low temperatures over this weekend, with highs in the low forties and a wind chill of-“

Akira turned the television off.

* * *

[Akira Kurusu is now online.]

AK: Hey, everyone.
FS: yoooooo
YK: Greetings.
MN: Hello, Akira.
HO: Hi Akira!!
AT: finally, i was getting worried again
FS: (morgana says hi too)
RS: wassup man, you home
AK: Yeah, just got settled in. Place needed dusting.
AT: you saw goro’s verdict, right
AK: Saw it as it was going on. Among other things.
RS: dude that calling card was NUTS. i mean we couldn’t actually see it but still
FS: i’ve tried to explain what happened to everyone but they can’t get it through their heads, i am surrounded by fools
MN: To be fair, Futaba, you do grasp cognitive psience on a somewhat more advanced level than the rest of us. Akira might be able to offer a layman’s account.
FS: FOOLS I SAY. FOOOOOOOOLS

YK: If the witness accounts are to be trusted, I must admit I am impressed by how closely you mimicked my own turn of phrase on the calling cards. But how were you able to manifest them in the Metaverse to begin with?

AK: I didn’t write the calling card. Goro did.

RS: he wha

YK: I beg your pardon?

FS: THAT’S WHAT I SAID. BASICALLY. SORT OF.

AK: The only really tricky part was the Meta-Nav.

AK: Yaldabaoth first installed it on all our phones after he took over the Velvet Room. You remember, the place where we all got stuck after he sort of deleted us from existence?

HO: Please, don’t remind me.

AK: Anyway, I spoke with the people who were actually in charge of that place and they said that there was just enough of his power left there to bring the app back for a short time. I asked them to install it on the phones of people around the courthouse. Might’ve overdone it a little, but it worked out.

AK: Once it was activated it pulled the area into the Metaverse. The original one. Without any distortions or Palaces, the place where perception can become reality.

FS: my turn my turn!

FS: so if cognitive bias affects the spatial psychogeography of the metaversal plane then all we had to do was create a sufficiently significant consensus to evoke largescale alteration of the AOE

RS: yeah see this is the shit we meant

AK: We had to nudge people into thinking what we wanted

FS: siiiiigh, yeah that. not too different from keywords honestly. all i had to do was set up a small botnet to get the ball rolling

AK: “The Phantom Thieves are coming for Goro Akechi.”

AK: “A calling card will be sent.”

AK: “The Phantom Thieves will reveal the truth.”

FS: bingo. but there was a deliberate ambiguity in that final keyphrase. what exactly is “truth?” no one had any idea, especially cuz goro’s own case was so nuts

FS: in that event the concept of “truth” would default to the cognition with the strongest perception thereof, and since events around the courthouse were such a clusterfuck of conflicting opinions that meant it’d go to the one with the most facts and strongest feelings on the matter

FS: i.e., goro himself

AK: Goro didn’t care about his innocence or guilt. He had one desire: “Unmask. Let people see me for who I really am.”

AK: But even he wasn’t certain of who he “really was.” He told me that he’d trust our opinion at this point more than he’d trust his own.

AK: So he unconsciously expressed his true feelings of himself through the calling cards supplied by the city’s own perceptions. His crimes, his atonement – his truth, spoken in our words.

FS: tbh we got lucky, guy had a serious case of self-loathing going on

FS: if he’d been too hard on himself those cards could have easily pushed him towards serious jailtime or worse

AK: Yeah. But it didn’t. I’m glad he was able to care about himself a little.

AK: He did a lot of terrible things, but I feel like he deserved that much.

AT: gonna be honest, i almost cried when i saw his face after the cameras came back on

AK: So, basically: we set the stage, Tokyo brought the props, Goro’s subconscious wrote the script. And…scene.

AK: Pretty simple, compared to how you guys busted me out of that interrogation room.
RS: …you’re friggin scary sometimes, dude
HO: Wait. I just realized something.
HO: You said the calling card was “written” by Goro’s subconscious. But the end of the message…it said that we were his friends.
HO: Does that mean what I think it does?
AK: Probably. And it’s true, isn’t it?
AT: ok now i really am crying GOOD JOB EVERYONE
HO: Sorry!
YK: I, for one, am proud to consider him a comrade after what we endured.
RS: it’s not like we won’t see him again anyway
RS: and speak for yourselves about the whole “friends” thing, he might’ve saved our asses a bunch
of times but he still jacked my hoodie and that shit ain’t right
AK: I heard about that, it was hilarious
RS: DUDE. BETRAYAL.
MN: Do you think Goro himself realizes what happened?
AK: I’m sure he’ll put it together eventually. He knows how the Metaverse works, after all.
RS: yo akira you should apologize to makoto too
MN: For what?
RS: uhhhh, for showing up your sister’s big moment with secret brain magic?
MN: Oh, that. Sae’s fine with it. She told me she knew what she was in for when she let Akira have her number.
AK: Yeah, made a lot of calls that day.
MN: Which reminds me. Boss said he can chauffeur us to your house this Sunday to drop off
Morgana. Does that work for you?
AK: It should. Fair warning, my place isn’t that big.
YK: I am certain we will cope. I look forward to being there.
YK: In the meantime, I must resume work on a project of mine. Recent events have left me inspired. Goodnight, everyone.

[Yusuke Kitagawa is now offline.]

RS: shit that’s right, i gotta be up at the crack of dawn tomorrow
RS: i’m out, talk to you again whenever
RS: and good job with goro btw, hopefully he’ll be more fun to hang out with once he gets back

[Ryuji Sakamoto is now offline.]

AT: i’m leaving too. see you soon, akira
AT: really happy that everything worked out, more or less
AT: i mean…..i know nothing’s really fixed, but we can work on that as we go
AT: got to keep trying, right?
AK: Right.
FS: tired. sleep. bye.

[Ann Takamaki is now offline.]

[ Futaba Sakura is now offline.]

HO: Akira, do you think they’ll let us visit Goro in juvenile hall?
MN: Unlikely. It’s restricted to immediate family or guardians, and considering Goro’s situation…
HO: I see. That’s too bad.
AK: I could try to work something out. Iwai or Sae might have some ideas.
HO: No, it’s fine. If that calling card is any indication then he knows that we won’t forget him.
HO: That will not stop me from sending care packages, however.
HO: I may just be a figurehead, but I am the primary shareholder of Okumura Foods. If I wish to send Goro Akechi cake, then he will receive cake.
MN: You tell them, Haru.
HO: We all defy authority in our own ways.
AK: Some of those ways involve cake.
HO: Exactly!

[Haru Okumura is now offline.]

MN: So. Just the two of us now.
AK: Yup.
MN: Tell me something. Why did you feel so compelled to help Goro in the first place? I know he helped us a lot in Shimizu’s Palace, but that could just as easily have been considered making up for past crimes. We didn’t owe him anything.
AK: I didn’t have a choice.
MN: Hm. I think I understand.
AK: You do?
MN: You’re not as mysterious as you like to believe, Akira.
MN: I’d say you did the right thing, in any case. More than ever, we need to leave ourselves open to the possibility that things can change for the better. That includes each other.
MN: Let’s do our best, too.
AK: Always.
MN: Goodnight, then.
AK: Goodnight, Makoto.

[Makoto Niijima is now offline.]

...

[Akira Kurusu is now offline.]

* * *

When Ryuji stepped outside it was still early enough for the dim chips of stars to still be visible overhead, and the December cold bit through his thin clothes like teeth. He shivered, rubbed sleep out of his eyes. As usual, he’d had to creep around his apartment like an intruder getting ready, so as not to wake his mother. He’d brushed his teeth with the light off and noticed the way the yellow highlights in his hair glowed. Every week there was less of a shine. His original hair color had finally become dominant.

His leg always troubled him this time of year and he tried to massage the ache out of it as he stretched. This was a time of day when even Tokyo lost much of its vigor, that dark hour between the end of nightlife and the beginning of commute, and the streets were quiet as he bent low, fingertips touched to the pavement. White steam puffed out of his nostrils.

Ryuji took a deep breath and started to run.
He started slow, arms at his sides, shoes slapping the sidewalk, that steady tempo, one-two one-two, and he didn’t think of the growing heat in his chest or the sting in his knee but of that sound, he buried himself in it and lost himself in it as the landscape crawled by, those blinded homes and vacant shopfronts so much like their drained and depleted cousins in the Dead Sea, but for now all that mattered was the sound, the quickening rhythm matching his heartbeat as he picked up speed and stoked that heat within him like a bellows-

-and at another time, another place, Morgana sat on the bartop in the empty Leblanc Café and gazed at his reflection in the polished wood and his reflections in the ranked glass jars of coffeebeans and the polished brass of the bar’s fixtures, all of them distended and warped in some way, the sapphire blue of his eyes following him wherever he looked, and he wondered about the shape he’d taken, the shape he’d been, the shape he could be in the future-

-and Ann Takamaki grinned down at her phone, which displayed a photo of Shiho Suzui at volleyball, the girl airborne and mid-spike with her lips peeled back in a fierce and triumphant grimace, the ball still distended from its impact with her knuckles, and at the photographers’ call she put her phone away and stepped out in front of the cameras, molding herself into a dozen different poses and expressions, all of them masks and all of them hers-

-and Yusuke Kitagawa stood in the gallery with hands folded beside his newest painting and watched it draw in passersby, watched their expressions turn fascinated and haunted as its imagery drew them in almost against their will – the canvas depicted a theater, rich and luxurious and bloody red, the seats filled with people bland and anonymous as shadows, and upon the stage itself was painted a black circle without dimension or luster so that it seemed almost a tear in the canvas itself, but at the hole’s periphery licked blue flame that owing to some trick of the brushwork appeared to burn inward, absence itself charring away to nothing under the theatregoers’ anonymous regard – and while many would believe the theme to be muddled and the imagery cluttered they would stare at the painting until they finally tore their eyes down to the nameplate bearing its title, cryptic but just as arresting, “The Spoken”-

-and Makoto Niijima walked the streets of Shibuya where over a year past she had confronted that manipulative crook of a host and driven him nearly to tears in full view of everyone, and she recalled the crawling emptiness behind that man’s eyes as she’d driven him into a corner, the same miserable hollowness she’d seen in so many of the Phantom Thieves’ targets, and she remembered Sae’s own words to her, half admonishment and half warning, that such people were not unique and not alone and the path on which she’d set herself would align her against countless more, and she watched the crowds of Shibuya, watched their faces, wondered what sort of malicious vacantness could be hidden behind those pates of bone-

-and Futaba Sakura perched in the sick glow of her computer, her keyboard firing off irregular bursts of noise as she navigated the hidden corners of the Internet – not unlike the cognitive world in its way, a shadow world beneath the mundane one that changed on the perception of its witness and reflected back onto the world that created it and altered it in turn – teasing out secrets, looking for threads of hope in the torrent of bad news, until her cellphone buzzed and she looked at it and recognized Tsukiko Minami’s number, at which point she hopped out of her chair and dashed out of the house with a shouted goodbye to Sojiro-

-and Haru Okumura sat in her palatial and empty living room with a cup of coffee in her hands and a photograph of her father set before her like a funereal offering, the man unsmiling and stern even in that captured idealized moment, and she herself saw her unsmiling face reflected over his in the photograph’s glass pane as she lifted the cup to her lips and drank, her own beans still inexpertly grown, still unbalanced in flavor and bouquet, but she kept her eyes unblinking on that picture and let the coffee linger on her tongue until it burned and then she swallowed, savoring that bitterness,
remembering it-

-and Goro Akechi laid down in his cot among the rustle and grunt of other boys in the reformatory, the mattress thin enough for his shoulder blades to bite into the bedspring underneath, the room insulated poorly enough to make them all shiver, yet another dim and half-remembered room but still softer than the rotting floors and warmer than the relentless wet of the Dead Sea, and his face was carefully neutral until the lights snapped off, at which point the ghost of a smile passed over it like weather, and as he closed his eyes his last thought was how, one day, he’d decided to play a game.

His leg throbbed. His throat felt lined with ground glass. He threw off droplets of sweat like diamonds in his wake. Ryuji’s legs pumped ever higher as the city streaked by him and the first pale light of dawn broke the horizon. He no longer knew where he was. He didn’t know if he was running to something or running away. The world behind him might be falling away into nothingness with every step and every step forward brought him nearer to collapse or collision. Still, he had to run. He couldn’t ever stop.

* * *

Here was a bus stop, at the onset of twilight.

No one else was here right now, and the air was bitter cold in the fading purple glow of dusk. Akira sat on the bench with his hoodie pulled up, shivering like a leaf, his fingers barely able to navigate his phone. Still, his smile was obvious in the light of the screen.

AK: Ok guys, I’m here.
RS: got it, we should be there in like ten
MN: Akira, it’s the dead of winter. Why aren’t you at home? Indoors?
AK: My mom’s going nuts battening down the hatches for everyone. Pretty sure our house hasn’t ever had this many people over at once before.
AK: Dad warned me that if I didn’t run away she’d hunt me down and make me do stuff.
MN: If you catch a cold, I will not be happy.
HO: We’ll pick you up in just a little bit, Akira!
AT: hey akira, quit texting and call boss. he’s driving and he wants to talk
FS: morgana too! turns out you can do pretty much anything with thumbs except text, who knew
YK: Boss also seems irritated at the way we are all sitting around texting each other rather than speaking.
YK: He has gone on to rebuke the youth of today, and recall anecdotes involving lengthy trips through the snow, which, improbably, were uphill both ways.
FS: omfg
FS: inari is dunking on my dad
FS: i’m so proud
YK: Well, I have an excellent teacher.
FS: THIS IS THE BEST DAY ツ +o.:` \ (※∀)ﾉ\:o+``

Obligingly, Akira dialed and put the phone to his ear. A moment later, Sojiro picked up.

“Hey. Got you on speaker. You doing okay out there?”

“I’m fine.”

“I can hear your teeth chattering, kid. I know you’re excited, but if you get sick I’m going to catch
hell from your folks. It’s bad enough that you- hey, cat, get off my phone!”

Morgana’s voice broke through. “Akira! Your next assignment is to find a way to make me human. I’m serious! This is the first time I’ve gotten to talk with you since we escaped that Palace, it’s so unfair!”

“Sorry, Morgana.”

“I want thumbs. And a train pass! And my own phone. Then I’ll bother all of you late at night and see how much you like it!”

“Shoot for the stars, cat,” Ryuji said in the background.

“Can it, Sakamoto!”

He listened to them bicker as the light of passing cars glassed his face. The sun slipped beneath the horizon. The constellations above started to poke out their heads, like burrowing animals.

“I’m fine with that, Morgana. Just keep in mind I’ve got entrance exams coming up. Life goes on, right?”

“I know, I know,” Morgana grumbled. “And it’ll be tricky, too. The Meta-Nav’s gone for good this time. But if anyone can do it, you can!”

“What’s he yowling about now, kid?”

“He said that he believes in me.”

“Huh. Good kitty.” He kept talking as Morgana futilely complained. “But yeah, entrance exams. You give any thought to what you want to do after? The future waits for no one, after all.”

“Yeah. I don’t know.” He pulled his jacket around himself and shivered. “Mostly I just want to be someone other people can rely on. Someone they can look up to.”

“Bad news. I think you passed that goal a while ago.”

“Thanks. But I’ve got options. And connections. Dr. Takemi, Mr. Yoshida…not to mention all of you guys. Plenty of directions I can take things.”

“You’re optimistic, huh?”

“I wouldn’t go that far. But, we’re still alive, right?”

“Seems that way.” Over the phone, Akira heard the car’s engine rev. “Alright, we’re pretty much right on top of you. Keep an eye out.”

“I’ll stick my head for you, dude!”

“Oh my God, Ryuji, put the window back up, it’s freezing out!”

“Hey Akira, you’ve gotta pay us back for this,” Futaba called. “Christmas is coming up. Next time drag your parents over to our place, or something!”

The wind blew and the cold bit harder. But as he listened to them talk, Akira found that he no longer noticed the chill.

They continued to chatter as he stood. The cars’ headlights burned like meteorites through the growing night. Then, as he watched, a pair of those lights slowed, and diverted. The van approached. The voices from it melded with those from his phone. Akira grinned, and put it away, and raised his hand high, and that light grew until it printed his shadow on the bench behind him and then washed over that shadow as well, everything so bright he could barely see.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

I think life is so interesting. There isn't a second wasted in being alive. Even a worthless piece of garbage like me can sometimes feel like that. That's how I get through today, and every other ordinary day.
- Inio Asano, "Goodnight Punpun"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The thin mattress. The cold walls. Civics lessons without meaning or purpose. His hands red and swollen from scrubbing his laundry. Journal pages filled with ordinary secrets, hiding deeper ones he could never tell. His hair was cut short and the late-night drafts caressed his scalp in unfamiliar ways after lights out.

As he’d suspected, juvenile hall wasn’t that different from the foster homes. Rigid routine, hard and apathetic stares, conversation that went from hushed and furtive to loud and confrontational without much in between. It wasn’t the Dead Sea but it was a place of stasis. A way station, for these boys. They were given education and too much work to stay bored for long even as the ground froze and the air howled bitter.

Still, he realized the key difference right away. It was in himself. They weren’t allowed to speak of their pasts to each other, at least not where the guards could hear. Histories, families, places of origin, the crimes they’d committed – all of these topics were forbidden. Akechi knew the practical reason; it was to keep the chronic troublemakers from hooking up and swelling their ranks after the facility let them go. But sometimes he overheard the others whispering about where they’d been anyway, or saw them passing notes, like smugglers, the boys sneaking in fragments of the people they’d used to be.

No one asked him what he’d done. Everyone knew who he was.

He’d been worried right off that he would encounter trouble with the other boys, or with the guards. Former police rarely had much luck in prison, even if this wasn’t technically a prison and he wasn’t technically police. But despite his fears, he wasn’t denied meals or beaten senseless in a corner as nearby guards averted their eyes. Most likely he’d confused everyone. The way he’d acquitted himself in that courtroom had made him out to be a tool of the establishment and a weapon against it both in one. He was shielded by contradiction. Still, no one was friendly with him, and he didn’t have much to share either, his true crime something that would have to remain forever unsaid. That frigidity remained even as winter abated.

He had another, darker fear of what would happen to him in this place, but he kept it buried and out of sight. Thinking about it would do him no good.

The days passed through him like wind. As the weather warmed and the earth grew soft he found another way to spend his time. On the facility grounds were plots of dirt that came to be filled with inexpertly planted flowers and vegetables, sown and watered by the inmates. It was good to work with his hands; he occasionally thought of Haru as he planted his own seeds. Still, even as they began to sprout, he thought that the gaps of bare dirt between his work and the other boys’ was just a little wider. He tried to take it as an encouraging sign, how that bothered him. He didn’t think it
would have bothered him so much before he’d met Akira and the others.

Still, sometimes, late at night, he would recall what Zenigata said to him. A contract that sounded more like a curse: *Your future is empty. You shall stand forever apart from humanity.*

It hadn’t been any sort of prophecy, he knew. Just his own, vicious inner voice, mounting one last assault against his resolve before he’d finally beaten it down and accepted it as part of him. But as the seasons continued to change and the chills turned to sweating, it came back to him, all the same.

A package arrived for him, the address unfamiliar. It contained a small strawberry shortcake that nearly made him faint with its fragrance after the bland food of this place. When he cut it apart in private he noticed something stuck in the soft pastry and extracted and unfolded it, wiping away frosting. It turned out to be a note from Haru and in the opening lines she apologized for the subterfuge while admitting that she’d always wanted to do something like this. It made Akechi laugh for the first time in weeks. She wrote about how the others were doing. Akira had done well on his entrance exams; Ryuji, against any cosmic sense of justice or reason, had passed his too, and they were both attending university in the city. Ann was still modeling. Morgana was still cat-shaped. Yusuke’s profile in the art world grew, with one piece he’d done in response to their last foray in the Metaverse drawing particular acclaim. Putaba had blown past her first year of high school and continued to painstakingly assemble a social life. Makoto and Haru herself continued their studies. Comforting banalities. He was almost relieved at how little their lives had moved forward. He didn’t think his own would change much, until he finally left this place. Akira had told him he wanted to meet the person Akechi had become. More than anything, he was resolved to hold onto that person. He’d carry it out of here and hold it up for the others to see.

Still, while the note was a welcome ray of light in the grey routine, it brought back that darker fear. Haru shouldn’t have been able to send him this package; she’d applied leverage. If she could, so could others. People whose intentions wouldn’t be quite so benevolent.

He knew that Shido’s conspiracy couldn’t have been wholly eradicated – most of them had been craven and liable to flip at the merest pressure, but there’d still be some, like that cleaner, who would have scurried away to bide their time. Such people wouldn’t have been likely to buy Shido’s explanation for Akechi’s crimes. He imagined they’d know what he had really done. He’d be a liability. A potential informant. Or it could be something more banal. One of the guards who’d known someone he’d hurt. Someone in the police, miffed that he’d made a fool out of them. Prisoners of all sorts, much like orphans, were invisible in this country. It would be so easy for one of them to disappear.

Akechi swallowed back those anxieties as best he could. It was just paranoia of a far more ordinary kind. He focused on keeping his journal filled with trivialities, his head down, his garden tended. But he wasn’t surprised when they finally came for him.

It was June, a little over six months after his conviction. The night alive with cicadas and so sweltering that the very air clung to his throat like moss. The heat left him restless enough; his still-frayed nerves did the rest. He felt their gazes falling on him and that was enough to wake him up. His eyes cracked open to see two shapes looming over his bed, rendered featureless by the dark, their faces hidden further under the brims of their guardsmans’ caps. As the fog of sleep evaporated all at once he thought he could place their silhouettes. Two of the newer guards. How new? Had there been times when they’d seemed to be watching him in particular? Picking this moment?

“Mr. Akechi,” said one of them. “Get up, please. You’re being transferred to another facility.”
They wouldn’t even give him the dignity of a good lie.

*Your every treasure will crumble in your hands.*

The silence of the dorm became very loud. The other boys listening intently. They all knew as he did that when the circle closed around someone in such a way it did so with a finality that could be neither delayed nor entreated. Time and again the hands of Shido’s conspiracy had found some luckless throat and started to choke; now it was time for his own neck to feel that grip. No one would come to save him here. By morning he would just be a rumor.

“All right, Mr. Akechi.”

He got out of bed.

They didn’t let him gather his things or put on his shoes; the flimsiness of this pretense was clear to all of them. Once they exited the room they made him hold out his hands and cuffed him; the metal teeth chewed into his wrists. They trooped him through the shadowy halls, one in front, one behind, forcing his footfalls to match their own. He forced himself to keep his breath regular. Inhale, count to two. Exhale, count to two. Keep his composure. He wouldn’t break down here. Wouldn’t bow and beg like the people he himself had killed.

It was a cloudless night and the close, wet air seeped through his thin bedclothes. The security cameras’ idiot stares went unheeded. His feet scraped across the asphalt as he shuffled along. They led him through the lot and to an unmarked car. Another shape sat rigid behind the wheel as if sculpted. All of this bearing the grinding inevitability of a bad dream. Barefoot, barehanded, shackled. Memories of Seki Shimizu, slouching through the ruins of a world forgotten.

They put him in the backseat, one guard on each side. Up front, thin fingers adjusted the rear-view mirror. The engine started. They left without a word.

Tokyo’s garish light spilled over them. He glanced to the left and right but the guards’ faces were rigid and unkind beneath their caps; of the driver he could see nothing at all. It was late but as always that made little difference to the city. Shoppers and drunks teemed the streets and none of them gave the car a second glance. He turned away from it all, kept his eyes on his feet.

Eventually the lights faded and he looked up again. They were driving away from the city. Somewhere rural. Hinohara, maybe. The highway emptied out, climbed, wove serpentine along cliffsides. He looked out the side window and past the silvery curve of the rail saw the black and lusterless hulks of distant mountains against the sky, night opening up into darker night. Deep in the woods. No one to see. Inhale. Exhale.

As they drove on he felt how limited the seconds of his life had become and he tried to value each of them all the more. He told himself that all the paths his life could have taken would have likely come to a premature terminus and this one was still among the best. It felt unconvincing. He knew that Akira and the others wouldn’t just accept that he had disappeared but that would do him little good at that point. His remains lying beneath some hollow, the rest of him gone to feed the soft earth, its own garden tended. Weeds growing through the bone birdcage of his ribs.

The car pulled over to the side of the road. An anonymous stretch of asphalt, without marker or company. The engine died. Akechi’s hands clenched.

The driver turned slightly. “This is it. You’ll be taking over from here.”

To Akechi’s surprise it was a woman’s voice – husky and low, disdainful.
“The money?” asked the guard to his left.

“It’ll be wired at dawn. Thank you for the help. I’ll contact you again when it’s time to leave.”

The doors clanked open. The driver stepped out. The guard to Akechi’s right followed suit.

“Step out of the car,” he said.

Akechi stepped out of the car.

“Put out your hands.”

He put out his hands.

And then the guard reached up, key shining between his fingers, and unlocked the handcuffs.

Akechi’s hands stayed frozen where they were after those metal teeth were pulled away. This had been an unexpected deviation from the script. He looked at the guard, silently begging answers. Under that hatbrim the once impassive face looked almost embarrassed.

“You can keep those clothes if you want.” He put away the cuffs. “Use ’em for pajamas, or something.”

Now he really did think he was dreaming. Words so inane they passed into the surreal. He remained where he was, staring dumbly, as the guard stepped around him and shut the door. He turned around and through the darkened windows saw bright rectangles of light as the guards played with their phones. He’d ceased to be a part of their world.

“You look surprised.”

The woman stood a little further down the road. With her pale skin and dark suit and close-cropped dark hair she was rendered almost invisible in the murk, her face floating off the ground like a disembodied mask. Young, maybe even Akechi’s age. She was a head shorter than him but her stiff-backed posture contrived to make her look taller than she really was.

“I was interested to see how you’d react,” she went on. “Most people in that situation would make a scene, or at least ask what was happening to them. But you just stayed quiet. Like you’d already resigned yourself to the worst possible scenario. Why is that, I wonder.” He continued to stare.

“Rest easy, Mr. Akechi. Shido’s remaining conspirators have gone to ground. No one is coming to silence you in the night.”

“Who are you?” he asked.

“You still haven’t pieced it together? I suppose that’s to be expected.” She gestured down the road. “They’ll explain everything in there.”

He craned his head, looking past her. On the shoulder of the road was another car – a limousine, shining like a fragment of jet. Again, that dim haze of unreality. He turned to the railing. He walked off. The woman watched him go, her face twisting in confusion.

In Tokyo, the light pollution sucked away all vivacity from the sky. Akechi couldn’t remember the last time he’d been out of the city. He didn’t think he’d ever seen stars like these. They’d gained a ferocious gleam like scattered zirconia; they clustered and whorled as if caught up in unseen currents. High scuds of nebula. The pinned and sullen glow of planets. The moon was a downturned sickle, a reversed image of the classic crescent, small and bright as a scar in the
stretched skin of nighttime. The stars seemed to congregate around it. He couldn’t make out any constellations. He wondered at the sort of minds that would try to find patterns in this chaotic spray. The breeze was warm and the cicadas chirped and the trees rustled like all the world was trying to whisper secrets in his ear.

“Thinking of running away?”

The woman’s voice behind him. She didn’t sound particularly concerned.

“You could do it. Jump over the railing, survive the fall. Take off wherever. Maybe if you got lucky you’d find a little town someplace and lay low. I doubt you’d last long, but many people seem to find a sort of romance in the idea.”

“I’ve never been much of a romantic.” He gripped the rail and leaned forward. “Still…it’s beautiful here.”

He felt the woman’s gaze on the back of his neck. Then, the sensation left. “In your own time, Mr. Akechi.”

He stayed there for a while. No other cars came. The weak starlight printed his shadow on the ground behind him. Eventually he turned and saw that the limousine now had one door hanging open. He went over to it, paused at the threshold, then stepped inside and closed the door.

Darkness. He sank into the leather upholstery, hands on his lap, and waited for his eyes to adjust. Outlines of people solidified – three of them, sitting across from him.

“Good evening, Mr. Akechi,” said the central figure. This was another woman, her voice smooth and refined. “I hope the journey up here wasn’t too much trouble.”

“It seems the handcuffs were unnecessary, at least.” That was the driver. That sheen of ice over her own words hadn’t thawed.

“On behalf of our Director, I would like to apologize for troubling you so late.” A third woman, the warmest of the three, but something was odd about her voice – it sounded clipped, subtly filtered, like he was hearing it through a high-quality radio. “This subterfuge was deemed a necessary precaution. Our Director has a bad habit of making a scene, even in situations where she does not intend to-”

“I’m sure he doesn’t need to know all that,” the first woman said stiffly.

“Ah. My apologies.”

Awkward silence. Then, a heaved sigh.

“Very well, I think we can drop the mystique at this point. The lights, please?”

“Of course. Mr. Akechi, you may wish to shield your eyes.”

He squinted as the overhead lights came on. In their glow he could see the women plain, all of them in neat black suits. The driver sat off to his left, staring; she didn’t seem to blink. The central woman was taller, cheekbones high, her hair a deep scarlet that spilled freely about her head like a velvet sheet. The right-hand one was, again, strange, possibly a Westerner, blonde-haired and blue-eyed, but her eyes shone like diodes and her skin was unnaturally smooth, almost plasticine. They all regarded him with polite interest.
“My name is Mitsuru Kirijo, current head of the Kirijo Group. Perhaps you’ve heard of it,” said the one in the middle. He nodded mutely, and she raised a hand to the blonde-haired woman. “This is Aigis, my chief field agent and personal assistant. As for our other guest, you may recognize Detective Naoto Shirogane.”

He turned to her. “Detective…?”

“That’s right,” said Shirogane. “Charmed, I’m sure.”

Suddenly the contempt in that stare made a lot more sense to him.

“We’ve already harassed you enough tonight, Mr. Akechi, so I’ll try to keep this brief,” said Kirijo. “First, a question. What can you tell me of Shadows?”

She didn’t explain further, but he doubted she meant the kind you saw by standing in the sun. And he didn’t much see the point of playing the fool now.

“Hostile manifestations of humanity’s collective unconscious. Often they embody suppressed desires or neuroses. They take various shapes, sometimes those of the people from whose thoughts they were borne. They can—”

“Thank you, that’s enough. A fine summation. I assume that the recent Paranoia Syndrome and ‘change of heart’ incidents were the result of Shadow activity?” Akechi nodded. “You might not be surprised to hear this, but they weren’t the first. The Apathy Syndrome epidemic in Tatsumi Port Island some years ago was also due to Shadow infestation. There were a number of similar occurrences in the Inaba region some time later. And those are just the more noteworthy ones.”

She placed a hand to her chest. “After Apathy Syndrome was quelled, I decided to form an independent organization with the Kirijo Group’s resources. A taskforce, of sorts. One dedicated to investigating and eradicating further Shadow attacks before they could do harm.”

“Is that so.” His voice could have withered grass. “Then pardon my language, but where the hell have you been lately?”

“A fair question,” she replied, unruffled. “Aigis?”

“We have come to learn that the collective unconscious can manifest in the real world through a number of possible vectors,” Aigis said. “The Shadows which arose in Tatsumi and Inaba came through completely different means, and we have identified several others in minor attacks through the intervening years. This ‘Metaverse’ is just the latest phenomenon through which Shadows have troubled mankind. Unfortunately, it is also one we know very little about, which hindered our attempts to intervene directly. We cannot battle Shadows if we cannot find a pathway into their domain.”

“It didn’t help that information about the cognitive world was closely guarded,” Shirogane said. “I’m not formally part of Kirijo’s organization, but she brought me on as a consultant in light of the Phantom Thief attacks, not to mention growing suspicion of Masayoshi Shido’s own crimes. I investigated, but I didn’t have much luck. We have a decent idea as to the Thieves’ true identities, but they’d be unlikely to share information with the police – as you found out yourself – and most of the cognitive psience research was either hoarded by Shido or destroyed outright. Any serious attempts to find more on the subject online were met with counter-hacks and some…colorful warnings not to dig any deeper. We opted to watch the Phantom Thieves from a distance and hope for the best. That worked out, but when Paranoia Syndrome struck, the wide area of effect and dissimilarity to the previous incident in Tokyo meant that we didn’t even connect it to the Metaverse until it was far too late.”
Aigis picked up again. “We continued to act on our own, of course. Given enough time I am certain we would have found a way to engage and neutralize the threat directly. But that is the point – we did not have enough time. Were it not for the Phantom Thieves’ intervention, civilization may well have suffered irreversible damage. Director Kirijo does not find this acceptable.”

“Don’t worry,” said Akechi. “After the Thieves dealt with that latest threat, the only means of entering the Metaverse disappeared for good. It’s ceased to be a problem.”

“I’m relieved to hear that, but we’ve thought the same thing several times before,” said Kirijo. “We were proven wrong, every time. It seems like nothing stays banished for long.” Akechi had to concede the point. “We need more intelligence in order to act effectively. I’ve received help from outside groups like the Phantom Thieves before – Detective Shirogane is affiliated with one of them – but they’re not dedicated to anti-Shadow activities like we are. And we especially cannot rely on the Phantom Thieves themselves. Their vigilantism means they take a serious risk every time they go public again. They deserve to live normal lives.” She held out a hand to him. “But then, we found out about you. Someone for whom that will not be an option for a while yet.”

“I take it you saw my trial,” he said.

“Correct,” Shirogane replied. “And unlike the general public, we have little reason to disbelieve your confession, or that calling card. I elected to arrange this meeting with you and Director Kirijo. It took some time to ensure a smooth exit from the penal system – documents prepared, guards bribed, and so on. I made sure that no one would be able to easily verify that you were no longer held at any particular correctional facility. Then I waited a little longer, for good measure.”

“Detective Shirogane dislikes you,” Aigis added helpfully.

“My personal feelings aside, Kirijo is right. The Metaverse is a dangerous blind spot. And you happen to be our most available source of information on the subject. Someone who can be encouraged to share what they know.”

“Coerced, you mean,” Akechi said. “So, what’s your plan? I tell you everything about the cognitive world and you set me free early?”

“Not exactly,” said Kirijo. “You are, after all, still serving out your sentence. We’d keep you under surveillance at our headquarters – still much more comfortable than juvenile hall, in any case. In exchange, I’d like you to share whatever you have regarding the Metaverse and its related incidents. No need to worry about incriminating the Phantom Thieves. They’ve earned their peace.” She tented her fingers. “And there may be something further you can assist us with. I assume you’re able to manifest the power known as a Persona?”

“I have the Wild Card.” He never took pride in that before, and still didn’t, but he felt a glimmer of satisfaction as the surprise that passed over their faces. Shirogane’s glare turned laser-intense. She leaned over to Kirijo and there was a brief, whispered exchange. Kirijo waved her off.

“Interesting, but ultimately irrelevant,” she said. “My point is that, given the opportunity, I would also like you to assist on the field if needed. Again, under close surveillance. The work is dangerous, even life-threatening, but I doubt it’s anything you’re not used to, given your prior… career.”

“I would look forward to working together,” said Aigis. “I think we would synchronize well.”

“Keep in mind that you can be re-inserted into juvenile hall at any time,” Shirogane said harshly.
“If you try to mislead or sabotage Kirijo in any way, you’ll be serving out your old sentence and then some. Still, it’s a very generous offer, for someone in your circumstances.”

“I decline.”

His answer came immediately and his voice was quiet and firm. Somewhere deep in him was that old, dark hunger. *I’m needed. These people want me around.* But its grip was feeble, now. He didn’t need to give into it.

“I’m familiar with this kind of arrangement,” he said to their blank faces. “A luxurious cage, where the bottom can fall out at any moment. Where I’m kept around, so long as I make myself useful. But I’m not that person anymore. And you have nothing to offer me.” He motioned to the door. “Now, if there’s nothing else, I’d like to return to my bed.”

Silence. The car settled around them. Then Kirijo closed her eyes and sighed again.

“I think we may have given you the wrong impression,” she said, and threw a sharp look at Shirogane. “We didn’t come all this way to put you on a leash. This would be more of a… contractual arrangement. For the duration of your sentence, you’d be in my care. Yes, we’d ask certain things of you, but I wouldn’t simply abandon you at the first sign of defiance. And when you’re not assisting my organization directly, you’ll be properly tutored, socialized – everything you’d need to re-enter society once your time is up. That’s what juvenile hall is meant to do, after all. I see no reason why I cannot take on the same responsibilities.” She shrugged. “I could even assist with a change of identity, should your current one prove a hindrance to any future endeavors. I’d be delighted if you chose to stay on full-time, of course. But all of my operatives have lives outside of this business. Even Aigis takes personal days.”

“I enjoy trips to the beach, on occasion,” Aigis chimed in.

Akechi started to speak again and Kirijo held up her hand, cutting him off. “To anticipate your next question, this offer isn’t made out of charity or pity. Unlike the Detective here, I don’t have much grounds to condemn people for their crimes. The Apathy Syndrome crisis was caused by my family. That, and much worse. This taskforce is my way of making amends. It’s my-”

“-rehabilitation?” Akechi said faintly.

“Yes. If you like. So, I look past the crime and try to see what it implies. And what I see is that you’re intelligent, you’re resourceful, you clearly have some sense of integrity if you confessed to everything. And according to that calling card, you’ve already done the world a great service by helping to cure Paranoia Syndrome. Whatever you were, it’s clear that the person you *are* is capable of doing good, within my organization or otherwise.” She averted her eyes, her tone becoming more uneven, less rehearsed. “And I’ll admit, the way you conducted yourself at that trial…it impressed me. Spoke to something in me, I suppose. Society really does seem unsalvageable sometimes. Especially if you have to deal with humanity’s own self-destructive impulses constantly coming back to haunt us. But that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t fight for every moment we can take. Every day can bring us something better. I’d like this to be one of those days.” She cleared her throat. “I’m, er, usually not this sentimental.”

“IT suits you, Director,” said Aigis. “And I agree on all counts. I would object most strongly if I thought Mr. Akechi were being mistreated in any way.”

Akechi looked to Shirogane. She’d turned that smoldering gaze away from them, silent and frowning.
“So, there it is,” said Kirijo. “All cards on the table. If you still wish to return, I can arrange it at once. The choice is yours, Mr. Akechi.”

He thought about it. He clasped his hands, eyes downcast. Aigis’ and Kirijo’s own expressions had turned carefully neutral. Finally he reached a conclusion. He looked up at them again.

“What about my friends?” he asked.

She blinked. For some reason, she seemed much more surprised now than by the mention of the Wild Card. “Excuse me?”

“The Phantom Thieves. They’re my friends. Or so I’d like to believe, anyway. Would I be able to contact them again? Juvenile hall wouldn’t allow it, but…I’d just like to let them know how I’m doing.” He chuckled weakly. “No guarantee that at least one of them wouldn’t try to find out anyway. And there’s this boy I know. His name’s Seki, I think he’s a second-year in high school now. I’d like to check up on him, too. If possible.”

They stared until it became uncomfortable. Aigis looked pleased. Kirijo and Shirogane, however, exchanged glances, and then bent in close and had another whispered conversation, this one far more animated. Expressive gestures were used.

He turned to Aigis. “It looks like that was asking too much.”

“On the contrary,” said Aigis. “Even when we took your calling card into account, your dossier suggested some worrying anti-social tendencies. This request is an encouraging sign.”

“I see.” He looked back over to the others; their conversation had either turned into a lecture or an argument, and either way Shirogane didn’t appear to be enjoying it much. “My compliments on your good-cop bad-cop routine with the detective, by the way. Very well-executed.”

“Good cop…? Oh. I comprehend. But you are mistaken. My feelings towards you are sincere.”

“Why? Did my trial impress you, too?”

Aigis nodded. “In a manner of speaking. I was struck by your appearance after the television broadcast resumed. There was quite a bit of debate on why you reacted the way you did, upon receiving that calling card. But I think that I have felt something similar. It’s gratifying, isn’t it?”

“What is?”

She smiled at him. “Finding a reason to live.”

Akechi went quiet. He seemed dumbfounded. But after a moment, he smiled back.

Kirijo coughed and they both turned back to her. Her little discussion with Shirogane had ended; the detective was leaned back in her seat, looking shamed and sullen. Kirijo, on the other hand, was doing a poor job of concealing the pleasure in her own expression.

“I have considered your request,” she told him. “We’d have to take security precautions, obviously, and face-to-face meetings would pose difficulties, but I see no reason why we couldn’t allow long-distance contact. After you’ve shown yourself to be trustworthy, of course.” The corner of her mouth tugged up. “If this little interview is any indication, that shouldn’t take long. Do you have any other conditions?”

“No. That’s all.”
Kirijo nodded, then leaned forward in her seat and offered her hand. Akechi stared at it for a time. Inhale. Exhale.

He reached out and grasped it. Her skin warm and dry against his own. She shook once, then let go and settled back again.

“There will be paperwork involved, but that should suffice for now,” she said. “Welcome.”

“I look forward to working with you,” Aigis said brightly.

Meanwhile, Shirogane had pulled out her phone and started to text. After she sent the message, the car that had delivered them here rumbled into life and drove off. Kirijo gave the window behind her seat two sharp knocks, and the limo’s own engine woke up and purred.

“Make yourself comfortable, Mr. Akechi,” she said.

He nodded and started to close his eyes, but then, quite abruptly, Shirogane rose from her seat and crossed over to sit down beside him. As the landscape around the car began to crawl forward, she bent low, hands clasped between her knees. In the dim overhead lights he saw that she was flushed red around the collar.

“I apologize for my earlier conduct,” she said, so quietly that he had to strain to hear. “Mitsuru – Director Kirijo, I mean – pointed out that my pride was overwhelming my better judgement.”

“Yes. She used very direct language.” Kirijo and Aigis had started to converse amongst themselves, in a transparent attempt to avoid eavesdropping on them.

“I wouldn’t say your judgement was impaired,” Akechi told her. “I am a criminal, after all. As for your pride…I won’t make excuses for what I’ve done, but I will say that leeching off your reputation wasn’t my idea. ‘The successor to the Detective Prince,’ and all that. Never cared for the nicknames.”

“That was a bit irritating, yes,” she agreed. “But that’s not the whole of it. I’ve encountered someone in a similar position as yourself before. Another corrupt detective, even. It wasn’t a pleasant experience. You could say it left me prejudiced.” She shook her head. “Still, that’s no excuse. As an officer of the law I need to believe that people can change for the better, regardless of their prior actions.” Then she perked up, appeared to find something amusing. “I have to get my act together, or else the Phantom Thieves might come for me next.”

“Now there’s a showdown I’d like to see.”

“Just as a bystander? You’re a Phantom Thief yourself, aren’t you?”

Akechi was taken aback. Then he thought about it, and tried not to grin. “I suppose I am.”

“All the better reason for me to keep tabs on you, then.” Shirogane angled her head towards him. “I’ll be in touch. The cognitive psience data doesn’t interest me, but I need to make sure you’re keeping honest. And I’ll admit, I’m interested in getting to know you better, ‘Charismatic Detective.’”

“I said I didn’t care for the nicknames.”

She smirked. “I know.”
One of the greatest young minds in Japan, now apparently dedicated to getting on his nerves. He always seemed to exchange one tribulation for another. Still, it was an improvement. He suppressed a yawn, rubbed his eyes.

“Is it okay if I rest?” he asked. “It’s been a stressful night.”

“Of course,” said Kirijo. “We have quite a drive ahead of us. Aigis?”

Aigis obligingly dimmed the lights again as Akechi moved to the far end of the seat, leaned his head against the window. The glass was cool against his cheek. He watched the promenade of stars outside between the mountain peaks.

“Goodnight, Mr. Akechi,” said Kirijo. “Tomorrow morning, your own rehabilitation begins.”

“It’s been going on for a while. I don’t think it’ll ever end. But that’s all right.” He turned away from them. “Wake me when we get there.”

The quiet hiss of tires on pavement. The inverse curve of the moon overhead. Akechi thought of what his life had been and the shape it had taken and of how in every direction was uncertainty studded with possibilities both promising and terrible. He thought of the forgotten and invisible people with whom he’d spent his years, in the foster homes, in the correctional facility, and all at once he was struck with a desire so strong it ached. If only all of them could come this far, he thought. If we all had these chances. How different would things be.

It was something to work towards. To think about for another day. Somewhere in the distance were the flames of people awaiting his return and he felt one of his own kindled where the hole had been. He put a hand to his chest as if protecting that warmth. The moon hung overhead until Akechi’s eyelids fell over it like a curtain, and his sleep was dreamless and long.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading.

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