thaumaturgy

by Lord_Maple

Summary

Thaumaturgy (US:/θəˈmæθərədʒi/, from Greek θαυμαθέν thaûma, meaning "miracle" or "marvel" and ἔργον érgon, meaning "work") is the capability of a magician or a saint to work magic or miracles.

A power like that has fallen onto my hands.

===

AU where Akechi hasn't gotten involved with his father + Hanahaki

Alterations to the warnings/tags may occur as the story proceeds. I do plan on mentioning mature themes later on, but no explicit descriptions.

Spoilers from the entire game

Notes

Allo/ This is my first Persona 5 fic and ofc my first idea was to combine AU's and make a mess of things. orz
Most of the big story details has already been planned out. It's a matter of filling in the gaps in between, not to mention any future changes that will take most of my time, so expect inconsistent scheduling. The fic itself is largely self-indulgent despite being planned to be a very long one, soooo. wup

Regardless, I hope you enjoy the ride! /o/
Prologue

DATE: ???

Miracles don't exist.

Or at least, I don't think something as frivolous like that will save me from the moment I was conceived between a woman and a wretched man to the present. That much, I believed in.

And yet, perhaps my current situation was indeed a 'miracle'. I don't recall what it was that made me realize, perhaps Shido slipped up or maybe some information that the thieves passed around triggered it, but for it came to me that something was severely wrong. Not in the sense that the goal was wrong, but rather the plan to execute it, like there was something I overlooked.

Of course he would never trust me, why would someone like him do that? I was a fool-- things like hopes and desires cannot be achieved with the cards I've been born with.

Shido, for all his power is worth, would eliminate me after the election. Stains can't exist on his pristine face and freshly-pressed suit-- standard dress code as a decent world leader. He knew that much that he would almost certainly succeed in that regard.

Keyword being 'almost'.

I found the perfect path to enact revenge. A perfect miracle.

DATE: ???

“Akechi?”

As I woke from my stupor, I snapped my head towards his voice. Kurusu Akira. The rich, intense smell of coffee. The strong, distinct scent of curry and spices. The subtle whispers of conversation. The taste of dried saliva. The texture of flower petals. It seemed as though I had fallen asleep in LeBlanc.

“You sure you aren’t overworking yourself?” Of course, he’s too kind for his own good. Am I though? Probably. Microsleep is a red flag for fatigue. Actually he’s not that kind, he’s just being realistic, but he might as well be. I like to think of him as such, and I like it much more when he shows it.

The mask he wears is not the mask he made.

“It’s fine.” It ended up sounding strained and the way it croaked out didn’t relieve Akira, judging from his face. Dark circles. A dull, lazy posture. Flowers swallowed. Good.

“Hmm… you know you can stay over if you want.” His keen eyes glance at my throat.

“Oh? Am I not imposing on you though?” Akira smiled. I think I too, felt the edges of my lips curling upwards. A lot has changed since I met him-- the quick brush of normalcy and another with the color of excitement. The corners of my thoughts are untouched, yes, but my undivided attention is not directed to my own canvas. I wonder if that man, Yusuke, has starting to influence me as well, given the shape of my thoughts.
“Hardly, or are you satisfied with that cup of coffee in your hands?” The way he tilts head-- devious, isn’t he? He knew quite well that there was only one answer-- what farce he’s playing.

“Perhaps I am. Why don’t you make yourself one?” The brief twitch of the hand-- fingers curl around the hem of his apron. An instinctive smirk on my part.

“It’s night. School tomorrow.”

“Even better.” Fingers uncurl. Akira laughed.

“I don’t think Morgana would like that but...” He moved behind the counter. “I suppose that even he can’t do much if you’re here to stay.”

Akira to me is… the person I admire the most. That much will be constant. I hope for at least that much.

The new world-- this miracle I’ve found myself upon was familiar, yet completely different.

And this is just the beginning.
you asked for a beginning, so let me give you one

Chapter Summary

The spark that led to the creation of the Phantom Thieves.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Now, I ask of you to tell me the truth and only the truth. We have little time to spare.”

A woman's words echo within this cramped interrogation room. Her voice, clear. Her face, warped. I can imagine a middle-aged American man on the other side of silver screen--

"Don't do drugs, kids. It's a real ol' hassle to deal with when you're trying to testify the supernatural shenanigans that went down in the depths of Tokyo." The supernatural shenanigans that I and the others caused, of course.

What a damn joke.

But even so, I somehow managed to choke out my voice. "Very well, where shall I start?" I bit my lip. God, the bruises sting.

“Activity of the Phantom Thieves started at around April with the first victim, Suguru Kamoshida. He was found guilty of… numerous acts unbecoming of a teacher." How kind of her to not say his crimes as it is, but it's too late for formalities. "How did you find out and why did turn out as it did? Tell me, Goro Akechi.”

I could barely stifle a chuckle. This will be a long story, Ms. Prosecutor. I'm afraid I'm not sure if the beginning I'll give is the beginning you seek.

DATE: 4/11/2016

Third year of Shujin, huh.

People weren't joking when they said time flies by when you're having fun, though for me, I suppose the definition of “fun” is a bit skewed compared to others. I mean, stroking my ego and displaying moral superiority is quite enjoyable and beneficial for my personal school life. It's just what I normally do as part of the student council. This year will be no different, I'm sure, even under this rain.

The wet ground was nice to look at during a rainy day. I don’t why I immediately thought that at this moment, but I can’t help but to appreciate the scenery that I see every day. It's odd in a way because last I checked, seeing the same things over and over again is supposed to get tiring. Perhaps it's just tolerance on my part, but there truly is a pleasing aspect in knowing what to expect.

When things are easy, it's even easier to be selfish in peace.

From a distance, I saw a familiar boy and a noticeable girl. It didn’t come to me who that boy was,
but I noticed that the two lacked an umbrella and are standing under some cover. Strange. Most would be too concerned over being late on the first day and would just dash through the rain regardless. The girl even had a hoodie if she was concerned about being wet. Toting a clear umbrella, I approached them with interest.

“Ah, you two are from Shujin, aren’t you?”

Both of them directed their attention to me. “You’re… Akechi-kun?” The girl seems to be aware of who I am, not that I didn’t expect otherwise. The boy on the other hand… have I seen that smirk before?

“I see that the rain is quite troublesome on the first day of school and all. Regardless, school doesn’t wait for it’s students; you’ll be late if you don’t hurry. If you like, there’s spac–” Before I finished, a car passes by and stopped where we were. Suguru Kamoshida. Volleyball coach. Never heard a good thing about him outside of his gold medal and whatever achievements his team got. It’s needless to say that I plan to take him down like any other scum within the school, though it has been difficult to gather hard evidence given his influence. (Though that’s skimming over many details) At least I was given a choice whether or not I got to be in the same car as him. Obviously, it’s a no, not that it would make much sense. Not sure what the girl was thinking, or if she was even aware about the kind of person he is. The car went off.

Well, then again, it’s not like I can fit three people under the umbrella anyways. I turned my attention to the boy and just when I did, a loud, blond guy ran passed us and said some stuff that probably had a vulgar word or two. I don’t know, I tend to instinctively shut off voices like that. Listening to them tends to be unnecessary and tiresome.

“...What do you guys want? You plannin’ on rattin’ me out to Kamoshida?” I couldn’t help but to focus on his blond hair. He’s someone who looks like that should stick out, but what was his name again? Before I could respond to him, the boy next to me spoke first.

“Kamoshida? Who?” He doesn’t look like he knows who he is, but he’s wearing a Shujin uniform. That could only mean….

“Hey, you don’t happen to be the new transfer student, right? I see you’re a second-year... I suppose that makes me your senpai.”

“Oh, you are? No wonder you don’t know him.” The blond boy turned towards me. “And what about you, student council vice-president? I suppose you’ll go on like nothing happened as always? You’re going to keep your fans waiting.”

As much as I want to squeeze his neck (just a bit), I simply gave my usual smile and said, “I’m not sure I understand, but it’s true that we should hurry. The rain has let up a bit.” I walked past that vulgar boy and I could have sworn hearing him say something about me acting like I’m king of the castle. Ah yes, the obligatory hate that comes with popularity. Boy isn’t going going to go far that much salt in his blood. To be fair, he isn't alone in that regard. He'll have company.

And just then, my vision blurs and my ears ring. A headache now? I kept walking the usual path, but there was a slight wobble every time I took a step, but nothing works as well as a straight posture to hide it. Judging from the sound of footsteps behind me, it seems the two are following as well. Well, the fact that I can hear them and nothing else is pretty strange though. It wasn’t as if we were supposed to be the only one in the city, but even then, I wasn’t prepared for what I was about to see.

A castle. A strange medieval castle towered over the city. The words “Shujin Academy” was engraved at the entrance. This definitely where the school should have been and there’s no way the
school was renovated in such a fashion. It’s practically a completely different building, complete with
the purple ambiance and all. Wait, why is the sky purple? I turned around and saw the blond boy and
the transfer student in similar states of shock.

“Dude… is there a school event that I missed or something? Wouldn’t you know, Akechi?”

“No, there shouldn’t be anything like that happening. It’s supposed to be a normal first day of school
like any other year. . . .”

“Well, obviously something is not normal and I’m pretty damn sure this is the right way. Can we just
go inside and ask?”

I nodded. It’s suspicious and instincts tell me that it’s dangerous, but what else are we going to do?
Now that I look around, the people that were out on the streets are gone. No students are seen at the
entrance of the school. Just what is going on?

Personas, Palaces, and Shadows. Also, a talking cat, who is also human, but apparently isn’t at the
time being.

How ridiculous.

If the transfer student and the vulgar boy (Akira Kurusu and Ryuji Sakamoto, respectively as I found
out) didn’t say the same things, I would’ve been convinced that I needed a psychiatrist. But no, all of
that was real, apparently.

I could've sworn that this a premise straight out of a video game or manga. Would that make me the
main character? Ha, becoming a beloved hero. If it was possible before, it isn’t now. If anything, the
main character is the transfer student, who awakened his Persona (a bird?) and essentially carried us
out of that castle along with the cat. I still think I have seen him before today. Was it is in middle
school? I did move into Tokyo for my first year in Shujin. Huh.

Well regardless, we found ourselves back at Shujin (in it’s normal state thankfully) several hours late.
It was unbecoming as a member of the student council to be playing hooky with a couple of
delinquents and to put it simply, it took a lot of sweet talking to prevent this incident being a bigger
deal than what it actually is. Or at least, a bigger deal than what the incident was “realistically”
interpreted as. Obviously I couldn’t hide the fact that I was obscenely late, and I swear, the rumors
people come up with. No, I was not involved in a threesome with two other guys, thank you very
much kind sir, now please throw yourself in the nearest trash can ple-

God, my face feels uncomfortable as hell as I have to repeat the same lie over and over again.
Explaining this to Niijima will certainly be one thing that no one will look forward to. Sometimes I
wish she wasn't as sharp as she is.

Kurusu-san probably had it worse though. As I walked through the hallways, I noticed that news of
the transfer student spreaded like wildfire. No one was being subtle about it at all when it came to
their fears and contempt of a person who they’ve never met. I guess it’s natural to be wary of a
criminal record, but it’s almost unwarranted how they act like they think that the boy going to be
nothing but trouble when they themselves are just hoping to get good gossip material, sit down, and
be the usual parasites they are. Then again, I called that “fun.”

But my selfishness came in the form of hypocrisy, so is it alright to feel this way?

A tap on the shoulder made me turn my head around. Black, curly hair and horn-rimmed glasses
came to view. Akira Kurusu. And it’s that same smirk from before, I--
He steps forwards and before I can back off he whispered, “See me after school at the rooftop, pleasant boy.”

I take it back. I have a pretty normal definition of “fun.”

Chapter End Notes

The story will be written in first person from Akechi’s perspective for the most part. The dry tone should fit the context of the story I’ve set up, but hopefully it doesn’t feel too out of place given that’s Akechi that’s speaking.
DATE: 4/11/2016

The sky above the school was this sickly kind of orange that wasn’t quite pale, but wasn’t quite saturated. It’s almost surreal in a way on how ugly it looks-- it’s not bright with the inspiration of an artist, but it’s just enough to know that yes, the place I stand here is indeed reality. The whirring of machines, they’re irritating. The scent of the city, suffocating enough to feel it clog my lungs. I dislike being outside despite what I pretend to seem as I race along the track with this smile I stitched on myself during field day.

I’m just tired.

“...There you are.”

But right now, there is business to attend to, and I know damn well that the price of ripping this mask off is steep. As I walked toward Kurusu and Sakamoto, I tightened my grip on my bag. “Sorry to keep you waiting. I had a long talk with our student council president over… whatever transpired today.”

Kurusu nodded. “Understandable. Rumors don’t do us any favors.”

“Damn it, I swear someone is purposefully spouting shit about us for the kicks! And people actually believe it... god.” For once, I couldn’t help but to agree.

“It can’t be helped given my prior record. One minute I’m your perfect role-model senpai, and the next minute I’m suddenly this odd amalgamation of a delinquent, a star-crossed lover, and a conspirator with the Illuminati.” I sigh. It's hilarious. It should've been quite hilarious. “To be honest, even for a gossip-hungry crowd, it’s a bit much. It’s as if I killed a person or something, ha.” Granted, it was a bit of an exaggeration to generalize the students as that, but even now, the extent rumors can go surprise me.

“Well, at least you still have some faithful supporters. ‘Goro Akechi’s Fan Club’, was it?” Sakamoto slammed his arm down on the worn desk. He’s got a point, to be fair. “On the other hand, Akira and I pretty much on the same boat. A criminal record, was it? Everyone’s talking about it.” First name basis already, huh. However, Kurusu’s situation is indeed a curious thing. I turned towards him.

“I apologize if I’m stepping over the line, but I am curious to what happened for you to get charged with assault. I doubt that involves all of those unscrupulous things the others make it out to be, based on what I’ve seen of you so far.”

The transfer student shrugged and sat on a desk. “I saw a woman being threatened by these men. I told them to get out and shoved them. Some old man was among them and called the police. Told them to arrest me and they did just that without asking me about anything. The woman said I pushed them on the ground. Then I found myself in court.” His dark eyes darted towards the ground. “And
What!? That’s bullshit. And now people are talking shit about you for doing the right thing? Agh.” Sakamoto raised his fist and hit the desk beside him, eyes twitching. Albeit tempting, I restrained myself from doing the same. Still, I worry for Sakamoto. He’s going to pop a blood vessel one day.

“Mm. That woman from your story… to deliberately lie after all of that sounds odd. Chances are, some pressure was used to force her into a false statement. The police’s behavior seems to imply that the men were quite influential as well.” Corrupt adults. Not the first time I heard of them.


“Yeah, but nothing I can deal right away. I just have to prove them wrong at the end, and I got a whole year to do that.” Kurusu paused. “But enough of that. That castle from before, you guys remember?”

“Of course, as if I can forget King Ripped Mophead. Kamoshida… that guy acting all full of himself. No one says anything about him because he’s some medalist who took the volleyball team to nationals. That castle hits it home all ‘cause of that.” Sakamoto rage from before seemed to be less visible with him not lashing out on that poor desk, but the underlying poison when he said that coach’s name were by no means subtle. Relatable.

“Kurusu-san, you probably don’t know, but the rumors about Kamoshida being a predator and abuser is known around the school, and there are many reasons to back it up.” Well, as transparent as depressed, beaten up volleyball players are, that much should be obvious for anyone with a pair of eyes. “Unfortunately, I’m having trouble getting said hard evidence, even as part of the student council. The principal likes to cover things up for the school’s image and he’s careful. And as for the parents and the other teachers… they don’t care.” Kurusu nodded in understanding.

“Wait a sec.” Sakamoto stood up. “Gathering evidence? You talk as if you’re that guy that has been exposing people by posting all of their secrets on the bulletin boards. Don’t tell me that those fangirls were actually serious, right?”

“Fangirls are always serious, Sakamoto. Always.” I took a deep sigh at the two’s confusion. Some things are best left unmentioned. “And no, that’s not the case. On the contrary, I’ve been looking into that person as of now.” A lie, but there’s no way I’m blowing my cover because a certain loudmouth decided to offhandedly blab about it. I don’t look forward to expulsion, to put it simply. I prepared myself to give more explanation on why I’m not that person, but thankfully, Sakamoto nor Kurusu pushed on the matter.

“Kurusu-san, you probably don’t know, but the rumors about Kamoshida being a predator and abuser is known around the school, and there are many reasons to back it up.” Well, as transparent as depressed, beaten up volleyball players are, that much should be obvious for anyone with a pair of eyes. “Unfortunately, I’m having trouble getting said hard evidence, even as part of the student council. The principal likes to cover things up for the school’s image and he’s careful. And as for the parents and the other teachers… they don’t care.” Kurusu nodded in understanding.

“Wait a sec.” Sakamoto stood up. “Gathering evidence? You talk as if you’re that guy that has been exposing people by posting all of their secrets on the bulletin boards. Don’t tell me that those fangirls were actually serious, right?”

“Fangirls are always serious, Sakamoto. Always.” I took a deep sigh at the two’s confusion. Some things are best left unmentioned. “And no, that’s not the case. On the contrary, I’ve been looking into that person as of now.” A lie, but there’s no way I’m blowing my cover because a certain loudmouth decided to offhandedly blab about it. I don’t look forward to expulsion, to put it simply. I prepared myself to give more explanation on why I’m not that person, but thankfully, Sakamoto nor Kurusu pushed on the matter.

“Oh, well, point is, Kamoshida is bad news.” A pause. “I wonder if we can go back to that castle again.”

“Why would you want that? I mean, we just got out of there to, well, not die?” Kurusu questioned.

“Well… I don’t know. Just wondering. I mean…. Ah, it was probably just a dream.”

“I’m pretty sure three people having the same ‘dream’ and all three being late to class on the same day pretty much disqualifies the possibility that the castle as a figment of our imagination.” Assuming we were in our right state of minds and didn’t take anything we shouldn’t be taking, I swear to god. “That being said, if we’re going to investigate the matter, let’s do it at a later time. Aside from my own personal errands, I’m sure that we had enough of supernatural dungeon-crawling for today.”

“I guess so….” He stood up. “Well, that’s about all I wanted to talk about. See ya.” As Sakamoto
gave his farewells in the form of a lazy wave and disappeared from my field of vision, the touch of Kurusu’s hand on my shoulder halted my legs from following.

“Is there something you need?”

“Do you think it’s interesting?”

“Ah, about the castle? Of course, it’s beyond normal comprehension. I’m sure seeing a castle in the middle of the city, meeting a monster cat, and gaining powers as if you were in an anime aren’t everyday occurrences.” I smiled at my own joke. I’m funny. I try to be. Emphasis on “try”. Very big emphasis.

“Well, that’s a given, but I think I’m more curious about how you managed to keep your calm throughout that whole thing so easily.”

“Hmm.” Where is he going with this?

“It’s true that I’ve heard others say that it takes a lot to startle me. Though, I could say the same to you. You seemed to know what you were doing with that Persona you awakened.”

“Aww, I wouldn’t say that, honey. You’re making me blush.” Wait, what. “But in all seriousness, I do get this vague feeling that I’ve seen that castle before. Was it the same for you?”

“Oh? No, I can’t say I have, Kurusu-san.”

“Ah well. It’s probably just deja vu. And you don’t have to call me ‘Kurusu-san’. ‘Akira’ is fine.”

That’s a surprise. “Are you sure? We just met, after all.”

“Wait, seriously? I thought you were just playing dumb considering how transparently plastic you’re being.” He sighed.

“Uh, wha--”

“It’s me, Akira! Akira Kurusu.” His posture straighten as he starts making these wild gestures. “You know, your friend from middle school? The dude who stole your lunch money the first time we met and somehow managed to quell your rage before you threw your desk across the room? The guy who you consoled with as you cried a single tear when you were called a ‘pleasant boy’ by the school broadcasting team straight from the intercom? The one--”

“Oh, Kuru-- er, Akira, you can you slow down for a bit? I--”

“--who at your side when that girl who had a crush on you died from hanahaki.”

Silence.

Akira went on. “It’s only been two years since you moved to Tokyo. Honestly, seeing you like this, it should’ve been me who should be struggling to recognize you, not the other way around. A fanclub? Student council vice-president? Damn.”

In retrospect, I recall a boy like that. A seemingly well-mannered boy who spout brutal words about adults and students when he knew he and I were in private. Likewise, I wasn’t afraid to do the same because like I said, stroking my ego is fun, and what better way to do it is to talk shit about others? He’s was good confidant. What was he like? Unruly hair, pale skin, shit tier fashion sense, sharp eyes--
“Ah.” So that was him. Why didn’t I realize sooner? “And you just happened to be here on probation. It seems that we’re bound by the red string of fate after all.” Akira scoffed.

“No kidding. Not gonna lie, I was pretty hyped that I was going to enroll to Shujin, despite, ya know, the whole criminal record thing. You tend to look forward to things like that more when you know your reputation is in deep shit. Light at the end of the tunnel and all of that.”

Akira’s relaxed face transformed into a piercing gaze, directed not at me, but at the ground, as if it committed a grave sin. “But you’re different now. Was it because that girl? Something to do with this school? I don’t know what it is, but you can te--”

“I don’t want to hassle my mother like last time.”

Akira paused. “Is it worth it?”

“That’s for me to decide.”

“Right.”

The atmosphere became depressing as hell. Weren’t reunions supposed to be a happy thing? Then again, why am I applying sappy movie logic to real life? If it wasn’t so awkward, I would slap myself in the face for that thought alone. God, I just want to leave. Distraction. I need a distraction.

“By the way, I just realized why I didn’t recognize you right away.”

“What was it?”

“You had glasses on.”

“Didn’t have them after that bloody de-masking.”

“The outfit was too sexy to believe it came from your imagination.”

Silence again.

We stared at each other for a full 52 seconds (I counted) and as we did, Akira slowly inched towards the stairs down with a dark expression. He opened his mouth, only to close it, as if he’s holding back the many things he wanted to say. (Which, I can imagine, is a lot.) At the end of said 52 seconds, Akira settled with one word.

“Noted.”

And he left it at that. At that instant, my legs gave up and I ended up laying on the cold, hard rooftop surface. Thank god, he isn’t here anymore. The sky was slightly more tolerable to look at now. I’m at peace.

In retrospect, he probably figured out that I only said that because I didn't want to be near him soon after.
The next day came by as if almost nothing happened yesterday, but I knew better than to slip back into the normal routine as if things were okay as it is. Rumors are still flying around, of course, perhaps even at a more disturbing degree given that time has passed for it to spread even further. (Thankfully, it has yet to reach outside of the school. I would rather not get my mother involved with this ordeal.) However, aside from that, it seemed just the same as always. Teachers lecture, students text behind their backs, I lie and pretend I’m a typical, upstanding student, and everyone, consciously or no, internally prays to whatever god to keep trouble out of their lives. A bit late for me, but eh, doesn’t hurt.

Not that this god has been any good to me so far.

Sakamoto and Akira were already waiting for me after school. Right, the castle. I took the same route as before and I didn’t encounter it. Whatever the cause is, it wasn’t the specific path we took. Something else more supernatural was at play, most likely.

“I see we’re all here.”

“Yo. What took you?”

“The usual business. Finishing my duties. Lending teachers a hand. Just being an overall decent student.” I actually stalked Kamoshida between class periods and some time after school, but he didn’t do anything strange today. Perhaps he was in a good mood?

“Whatever.” Sakamoto’s face did no favors to hide his emotions. He’s quite transparent, isn’t he? I’m not sure if we need more people like him or not.

“Your displeasure amuses me. Don’t you do the same, fellow student?”

“Anyways!” His face is getting red. “About the castle from yesterday, I tried tellin’ myself that it was all dream, but I couldn’t do it.” Well, no shit. “I can’t act like nothing happened and it’s all connected to that bastard Kamoshida, after all, so I want to find out what’s up with that place, no matter what. You two in?”

Well, it wasn’t as if I had anything better to do, not to mention that I’m curious myself. The only downside is that the place is an unknown variable-- a danger, especially given what happened yesterday. Knowing that, I can’t doubt Sakamoto’s resolve since even he knows the risks. According to the more reliable teachers (since unlike the students, they weren’t swept up by rumors, or at least, not as badly), Sakamoto did something that led him to get kicked out of the track team. Considering that Kamoshida’s probably involved….
“Kurusu’s the only one who could deal with those ‘Shadows’, correct? If we’re going to go, he must come as well. Another life and death situation would be troublesome.” I didn’t miss the way Akira’s eyes and hands twitched.

However, Akira simply nodded. “Troublesome is one way to put it, but yeah, sure. What next?” I need to remind myself that I need to talk to him later in private. Something came up last night.

“Awesome! Let’s retrace our steps from yesterday.”

“I took the same path this morning. It’s probably not going to work.” Not that I’m particularly certain.

“Well... I don’t know. It’s not like I got any better ideas. Maybe we have to go together or do it at a certain time for it to work. Maybe there was a castle built somewhere and you just missed it?”

I didn’t bother responding to that.

“Okay, maybe that was kinda dumb. Then what was it?” Good question. I didn’t recall anything out of place until we reached the actual castle. Before I could voice my thoughts, Akira spoke up.

“You guys should check your phones.” Phones...? Without much thought, I did just that. Nothing was out of the ordinary, and judging from Sakamoto’s reaction, he thought the same. He isn’t saying that we should look up a castle in Tokyo, is he?

“Phone…. Hey, that reminds me-- didn’t you have a navigation app thingy on, back then?” I try to gather the memories back then, and I did remember Akira holding his phone. “I dunno if it was or not, but I heard stuff that sounded like one comin’ from your phone.” Oh. I see now.

“‘Returned to the real world,’ was it? Something like that was said when we got out of that place. Is there such an app installed on your phone, Kurusu?” He nodded and took out his phone for us to see. There was this odd-looking app with an eyeball as it’s logo. Moreover, it was glowing ominously, as if pressing it would be equivalent to signing a contract with the devil.

“It’s a cute logo, isn’t it?” Akira’s tastes are as questionable as ever, I see. “But seriously, it just showed up one day and I can’t delete it. It just comes back when I do.” That’s... odd. Now it really does feel like an anime. Main character mysteriously encountering an unknown world through supernatural means, and subsequently gain powers to fight an antagonistic force seeking to use it’s powers for evil. It’s up to the main character and his rag-tag group of friends to stop this evil force from taking over the world, or else doom will befall onto humanity.

In other words, this whole situation is quite exciting. However, before I had the time to get a good look at it, Sakamoto snatched the phone, pressed the app, and opened the search history. He showed off the words (I could make out “Kamoshida”, “Shujin Academy”, and “castle” before he quickly turned it back to himself) and did... something, which supposedly activated the navigation, judging from the robotic words spilling out of the phone.

The atmosphere became cold and my vision became tinted purple. Did this happen when we went to the castle? I recall a headache and the nauseous feeling I’m getting now does feel nostalgic. My vision blurs and space warps, causing Sakamoto’s voice to drown out.

At an instant, the pain goes away and I’m greeted with a familiar scene.

“Look! It’s the castle from yesterday!” Sakamoto marched right into the entrance and left with very little choices, I followed his stead. Once we stopped, I turned my head towards Akira.
“A-- Kurusu! Your clothes…!” The outfit Akira was wearing when he used his Persona came back, this time with a mask on.

“Ah, yes.” Akira looked like he’s suppressing a smile. If he was, he’s failing. “The ‘too sexy to come from your imagination’ outfit.” Shit, I should have known that comment was going to bite me in the ass.

“See if you’ll ever get me to cosplay as Robin ever again, Goro. It was destiny to be blessed with this sweet, edgy trench coat after years of suffering by your hand, as if I had become one with the sexy Batman inside of me.” Oh god, please stop. As he said those words, Akira held his right hand on his heart, and his left towards the sky. It was as if he thought that some deity will grant him something other than a fistful of jack shit to go along with his poetic bullcrap.

“Perhaps this time, my charm will reach a sufficient level to break down the walls of the young prince’s stone-cold heart, like a sword of fire gouging the flesh of a sacrificial animal!” Where the hell did that violent imagery come from? Thankfully, Akira didn’t continue being an embarrassment and turned his head towards Sakamoto, who was staring dumbly at him. He flashed that godforsaken smile and said, “You jelly?”

“I ain’t jealous!” So he is. “J-Just what’s goin’ on here!? This makes no effin’ sense at all…” Eff…? Child, no.

“Hey!” A cat-like monster peeked out nearby. Morgana, wasn’t it? “Stop making a commotion.”

“Ah... you!?”

“The Shadows started acting up, so I came here wondering it could be…” Our presence creates an immediate reaction out of the Shadows here? I suppose we are abnormalities who aren’t supposed to be here, but wouldn’t that make Morgana, well, a normality, despite being different from the other residents here? “…To think you three would come back to the entrance when you barely managed to escape. And acting like fools at that! I thought you of all people were better than that.” The sheer disappointment and anger on that cat’s face was almost hilarious. Akira just laughed. I didn’t know he had a hobby of making others cringe for the hell of it.

“I’m just having fun with this old friend of mine--” He looked at me in the eye. “--who should stop calling me by my last name.” Why is he patting my back? The impact of his palm wasn’t painful enough to sue him for assault at least.

“Wha- Wait what now?”

“I know him quite well, Ryuji. Ever since middle school.” I don’t like the look on his face… “I don’t know if you’ll believe it, but just between us, this guy--” He points at me. “--was wild back in the day. Like no joke, what he did was worthy of a suspension.” What is this guy, a gossiping teenage school girl?

“Wait, you guys knew each other!? I nodded, reluctantly so. “And no, I don’t believe it! It’s Akechi we’re talking about here-- the good-boy, student council wannabe idol? Suspension? The day that happens is the day I sell my house to Kamoshida.”

“You flatter me, Sakamoto.”

“T-That wasn’t a compliment! Argh….” Sakamoto pinched the bridge between his eyes.

“Well, I was surprised, too, but there’s no mistaking it.” Akira sets his arm over my neck. “This is the
guy who threw a chair at a classmate simply because he wanted to avert his eyes from the cold, hard truth of reality.” He shook his head in faux disappointment. His face is getting uncomfortably close. “I would know because it was me.”

“You're exaggerating-- it was just an eraser.” I pushed him away from me with little resistance. “To be fair, you said that Phoenix Rangers Neo Featherman was inferior trash compared to the original. That’s a completely justifiable reason to have a chair planted on your face anyways.” I somehow managed to prevent myself from calling Akira an asshat at the end there. No matter the situation, I can't move out of line. “But don’t worry. People grow up, Kurusu. I have moved on from my so-called ‘chair-throwing’ phase of life, even for people as insufferable as you.”

Sakamoto was understandably dumbstruck. “Uhh… are you sure you guys are friends?”

Akira’s face brightened. “Of course we are. Why, only friends would trust each other enough to not allow inexplicable pain--”

Screams rang out.

“--to damper their relationship.”

The screams continue.

“No torture was involved, I swear.”

“Yeah, I think I got that….” Sakamoto shook his head. “And shit, are those screams for real?!"

“That must be the slaves captive here,” Morgana piped. I can tell from his tired face that he’s just glad that we’re done. I wonder how many of his efforts went unnoticed.

“We saw other guys held captive here yesterday… I’m pretty sure they were from our school.”

“Most likely on the castle ruler’s orders. It’s nothing out of the ordinary; it’s like that everyday here. What’s more, you three escaped yesterday. He must have lost his temper quite a bit.” From Morgana’s words, Sakamoto’s pent up anger let out as he screamed bullshit and Kamoshida’s name, as he ran straight into the door. Unceremoniously, it didn’t budge.

“Don’t that isn’t going to open it you know… though it does seem like you have your reasons.” No kidding. Speaking of reasons….

“However, are they truly real students from our school? I think people would know if students just suddenly gone missing. Just what exactly is this place, Morgana?” Akira’s shenanigans almost made me forget the reason why we came here, sheesh.

“Glad you asked.” Morgana grinned. “Back then, I mentioned something about this place being a Palace, right? Well, this Palace has a ruler, who I believe you called Kamoshida. This is how his distorted heart views the school, which has manifested to what you see right now. As for the students, no, not really.”

“Kamoshida… Distorted…?” Sakamoto glanced at Akira, as if he found it necessary to confirm his confusion wasn’t unfound. “Explain it in a way that makes sense!”

Agh, I’ll just ignore him. “So you’re saying that Kamoshida’s thoughts somehow created this place we are right now. The students, in that case, are just what he perceives the students to be?”

“I see at least one of you understands.” Morgana seems pleased. “Yes, this world is completely based
on Kamoshida’s distorted desires. It’s directly connected to his perception to the world.”

“Directly connected? Does it work both ways then?”

“Ho ho, sharp aren’t you? Doing things here can indeed potentially alter Kamoshida’s cognition in the real world.”

“Wait wait wait wait wait.” Sakamoto struggled to keep up, it seems. “I don’t completely get it, but if this is Kamoshida’s mind or whatever, couldn’t we use this stop him from pulling shit in real life somehow? I mean, if we can do something about it.” That’s a surprisingly good point, actually.

“In that case… wouldn’t freeing the captives cause Kamoshida to perceive the students as something out of his control?” That seemed logical enough, assuming I interpreted the cat’s words correctly.

“Seriously!? Can that happen Monamona?”

“It’s Morgana! And as for that… it’s best if you see it for yourself.” Morgana’s resigned tone makes it seem like it won’t be that easy. I suppose even having access to this… ‘cognitive world’, one can’t solve the Kamoshida problem that easily. “I’ll guide you guys to the source of the voices if you want, but only if he comes along with us.” Of course, he points towards Akira.

“Mmkay.” As chill as always, I see.

“Let’s go.” His face was blank despite his earlier bravado, so I’m not sure if he completely understood the earlier discussion. I guess not since he didn’t have any questions, but wasn’t he at least shocked?

After going through the same path that we took to exit the castle, more specifically, the convenient hole in the wall, I was greeted with the cold air of the interior. The castle was about as unnerving as before, with it’s comically garish decor (particularly at the foyer) placed about. The dim lighting didn’t help either, hiding dark figures easily over every corner. Not that it didn’t work in our favor, given Morgana’s advice on ambushing the opponent.

Eventually, we ended up in what Morgana called a “safe room” (apparently because of the lack of distortion, thus weakening the ruler’s control) to wait out the roaming Shadows outside. The brief vision of a classroom within the room did no favors to raise any doubts.

“Before we leave this room, there’s something I’d like to ask.” When Morgana signaled to go on, I proceeded and said, “You seem to have experience with this world, but why is that? I don’t think we’ve made clear exactly who you are.”

“I’m curious about that as well. I mean, you’re a talking cat.”

“I’m not a cat! I’m human!” He mentioned it before, but it’s quite jarring to imagine what Morgana would look like in human form. Though, rather than jarring, perhaps it’s more accurate to say that I can’t imagine one at all. “I just lost my memories along with my original form. I think.” He sighed. “I know how to get it back though, which is why I’m investigating this place. I ended up getting captured at the end though…” Morgana’s words sounds genuine, but the tinge of uncertainty leaves room for doubt. Then again, there’s no use questioning what Morgana doesn’t know anyways.

“Amnesia… that’s usually used as a convenient excuse, but it’s not like I saw anything to suggest otherwise. I’ll take your word for it for now.” Retrograde amnesia should be curable under normal circumstances, but I can I say it applies to someone like Morgana? "What do you think, Kurusu?”

“Eh. It’s just as you said. If he has info, we might as well take advantage of it, ‘specially since we don’t really know anything about this place.” Akira steps forward. “Could you spill all the details about this place? We got time to spare for our good friend, Ryuuji.”
Sakamoto could only sputter at Akira’s last comment and Morgana took a deep breath for his explanation. It took some time, but at the end, I managed to get a clearer understanding of this world. Kamoshida’s desires, Akira’s clothes and will of rebellion, the navigation app, the cognitive world—if any of this information reaches to the public, it would either lead to dismissal or fear. A person tampering with your brain isn’t exactly the most pleasant idea to think about, especially without your knowledge. It didn’t hit me earlier, but should we be messing around with this place?

“If everything you said is true, the rumors of abuse around Kamoshida are also sure to be true.” But in that case, why hasn’t any witnesses stepped up...? Fear? Does just being an Olympic gold-medalist automatically grants such authority? That’s… not surprising, actually, knowing the principal. But even Sakamoto, who is particularly vitriolic with his speech against Kamoshida, has yet to take solid action against him. Even if he wasn’t the sharpest tool in the shed, he should have at least considered telling the police himself. No, perhaps it’s because he is Sakamoto is the precise reason why he can’t. Between a delinquent and an esteemed athlete, who would one rather believe? Was ruining Sakamoto’s reputation a deliberate action to keep him silent? Hmm...

“The school would just cover it up. Reputation and all of that. Seen him talkin’ with the principal before over some shady stuff. Didn’t you know about this, Akechi?”

“Hmm… I suspected Kamoshida but as I told you before, hard evidence hasn’t come up, let alone any testimonies. For example, when I snuck into the security office, any footage that would incriminate Kamoshida was discarded. Yes, the missing gaps are strange, but it wasn’t as if there was a consistent pattern. Something like that would just be chalked up as circumstantial at best without anything to support it. They’re being quite meticulous in that regard.”

“Wait… you went into the security office and watched old tapes?! Since when did the student council been able to do that?”

“Of course not. I made a lockpick to get in and confirm my suspicions.” Actually I made a replica of the master key, but again, no need to tell him that.

“Hmm…” Akira made a perplexed face and spoke in a low voice to no one in particular. “Goro’s proficiency level has improved. Maybe he’ll improve my own stats if we hang out.”

“Dude, we’re not in a video game.” Sakamoto sighed. “But seriously, is there really no way to get dirt on him? Like, I don’t know, set up cameras ourselves? Tape recorders?”

“Pretty sure that’s illegal. Even if we do catch him in the act that way, it may not be admissible as evidence in court, especially if he gets a good lawyer.” And knowing Kamoshida, he’ll certainly will considering he’s influential enough. “I thought of using my own phone catching him in the act though, but no opportunity has arisen, my duties aside. I even got caught by the principal once, so I’m pretty sure he’s doing a great job of keeping a close eye on me, even though I managed to smooth it over.” I sigh. “I don’t think you guys will do any better with your reputations, so the safest way to go is to convince someone to testify.”

“In other words, the people Kamoshida is abusin’, ya? If this is cognition or whatever, the guys here will have the same faces as the guys in real life. We just have to find out who they are and ask them once we get out!” Sakamoto's motivation became clearly visible on his face. “Let’s go!” And with that, the boy left the safe room leaving the rest to follow.

Chapter End Notes
wew still alive. barely. ___.

The chapter was originally going to be longer so that it covers everything all the way through Ryuji's awakening, but I think I delayed this long enough.

As some of you may have noticed, I've added the mystery tag. It's going to be a big focus of this fanfic as much of the context of this AU is left in the dark, so I'm curious on what you guys think along the way. The differences between this world and what happened in canon is one of them. Hanahaki will become more significant later in the story.

And on the side note, I forgot that Morgana didn't explain palaces and him being a human until Akira's second visit. orz Let's just say Goro asked questions along the way the first time around. :P
i think having a common enemy is enough to be comrades

Chapter Summary

So the two boys did their awakening sequence

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

DATE: 4/12/2016

“Why did you bring a model gun with you?”

As Akira and Morgana were caught up in their little tutorial session, I was a bit surprised of the utter idiocy Sakamoto is capable of. Yes, it’s technically not a real gun, but that doesn’t mean that one cannot get into massive trouble if one just waved a realistic-looking gun around, if not give someone a heart attack. What’s the point anyways? It’s not like he’s going to somehow paint himself as a martyr for the “student’s rights to bear fake arms.” Or maybe it’s for the thrill? Maybe that’s it, knowing him.

“W-wha, it’s just a toy, man! I ain’t plannin’ to kill people with it or something!” Oh, did the irritation show up in my face? I was pretty sure I was able to mask it decently enough.

“Alright, but that doesn’t change that it’s against school rules. You do know that you susceptible to heavy consequences with that thing, regardless of your intentions, correct? Try explaining it to the faculty and see where that leads you.” If they actually listened, Shujin wouldn’t even have half of the problems it has now. Granted, Kamoshida is large chunk of it and the principal doesn’t help either.

“Relax, I’m not going to just whip it out in the hallway or something.”

“It’s still against school regulations.” And the school is against you with your reputation.

“What are you going to do about it then, huh? Report me?”

“Nothing, just consider it as a warning. I’ll let it slide since it ended up being useful at the end, for whatever reason.”

“What was that?! I don’t need your pity!”

Do you want me to report you or not? “It’s not pity, it’s standard procedure. Verbal warning for the first offence. Other countermeasures for repeated offences. Surely you understand that much, Sakamoto?”

“I don’t remember too many of the teachers giving out a warning before. As far as what I can tell from experience, they just get straight to it.”

“That’s because they don’t care. I do. Hence why I’m telling you now because as I said before, try telling the faculty and you won’t even have a chance to defend yourself.”

As I said that, Akira and Morgana finished cleaning up the Shadows. Before Sakamoto could sputter
whatever he was going to say, I turned away from him and spoke. “About what just happened… how is this possible, Morgana?”

“This is the cognitive world. As long as our enemies sees it as real, the gun will work as what it looks like. It’s a good thing it’s realistic-looking.”

“…I don’t get it.” Of course, you don’t.

Morgana laughed (meowed?). “I wasn’t expecting some with your brains to understand. How about you, Frizzy Hair? Did you get what I said?”

“It’s simple logic.” If I wanted to, I would give Akira a high five. But I didn’t. It’s not like I would do anything as immature as celebrating Sakamoto’s distraught and rubbing it in his face. Though in all seriousness, Morgana’s explanation isn’t accounting for one thing….

“Wait, if it’s better havin’ something realistic, why do you got that slingshot?” Yeah, why is that? Not that I can see Morgana carrying a submachine gun with those stubby arms. Hell, how is he wielding a fucking cutlass with them? Agh. “And it was just as strong as a goddamn gun! What about your whole cognitive whatever?!”

“W-Well, umm…” Morgana sighs. “Fine, you can choose to understand it however you want.”

Perhaps it’s because Morgana is special. You have been wandering around here for a much longer time than we have, so maybe you’re an exception in some way.” Sakamoto muttered under his breath with an exhausted expression. I don’t even need to hear his voice to know that he called me a suck-up. Whatever, the cat seems happy.

“Oh, that makes sense! I am quite special. Mwehehe.” It’s almost sad how that’s an actually valid explanation.

I already knew that Kamoshida was far from a good man, but this sadly-named “Training Hall of Love” is something grotesque on its own.

Whippings for the sake of whippings. Inflicting pain for the sake of inflicting pain. The students before me is enduring this for what? A cruel man’s entertainment? It’s all cognition, yes, but even so, it begs the question on how far Kamoshida’s abuse has extended in reality. It’s almost comically villainous how the Shadows crack the whip in this dark dungeon. Sakamoto evidently felt similarly.

A few of the students in gym uniforms came into view. These guys… aren’t they from the volleyball team? “Why do you stay here?” I say. Something something about not wanting to be executed, they said. I haven’t heard of a string of murders or anything like that, so the so-called execution was most likely metaphorical in that sense. With Kamoshida’s influence, expulsion was probably what it meant, or something similarly devastating. To die or to get expelled are essentially the same in his eyes: he’ll never have to see them again. Makes enough sense.

“...Do you get it now?” I turned towards Morgana. “Even if you free them, they aren’t going to leave because Kamoshida doesn't view them as people willing to escape. He’s confident on whatever grip he has on the students.”

“I see. One’s cognition couldn’t be changed by such simple means. Is it because of the strength of that distortion?”

“If it wasn’t that strong, there wouldn’t be a Palace in the first place. Even if you somehow forced them to, there’s no guarantee that it would have permanent effect.” No guarantee? Sounds like it’s
more likely that Morgana isn’t sure, rather than him having innate knowledge that it’s impossible. Still, I rather not risk wasting time and energy on a maneuver that may not succeed.

“But there is a way to get by it, correct? You mentioned it before. Something we can do with these cognitive beings.”

“Well… yeah, sorta. I mean, these guys are products of his mind, not the other way around, but that doesn’t mean negotiating with cognitions is something that can’t impact a person’s mind. However… it kind of depends on the person and the cognitive being we’re talking about.” Morgana points at the slaves. “See, here you can see that each person has distinct faces. That means Kamoshida, at the very least, recognizes them as individual humans, but they are nothing more than slaves, practically objects. They are obviously subservient to the Palace ruler and he sees them this way because of his actions in the real world.”

“So what kind of cognitive being can be manipulated to change his actions in the real world?”

“It has to be a cognition that is out of the Palace ruler’s control, or rather what he perceives as out of control, whether it’s an equal or a superior. If he believes he has full control over something, it means it’s a victim of his distorted desires. He sees these victims everyday-- he knows he has control and the thought of them breaking free may even cause him to lash out in the real world.”

“I see… so if we were to hypothetically free the slaves, it could lead to an undesirable result, if anything at all. But what if say, there is someone of a dominant position in his mind that he sees everyday? Wouldn’t that same principle apply then?”

“Probably. It’s just that victims like the slaves here are almost certainly unmovable in terms of their position from the ruler’s mind, regardless of how they’re seen or how often he sees them. If the ruler perceives them as a person who has the potential to fight back, they’ll leave an impression that they are a threat. A threat isn’t a helpless victim, and thus not a completely subservient position. This ties in with the strength of the distortion required to have a Palace-- to see others as borderline inhuman objects when they’re not.”

“To sum it up, a cognitive being that can be manipulated to cause lasting changes have to be the following. First, it has to be perceived as a dominant or equal position over the ruler. Messing with a victim wouldn’t get the results we desire. Second, it has to be something far away from the ruler or perceived as an unknown variable. That way, it doesn’t contradict with the ruler’s knowledge, thus allowing the change to last. And finally, from what I assume, it has to leave a strong enough connection to his desires to manifest in the first place. Is that it?”

“Yeah, pretty limited, huh? And even then, it has to be something that the ruler sees is as a possibility of happening. Just like how he can’t just say another teacher from the real world is a dinosaur in this world. That’s why the ‘unknown variable’ condition is crucial. Leaves possible interpretations. Even if you want to eliminate a certain cognition, it’s useless if the ruler sees them the next day as normal.”

“Quite limiting and the effects are likely temporary.” Isn’t there something we can do? I thought a cognitive Principal Kobayakawa might be a good candidate at first, but despite his involvement, he probably has a solid position in Kamoshida’s mind, assuming he was even here. The entire method is a lot of effort with little rewards… that’s probably why Morgana seemed certain that it this isn’t the way to go. “Last question, is this something you remember from the information you already had, or are you speculating?”

“Hmm… I think it’s information I already had. When I tried to think about it, the answer just came to me, rather than me coming to my own conclusions through logic.”
“I see.” So there would be no point in debating now. If more information is needed, I’ll can ask later.

“Though… I can’t place my finger on it, but for some reason, I kind of doubt my own words.” Huh? Before I could question it, someone else beat me to it.

“Okay so. I didn’t get a lick of sense of what you two were talking about, but at the end you got nothing. Cat, just get to the point. Is there a surefire way that can get Kamoshida to stop what he’s doing in this world? Yes or no?” I just noticed that Sakamoto and Akira were silent for some time, probably trying to get the information to sink in.

“For the last time, I’m not a cat! I’m human!” Morgana just grumbles. “Did you get it, Frizzy?”

“I ain’t erudite, man. I’m not at that level just yet.” I get the feeling Akira’s just lying to not make Sakamoto feel like he’s the only one out of the loop, but whatever. “But yeah, what Ryuji said. I have a feeling there is something we can do here that will get what we want, but I don’t know what it is. Better to just tell us straight, Monamona.”

“It’s MORGANA! Jeez…you two...” Morgana grumbles even louder. “I can think of something else, but... I’m not sure if it’s something you wanna do.”

“Hmm? Why’s that?”

“The thing is… you can force a mental shutdown if you kill the Palace ruler’s shadow.” I felt a chill up my spine. Mental… shutdown?

“You mean that speedo-wearing King Kamoshida we saw in this world? That’s his shadow, right?”

“Yeah. If you kill him off just like Frizzy and I have with Shadows on the way here, it’ll force his Palace to collapse. The Palace represents his desires as a whole and no Palace can exist without a ruler. No ruler equals no Palace which equals no desires. Things is, that Shadow isn’t a simple cognitive being. It’s his literal inner self that embodies his suppressed thoughts. Killing him isn’t just eliminating the idea that he’s a king or who he is. You’re basically attacking his brain. It’s without saying that it can potentially lead to fatal results, if not a coma.” So rather than a product of his mind, it’s the mind itself. Agh… A wave of nausea stroke and as I attempted to hide it, Akira spoke.

“Hold up a second. You are saying that this world leaves us the chance to kill a person with little to no evidence that it was us, correct? That’s…” …not an option, is what he probably wanted to say. And yet, looking at the student slaves… it can hardly be called harsh training, it’s outright violence. An adult preying on students like this is arguably deserving of the death penalty, and from the other’s faces… they’re hesitant, but it’s an option to consider. Abuse… cannot be forgiven. Morgana reluctantly nods, despite it being a simple question of confirmation.

“...why don’t yo...ust...”

It can’t.

“Hey, Goro.” My eyes snapped back into reality. Akira. “You okay?”

“Uhh… yeah.” Damn, that came out sounding fake as hell. Thankfully, he didn’t comment on it.

“Anyways, something about that seems off. It’s just a feeling but… don’t you guys get it, too?”

“What do you mean?” Morgana asked.
“I don’t know… for some reason I feel like you weren’t supposed to say that.”

I spoke. “I’m afraid I don’t understand either, Kurusu. I mean, I understand if you think it’s morally wrong…” Sakamoto, however, is silent, as if he wants Akira to continue.

“Nah, that’s not it. I don’t know how to explain it, but for some reason I expected you to say something different. No, wait…” Akira paused in thought and started speaking moments later. “It’s not the entire response that’s the problem. It’s when you said stuff about ‘causing a mental shutdown by killing the Shadow’. I… felt like I expected a different method than that to come from you.”

“Hmmm…” Morgana stood there deep in thought.

Sakamoto, on the other hand, nodded in agreement. “To be honest, I get the same feeling. Like, the part where you said that the Palace represents desires or whatever makes sense, but… I don’t know. Mental shutdowns sounds kind of extreme coming from you.” Even though we met him recently…?

“Well… I do get the feeling there is something else on the top of my tongue-- a different method that I was going to propose, but I ended up drawing a blank so I proposed something else. Maybe with more time, I’ll remember what it was…” Just when I was going to put in my own thoughts, loud crashes echoed through the hall and gruff, inhuman voices bellowed towards our direction.

“There they are! The intruders!” Shit, there are way too many for Morgana and Akira to handle…!

“Crap! I got caught up and lost track of time! Let’s scram, now!”

Our dash for the exit was sloppy to say the least. Under normal circumstances, we would make our way through stealth, but their defenses got more condensed. It wasn’t enough to get us surrounded, thankfully, but the numerous battles has taken it’s toll on Akira and Morgana, despite the experience gained. The guards will be on alert for awhile.

Eventually, we made our way back into the foyer, the same one we passed earlier. And there… it was him.

“...You knaves again? To think you’d make the same mistake again. You’re hopeless!” I didn’t think of it before, but now that I have seen him again without the initial shock, even his voice sounds distorted. As if… this is something imitating Kamoshida’s form, but I know better than to jump to that conclusion. From what Morgana said, this is indeed Kamoshida, albeit with exaggerated behavior.

“The school ain’t your castle! I didn’t need to memorize their faces to know that you’ve been treating the volleyball team like shit. You’re goin’ down!”

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

“The hell are you gettin’ at??” Could this be…?

“I speak of the ‘Track Traitor’ who acted in violence, ending his teammates’ dreams.” Traitor…? Another painful throb. It’s just like back then with Morgana… “Oh, I can only imagine the pain of the others who were dragged under with your… selfish act.” Selfish act… I… I… why do these words…? I-I need to brea…the… I force myself to take deeper breaths, but each time, a certain weight in my throat just seems to make my voice wheeze and my lungs heavy.

“Ngh…” Sakamoto… is he the same as me? No… no. What am I talking about? I… haven’t betrayed anyone. No one… Even as these thoughts echo through my head, time doesn’t seem to
slow. Another throb.

“Violence?” Akira doesn’t seem to notice that I’m kneeling... thank god. He won’t have to look at me. If he doesn’t look at me, h-he won’t...forgive... no, nononononononono

“What a surprise. So you’re accompanying him without knowing anything at all? He betrayed his teammates and crushed their hopes, yet he still carries on as carefree as ever.” No... I didn’t. I didn’t betray anyone...! I’m... I’m not...! I--

“This is the end of your justice.”

“That’s not true!”

...

“...Akechi?” Ah. It was me who screamed.

It was me.

Damn, I don’t need pity, especially not from Sakamoto. I don’t even understand why I screamed. This has nothing to do with me! Nothing at all!

“Goro, are you okay? Can you hear me?” Akira. Now that I’m trying to see what’s in front of me, it’s all blurry and spotty. Something wet just dropped on my knees... water? Am I crying? No! There’s no reason for me to...!

“I can hear you...*hic*... just fucking fine, Kurusu!” I don’t want to be like this. Just look away...!

“Dude... you don’t look fine.”

“N-No shit, Sherlock! What gave it away...?” Unfortunately, the ability to be sarcastic wasn’t enough for Sakamoto mind his own damn business. He inches forward, holding his arm towards me. Unwilling to leave. Unwilling to touch. Make up you damn mind! Why doesn’t my voice sound normal? Because of that, he just had to keep staring at me with that dumb expression of his. It’s frustrating. I hate it and I want out.

And yet, I can’t even muster the energy to even stand. I can’t even bring myself to care how much my arms hurt from how hard my fingers grip on it. I can’t even say anything coherent anymore. I...I just....

“...ha. Hahahahaha!” All attention went straight to Kamoshida. His voice... doesn’t it sound even more warped? “Oh my god! This is absolutely hysterical!”

“What are you on about now!?”

“To think the celebrated prince of the Student Council is on his knees and having a panic attack...! If I knew he was this vulnerable, he wouldn’t be such a pain in the ass to deal for these past years. If only the rest of the student body saw you like this... you won’t be much of a heroic prince then, huh?”

“Don’t tell me... the strange rumors at school were your doing?”

“Being jealous of the popular kid in class? That isn’t how a teacher acts. You’re more like a child who can’t get what he wants!” This is pathetic... I should be the one fighting my own battles... Not a cat and some delinquent.
“It wouldn’t be much of a problem if he just spread the good word about me. What did I get instead? Rumors that he’s the one snooping in other people’s private matters and exposing them to the public! They’re just rumors of course, but hey, ‘leave no stone unturned’, right?”

“Bullshit! People don’t exist to just worship others! Especially not assholes like you!” You don’t even understand why I’m like this… why do you even bother?!

“Hah, people like you would hardly understand the value of being loved by me. You fools are going to end up dead, all because you decided to poke your noses where it doesn’t belong. ...How unlucky.” Kamoshida turned away from us and towards his guards. “Go. Kill them all. Don’t sully my castle with garbage.” He walked out and the Shadows come forth.

“Goddamnit…”

“Ryuji, move! You too, Goro!”

“Take care of him, ‘kay?” Akira’s touch left and for some reason, it felt like the room got 20 degrees colder. Instead, I’m graced with Sakamoto’s presence. It didn’t feel good. It’s foreign. Strange.

“Fuck off.”

“I never I thought I would ever say this, but watch your effin’ language.” Sakamoto lays his right hand on the back of my neck and starts rubbing circles. In a much softer voice, he said, “Much less to you of all people.” I scoffed at the irony, but for some reason, it felt like I choked on something. The back of my tongue tastes bitter.

“I don’t know why… that happened, but if you wanna talk about it, you can. I’m not the best at this sort of thing though, so if you don’t wanna, you don’t have to.”

“...Just shut up.”

“I guess that’s fine, too.”

My vision starts to get sharper. Must’ve been because my tears has dried at this point. I still find myself shaking just a bit, but at least now, I’m actually aware that I am. The black goat shadows were numerous and the two Persona users are at a disadvantageous position. The eiga spell Akira unleashed did insignificant damage compared to heavy hits the Shadows deliver. Lacking in speed, there was no way for Morgana to heal the two of them fast enough. Perhaps I shouldn’t be surprised I’d find them on the floor-- defeated.

And yet, I couldn’t do a thing about it?

How idiotic and sad it is.

“Rgh… You piece of--” Shadow Kamoshida pressed his foot harder on to Morgana’s back. Sakamoto is on his knees. Isn’t it the same for you? That you couldn’t do anything to help the situation? I ask these questions meant for him, and yet I never said it out loud.

“I bet you guys came here on a whim and ended up like this. Isn’t that right?”

“No…” Why did we come here? Curiosity? I don’t remember....

“What a worthless piece of trash, getting emotional too quickly… How dare you raise a hand at me.” A prime example of hypocrisy, I said to myself. “Though it was only temporary, have you forgotten my kindness in supervising track practice?”
“Wasn’t no practice-- it was physical abuse! You just didn’t like our team!” Ah. So that’s how it is.

“It was nothing but an eyesore! The only one who needs to achieve results is me!” Is that why you went after me? Morgana hit it close to home, huh? “That coach who got fired was hopeless too… Had he not opposed me with a sound argument, I would’ve settled it with only breaking his star’s leg.”

“…What?” I looked at Sakamoto’s face-- his eyes widening in shock. The truth that happened back then was…. I feel pity welling up inside me. A prime example of hypocrisy.

But is that a bad thing?

“Do you need me to deal with your other leg too? The school will call it self-defense anyway!” Would the school do that? The principal would… wouldn’t he? I grit my teeth. This man...

“Dammit… Am I gonna lose again…?” I tried to speak. What are the words that I need to say? “Not only I can not run anymore… the track team is gone too ‘cause of that asshole…!”

“…Sakamoto…!” Shit, as if yelling his name is going to do anything.

“So that’s why…Ergh!” Morgana winced in pain. I need to do something…. What is it? What is it? What is it? What is it?

“Once these two are dealt with, you’re next. I’ll save the best for last… hahahaha!”

“Ryuji! Goro!” Morgana’s plea didn’t quite reach my ears. After all, what Kamoshida just said….

“…The best…?” I questioned.

“Oh right, you don’t know. I suppose even the supposed snitch in Shujin isn’t omniscient, ha!”

“Just get to the point, you piece of shit.” I snarled. No need for formalities with this man.

“I know about your little secret.” I froze. “Shujin’s prince in shining armor? It was all a lie wasn’t it? You did a good job of hiding it, but at the end, you were just trash like the rest of them.” I see. He had his eyes from me from the very start….

“Don’t say a damn word about that…!” Akira’s voice. Right, he would know. He was the only one I told.

“Silence!” Akira groaned from the applied pressure on his back. “I found out awhile ago actually. You remember, don’t you? The rumors of Goro Akechi being a bastard child throughout your years?”

“…I remember about that.” It seems that Sakamoto has calmed down when the topic shifted towards me. “Heard about it here and there, but looking back on it, it died off pretty quickly didn’t it?” Memories of my first and second year at Shujin seemed to flash through my eyes. The clean image I made for myself. The rumors. The whispers. Desperation. The money. The favors I did to hide it all….

Let’s stop remembering.

“Your family history was leaked-- out in the open for everyone to see…! And yet, not a damn thing happens to you-- a stubborn thorn on my side, you were. You were nothing important-- you shouldn’t be anything at all and yet, you…!” He hasn’t figured it out, huh.
“You don’t know a damn thing do you…?” I found myself speaking. What do you call this? A rush of adrenaline? A burst of courage?

“What was that?!”

“You don’t know a damn thing, is what I said, you asshole. It’s the same with Sakamoto. You don’t know what to do with that fame of yours, so you push yourself around because you could…! Because you felt like you earned the right to trample on others!” I took a deep breath.

“But really, you’re just an empty son of a bitch, aren’t you? I suppose I can understand in that regard.”

“Shut up! I--”

I didn’t let him continue. “Sakamoto…!” I forced my legs to stand. They still shake a bit, but I think that’s enough. “You understand, right?! What we need to do right now!” Yes… it’s the same isn’t it? He was thinking the same things as me right now, isn’t he?!

“You’re right… Everything that was important to me was taken by him… I’ll never get’em back!”

“Stay there and watch! Look on as these hopeless scum die for nothing because they sided with trash like you.”

“No… that’s what you are… All you think about is using people… You’re the real scumbag, Kamoshida!”

Kamoshida looks back at his guards. “What are you doing? Silence them!”

“Stop lookin’ down on me with that stupid smile on your face!”

And with that, a burning sensation enveloped me, but that wasn’t what I was paying attention to.

“Your wish for justice has lead you down this path.”

A loud voice that rang into my ears was nauseous-- irritating, even. But it wasn’t harsh. Kind, but solid. Like a parent.

An ideal parent, I corrected to myself.

“You wore your mask tightly for the sake of justice, for the sake of yourself-- your survival.”

Even now, is it for my sake any more? A mask manifested on my face. I don’t want this on me anymore-- this punishment I put myself through for no other reason to avoid pain…!

“But that isn’t enough. There’s more to life than your ideals isn’t it? Your justice doesn’t end in self satisfaction, does it?”

Self satisfaction is a part of it. A large part of it. But maybe-- just maybe, I can selfishly save these people here, can I? I’m allowed to do that, can I?!

“Call out to me and I’ll be your power to smite the evil you see before you!”

Summoning the strength in me, I tore the mask away, anticipating the pain that came along with it. The warmth of the flowing blood on my face was the first thing I noticed, and after all, its fresh scent. And after that, a shining blue fire.
Right beside me, I saw the same bright blue that surrounded me where Sakamoto is standing. And beside him was a large skeleton riding ship. “Right on… wassup, Persona…” He clenches his fists. “This effin’ rocks! Now that we got this power, it’s time for payback…” He turned his head towards me. “You ready?” That smile he’s making right then… I couldn’t help but to return it.

“Ha… you didn’t need to ask.”

“Alright then… bring it!”

“Ngh… don’t mock me you brat!” The guard melted into something that resembles a cavalryman. After a quick glance towards Sakamoto-- no, Ryuji, we shouted in unison--

“Blast him away… Captain Kidd!”
“Strike them down… Robin Hood!”

Chapter End Notes

oof school is starting soon

I basically made that cognitive psience stuff up for this story in particular. I did consider canon material to a degree, but I doubt that this is the case in canon, if that makes any sense.

Also, I hc that Goro got Robin Hood first and then Loki.
i have a strange impulse to be honest, but also to lie through my teeth

Chapter Summary

The kids overshare their dark backstories. Kind of.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

DATE: 4/12/2016

“...How ‘bout that!?”

The Shadows swiftly fell to the relentless attacks. With two more Persona users in addition to Akira and Morgana, the guards protecting Kamoshida stood no chance despite the numbers and our inexperience. Is it because there is a sudden, temporary boom of strength, or is it because the Shadows here are weak? Regardless, if the Shadows then are around the same level as the others, navigating this place would be much easier.

“Whoa… so Ryuji and Goro had the potential, too…. ” Our new found strength was indeed something to behold. It is hard to imagine just anyone awakening this power, and to be fair, I doubt anyone would just gain the ability to access the Metaverse. Though that begs the question, why were we chosen? What kind of whimsical god do we have-- handing out this power to handful of high school students because he felt like it?

I look down on my outfit and compared to Akira and Ryuji, I can already tell the differences. A flashy, all-white princely outfit in contrast to Akira’s edgy cosplay (I take everything I said about that outfit from earlier) and Ryuji’s punk-like attire. If this is meant to represent our so-called will of rebellion, I suppose it’s accurate. Being loved by the people as you rebel against evil openly is much more satisfying than lurking in the shadows-- not that the latter didn’t have its merits.

Plus, the notion of someone like me being anything close to a prince is practically rebellion in itself.

“Even if you apologize now… I ain’t forgivin’ you...!”

“I told you that this is my castle. It seems you still don’t understand…” At those words, a woman with prominently large pigtails walked in. The scantily clad outfit… it reflects of what I’ve heard about her, but… given this is Kamoshida’s mind, it’s almost certainly exaggerated, if not false.

“Wh-- Takamaki!?” Does he know her personally?

“...Ann… Takamaki....” Given her appearance, it’s hard to miss her in the sea of generic students. Unsavory rumors aside, there’s not much known about her aside from her being quarter-American and that she is frequently seen with a female member of the volleyball team. Perhaps she’s worth looking into if the “slaves” end up being useless as I expect them to be.

“Oh…! Wha… What a meow-velous and beautiful girl...!” God, do I have to deal with Morgana’s thirst now? Wait, a cat crushing on a human...wha? Right then, Cognitive Takamaki approached Shadow Kamoshida, hanging off of his arm like some decoration. If this is how Kamoshida sees her… then the other rumors other than physical abuse are likely true as well. Now that I think about
it, wasn’t there a rumor that Takamaki is dating Kamoshida? I can’t imagine anyone willing to throw themselves at him— even yesterday where he invited her for a ride, she was most certainly hesitant. Students obey Kamoshida because they either fear him or ignorant of his true nature, not because of he’s a legitimate admirable person.

“...Just... what’s going on!?”

“Something seems off...” Akira... seems to be a bit quieter than usual.

“Y-yeah, now that you mention it... but why is she even here...!?”

“I can think of some reasons... nothing pleasant,” was what I settled on saying. Kamoshida then grabs the cognition by the chin, gazing at her like she’s some piece of meat. *Ew. He would be the kind of person who would disregard the taboo on teacher-student relationships wouldn’t he? I already knew that, but... would he do it by force?* God, I need to stop thinking this train of thought. I can practically feel the bile being tempted to run up my esophagus.

“Ugh... hey! Let go of her, you perv!”

“How many times must I tell you until you understand? This is MY castle— a place in which I can do whatever I want. Everyone wishes to be loved by me. ...That is, everyone besides slow-witted thieves like you.” *How delusional is this man? All wrapped up in his agenda, he can’t even see through the thinnest of masks. I knew he wanted to be loved, but to actually believe that people want to be loved by him in reality?* It was difficult to restrain the humor seep into my face, despite my previous disgust.

“Takamaki! Say something!"

“Calm down, Ryuji! It seems this girl isn’t the real one. She’s the same as those slaves-- a being made from Kamoshida’s cognition of her!”

“Are you jealous? Well, I’m not surprised. Women aren’t drawn to problematic punks like you. Even that false prince by your side will fall down your level soon enough.” *Some girls like bad boys, but I’ve never heard one who is lusting over a mop.* Though, there is one point of concern that he brought up. I wish I could say that he underestimates the extreme loyalty fans have, but I can’t say it’s unbelievable if people came to believe his words.

However, it shouldn’t be an issue since I struck a deal with a few people to suppress rumors regarding my background and spread counter rumors to do so. (Fear has prevented some to discredit Kamoshida directly, though, and for those who did, their efforts were generally ineffective.) It’s been successful for the past two years after all... but it’s much harder to cover up the truth than debunk something that’s false if you lack the resources. There’s no guarantee that the defenses that we made will last, if not wiped out if they’re traced back to me. After all, the current rumors are running rampant, to the point where my image is being tarnished with lies. Hopefully it will die off, especially from how ridiculous it is....

If not, I’ll probably have to ask that person later. I’ll just have to cross my fingers that it doesn’t get out of hand.

“Clean them up this instant!” At Kamoshida’s orders, more shadows started to gather. Even the ones that were patrolling back at the Training Hall of Love are rushing in.

“We’re outnumbered... Let’s scram before we get surrounded again!”

“We’re not going to do anything and just run!?” *Holy shit, are we seriously going to have this*
“Sorry Ryuji, but it’s in the best interest of the team to not die and rot in this gaudy castle, so grab your ass and run!” I yelled.

“Thank god you’ve got a level head,” Morgana remarked.

“Ngh… fine. We’ll expose what you really are, no matter what! You better be ready for us…!”

“Hahaha! I was beginning to get bored of torturing the ones here! Come at me whenever you want, if you don’t care about your life! Haaaahahahaha!”

“Ignore him. Let’s go!”

“We need to get back to the real world! The Shadows back from the hall are going to come, too!” We ran through the foyer, through the hall, and exit from the infiltration point.

You have returned to the real world. Welcome back.

“Weew, we somehow got out of that one… h-hey where did this cat come from?” Just then, a black cat leaped onto a box turned towards Ryuji.

“For the love of god, I’m HUMAN. Do I need to spell it out for you until you get it?” Oh. That voice must be...

“B-but how?! I mean…”

“Forgive him, I wasn’t under the impression that you couldn’t go out in the real world so freely either, nor were we expecting your new appearance.” That much was the truth. Hell, a talking cat is still odd to the eye, even with our… past experiences. Upon closer look, the resemblance between this cat and Morgana from the cognitive world is noticeable: bright blue eyes, black fur, and a smartass mouth.

“Well… when you put it that way, I guess I can let it slide. Just so you guys know, I don’t live in Palaces or anything. I can move in and out of Metaverse like you guys.” In retrospect, I suppose that should have been a given. Living with shadows crawling around… even with safe rooms, that seems a bit nerve wracking. That leaves a question though.

“You can do that without a phone? Does that mean you can go into Palaces without knowing the name, place, and keyword?”

“Nah, I need to know that information to get in like the app asks for. I mean, that sounds like it would be convenient, but wouldn’t it be bad if there are two different people with Palaces and have the same name? Or even the same location? It would just get confusing.” True. I suppose it would be wise to think of the requirements as necessities rather than restrictions.

Sakamoto smiles. “So you can travel between worlds with a phone and you look like this in the real world. Are you suuuuure you’re human?”

“Hmph, I look like this in the real world, but I promise you, I’m human. I’m investigating how to remove the distortion within me to get my true form back.” Morgana cleared his throat. Do cats do that? “Anyways, it’s time for you to cooperate.”

“With your investigation, I presume?”
“Wait, we didn’t agree to this, did we?”

“Well, that’s why I was super nice about teaching you idiots everything. Don’t tell me you aren’t going to repay me for my hospitality, are you?” It shouldn’t be surprising. He didn’t have to help us, so unless he was your standard good Samaritan, it’s only natural to expect a favor in return. In terms of kindness, Morgana… isn’t at the top of the list at the moment.

“I think it’s only fair to help him out. My only condition on this deal is that we settle the Kamoshida issue first before anything else. It’ll be troublesome to work between the two, especially with school and all. After that, it’s fair game as long as we’re free to do so. What do you think, Kurusu?”

“Akira.”

“Huh?”

“Call me Akira. You’re even calling Ryuji by his given name. Why not me, your bestest friend ever?” Oh. I forgot that I called Ryuji by his given name on instinct.

“Kurusu.”

“Akira.”

“Kurusu.”

“Akira.”

“Kurusu.”

“A-ki-ra.”

“Kurusu-san.”

“What is this childishness.” Morgana’s tiredness is showing through his voice. Not that he tried to hide it.

“Fine, Akira. What do you think?”

“I think it’s alright. I wasn’t plannin’ on it, but like you said, I guess it’s only fair. Only one more condition to add on what you already got.”

“What is it?”

“Morgana lives with me. I say this as the self-designated leader.” Oh right, you like cats. Of course. “Oh, and don’t worry about the probation officer. I can tell he’s a softie at heart.”

“Ha, well, it’s not like I have any issue with you being the leader nor do I want to take care of Morgana. Rather have you than this guy.” Ryuji points at me.

“I don’t have an issue with either, so don’t act like I’m going to compete for it.”

“Hmm? I thought you were the kind of guy who likes being the leader.” So you admit that you were trying to displease me. Great.

“There’s a reason why I chose to run for vice-president rather than facing Nijima-san. I don’t mind leadership positions or competition, but I’m aware of who is best for the job in a group.” Or rather, I didn’t find the need to compete for it in the first place. I turned towards Morgana. “Are those terms
“Well, I don’t like that Kamoshida bastard anyways, so yes, I accept.” Morgana leaped into Akira’s bag. “Your house better be good.”

“Before that, you guys wanna get some ramen? I’m tired and starving.”

With no objections, we went off.

The ramen shop was well kept and it had it’s own modern appeal to it compared to a cart, or the such. Money wasn’t something I had much of, given that I can’t afford too much as allowance. Not that there is many people I’m willing to go out with for lunch or things I need to buy in particular.

The food was satisfactory, though Ryuji’s messiness is a less than pleasant sight. Akira, as always, is seemingly normal and calm. Sometimes I wonder if he has a split personality, but after knowing him for so long, his calm exterior is nothing more than a facade to avoid unnecessary trouble. His true personality is something I could only describe as a ridiculously silly snark, no doubt.

“You know, now that I think about it, we’re more similar than I thought.” Ryuji seriously needs to stop eating with his mouth full.

“What do you mean?”

“Just keep calm… don’t cringe…

“To be honest, I thought that you we just some stuck-up prick. I mean, you had it all: good grades, good looks, a fan-club, etc. Everybody just seems to like you. Guess I can’t judge a book by its cover, huh.”

Oh right. Kamoshida’s opened his fat gobb about shit he had no business with.

“I would greatly appreciate if you just forget what happened in the Palace.”

“Easier said than done, but you don’t wanna talk about it, you don’t have to.”

“That phase again… agh. It’s too late to take it back.

“Right….” I took a sip of water. “And you know what? It’s fine. Like you said, you guys aren’t going to forget that any time soon so I might as well elaborate rather than leaving it to your imagination. I haven’t told you the whole story, right Akira? About moving to Tokyo, attending Shujin-- all of that stuff.”

“If you’re alright with that, sure. Not gonna lie, I was curious about the details. I mean, it wasn’t that sudden since I knew you were going into high school, but still.”

“I see. Where to begin then…. I guess I’ll start with me being bastard and all of that since you’re here, Ryuji. Fill you in on the information Akira already knows.” I finished off my drink.

“So, you’re going to overshare your tragic backstory?”

“Shut up, Akira. Anyways, what Kamoshida said about my background was more or less true. Never knew my father well and I know my mother never married. You can imagine that alone was a hassle with all people harping on us once it got out.” I chuckled humorlessly. I’m already skipping many details with that sentence alone.

“To be honest, I haven’t really met a person like that before, but isn’t that like, completely out of your control?”

“The stigma still exists, especially with a system that doesn’t do a great job convincing society
otherwise. I didn’t really care about it for most of my life. Or at least, I tried not to. There wasn’t really anything I could do about being an illegitimate child, so I didn’t bother to pretend or assimilate with the popular crowd or anything like that. I didn’t know how to deal with them at first, but I managed to get around bullies and all of that through middle school. They are surprisingly predictable once you get the hang of it.” And by the hang of it, that means memorizing their schedules by heart and forcing them to be in the vicinity of a teacher whenever they approach me, but that’s aside the point.

“That’s when I met you, huh,” said Akira.

“Yeah, as sad as it sounds, you were my only friend in middle school. I was fine with that, honestly. Better than thousands of superficial friends, I thought.” In retrospect, that mindset was probably just me wanting to elevate my self-worth, but you know what? It worked. “Plus, at the end, you paid back the money you stole, so it was all good.”

“But you had to move out, right? Why the sudden change in Shujin?”

“It’s because of my mom. I don’t know why she didn’t just throw me in an orphanage like the many other single parents out there, but she didn’t. So, I felt it was only natural to help her whenever I could.”

“I can definitely relate to that…” Ryuji muttered. “But wait, aren’t orphanages for, well, orphans?”

“You’d be surprised at the number of kids who have living parents and live there. Parents can just drop them off there if they don’t want to bother taking care of their kid. Didn’t find out until I read an article on whim, and I’d hardly compare it to a decent daycare or hell, an actually decent orphanage.”

“The hell…”

“It’s just one of the many problems in society. That aside, one day my mom came home late all beaten up. She drinks sometimes so smelling like alcohol wasn’t necessarily odd, but she was clearly sober this time around. Just tired. It didn’t take long to figure out that she was working some… questionable jobs to get money to support us and that night was particularly rough. That’s really when things gone to shit.”

“What did you do then?”

“The problem was because my mother was a single mother living with me, a bastard child. That stigma isn’t going to go away and my behavior at school doesn’t help. After all, even though my grades were okay, my behavior isn’t too far off from the stereotypical outcast and it doesn’t take much for word to spread around. Helping my mom with chores wasn’t enough, you know? There isn’t much a middle schooler can do alone to hide it, so I had to get help.”

This time, Akira spoke up. “Oh! Was that the reason why you asked that girl…?”

“Yeah.”

“What are you guys talkin’ about?”

“There was this girl who had a crush on me for some reason. I don’t know if it’s because she liked bad boys or whatever, but I knew she had connections. Her parents own a pretty sizable food chain, so I asked her if she could convince them to get my mom a decent job. She agreed, of course.”

“What was her name?”
“Elena Toromi. She was half-Canadian, but I thought she was a pretty average girl overall. I wasn’t particularly confident since I would have to assume that her parents are soft enough to spoil her a bit, but she managed to do it. It wasn’t high-paying or anything, but it was better than any other job my mom had ever since she was fresh out of college. It was just some generic office job, but again, a big improvement.”

“Did they find out about about you?”

“I told Elena-san to keep it under the wraps if she could, but I don’t think she was able to. However, just like Akira, they didn’t mind too much that I was a bastard. I don’t know if it’s because they truly didn’t think too much about it or if I was some exception in their mind, but I was willing to take it. That was naïve of me….”

“It didn’t work out at the end, huh.”

“Yeah. Elena-san died from hanahaki. She was hiding it pretty well, but I found out about it not too long before she passed away. The doctors said that she refused treatment to the end, despite her parents wishes. Claimed that she ran away several times and she died before they properly treated her.”

“ Damn…I don’t know much about love, but it isn’t worth dying over it. It’s like… saying everything is meaningless outside of that one person.” I didn’t miss the way Ryuji tightened his fist.

“Ah, but here’s the kicker. The doctors lied.”

Ryuji’s and Akira’s ears perked up. “Huh? But why?”

“This is the first time I’ve heard of it.”

“Yeah, it was completely luck. Elena-san was already dead by the time I decided to visit, but because of that, I managed to catch a couple of the staff talking in hushed tones. I heard Elena-san’s name, so I eavesdropped. They were talking about a ‘deal’ they had with the Toromis.”

“A ‘deal’?”

“Yeah. I thought it was shady and at that time, I found out that Elena-san died. From the sound of it, it seemed that in exchange for money, they were willing to distort the truth about Elena-san’s death.”

“But this is their daughter we’re talkin’ about! Why would they want that?”

“I thought the same, Ryuji. So the next day, I snuck into the Toromi residence prepared, since it was less risky than the hospital. I also knew the layout since Elena-san invited me a couple of times. The house was protected by passcode instead of a key, so I managed to get in since I knew what it was beforehand.

“Isn’t that… a crime?”

“Yeah, not that I cared at the time. It’s not like some random kid could go up to the police and expect them to take me seriously, especially against two wealthy adults.”

“More importantly, why didn’t you tell me? I could’ve helped out if you asked.” Of course, you would complain about that.

“I’m not going to risk getting you in trouble by dragging you down to be my accomplice. Plus, you only been there like, once? No offence, but there wasn’t any guarantee that you be more beneficial

“Anyways, it was nighttime and both of the parents were out at work and there was no school, so I went straight to Mr. Toromi’s study room. Well, while dodging some servants and all of that, but that wasn’t much of a problem. That was enough for me to sneak into the room and investigate.”

“What are you, some criminal mastermind?”

“I do enjoy crime films and the such, but I’d hardly call myself as such. Plus, I mentioned it before didn’t I? I knew my way around those bothersome bullies in elementary school, why can’t I fool a few old maids? Akira was also a pretty good influence with all the pranks we pulled off.” Or rather, what he pulled off alone and I just watched. It’s always hilarious to see it, regardless if Akira gets caught or not.

“I… wouldn’t call that a good influence.”

“Suit yourself. Back to the point, I found out something big. Five hundred thousand yen. All to blame Elena-san on her own death.”

“W-what?!”

“Turns out they were the ones who denied Elena-san of surgery.” I leaned forward and let down my fake smile. “They basically killed her.” And it wasn’t just them either….

A few seconds of silence hung over the air, probably from shock. To be honest, I expected Ryuji to burst out in anger, just like he had with Kamoshida. Perhaps it’s the fact this case isn’t a typical serial killer murder or a typical case of domestic abuse.

It’s a completely nonsensical action. No motive. A complete enigma.

It’s something to be angry about, but the most prevalent thought is “why?”

“Just so you know, I have no idea why her parents would do this. The Toromis were able to garner sympathy from the community, but Elena-san’s death wasn’t publicized by the media, so as far as I could tell, they gained little to no benefits. Maybe they’re sadists, but I know Elena-san enough to be confident that she wasn’t being abused. Neglectful enough to leave her under the care of servants, sure, but no bruises. No insults.”

“…B-But then…?”

“I don’t know, Ryuji. I don’t.”

“Nah, that’s not it. What did you do after that?”

“O-Oh, well… I left. I was pissed, so I tried to find a way to reach those two but I couldn’t. I even brought some solid evidence to the police, but as I thought, they totally dismissed me. I suspect that it was because they had their hands full with something else. Not long later, my mom was laid off.”

“You told me about that. How your mom went right back to her old job right away. Nothing seems to phase her, huh?”

“Yeah…” That’s what I would’ve thought, if I didn’t know any better. “But we were back to square one, and there was no way I could accept that. So I did some more research and came up with, quite
frankly, an absolute genius plan.”

“What was it?”

“It’s a brilliant thing called lying. Have you heard of the Thaumaturge?”

Akira widened his eyes, but Ryuji’s confusion didn’t seem to fade away.

“Thauma-- wha?”

“A thaumaturge is a miracle worker, if we’re talking literally. It’s also an urban legend that’s been around for awhile,” Akira explained. “Right now, the Thaumaturge is known to mysteriously cure people of hanahaki, minus the severe backlash that comes with surgery.”

“You mean how they can’t love the person they used to love?”

“That isn’t the full story.” Akira’s expression darkened. “Surgery doesn’t just remove the feeling of love for the person of affection. It removes all emotions. Love, hate, anger, happiness. They can’t feel anything but indifference. The movies ham it up quite a bit and caused some misconceptions, but this is public information.”

“Oh, so the Thauma-whatever can cure that disease without that? Why didn’t he just tell the docs? I mean, not being able to feel is pretty messed up. A lot more people would be happier if they could be cured like that.”

“Well, the ‘victims’ of the Thaumaturge still can’t feel romantic love, but they can feel other emotions, so it’s not completely foolproof. But, yeah, it’s still a big improvement. Dunno why either, but that guy has been going around. To be honest, his actions enforce the previously mentioned misconception more than his own existence, but without little physical evidence aside from a single card, he’s basically just a rumor.”

“Okay… but what does he has to do with this?”

“That’s what I’m about to get to,” I said. “Like Akira said, that’s what the Thaumaturge was mostly known for right now. However, back then he was known for more than that.” I lowered my voice. “He was known for these mysterious ‘changes of heart’.”

“Changes… of heart? Why does that seem familiar?”

“You might have heard of it before. It was said that the victim in question would receive a mysterious phone call from one of their contacts. A person who sounds just like said contact would tell them that they will ‘rip out the desires of their hearts from the root’ and end with, ‘That is my duty, as the Thaumaturge.’ After that, the victim, who generally had done some wrong in their lives, confess to it, and devotes themselves to repent.”

“Dude, wouldn’t there be like… evidence of that? Not to mention a big deal…?”

“Yeah, but it’s something very easy to fake. Anyone could pull that off as off as a prank and then pretend it’s not them. In fact, most cases are like that, so it’s difficult to tell sometimes if one is dedicated enough. Plus, it never happened on a huge scale, like some big shot politician. Just small scale incidents all over the country.”

“Hmm… I guess I get it. This lying thing you said-- does it have to do anything with that guy?”

“Yeah, it’s pretty simple. I just have to lie about being the Thaumaturge.”
“But how would make them believe you?”

“Three years ago, reported incidents of ‘changes of heart’ had already died down and more reports of ‘miraculous cures of hanahaki’ were coming up. People would’ve assumed that these were two different rumors at first, but just like what Akira said, there was a single, white card that claimed it was the doing of the Thaumaturge. Some people believe it was actually two different people, but since the changes of hearts and the hanahaki incidents don’t overlap, there’s a decent following that believes that is the same person who changed their M.O. The last known change of heart was supposedly said to be his last from the Thaumaturge himself, after all.”

“So you managed to convince them that you were the Thaumaturge from that time like that?”

“Yeah. Since the case on Elena-san is connected to hanahaki, it’s a bit more believable. I can’t fake someone else’s voice, so I got one of the more friendly maids to follow through with the plan. Meaning, I blackmailed with proof of her affair with Elena’s father. I told her pretend that she was the Thaumaturge and say that he will make an exception with the Toromis and that he found out this during his line of work. On top of that, I told her to say that as proof, that a certain maid will confess to her affair to the police the next day. Elena’s father having several affairs proved useful.”

“Ahhh.” Akira clicked his tongue. “So that’s why she did it. She had an affair with Mr. Toromi, right?”

“Yeah, and it wasn’t too hard to get it to happen. Said maid was particularly superstitious—hence why I chose her out of the many servants, so I didn’t even need to prove her that it was the Thaumaturge was speaking to her. Basically, I told the maid, the who was cooperating with me, to tell the other maid that she could escape further misfortune if she confessed herself rather than making the Thaumaturge to do it for her.”

“Damn.” Ryuji scratched his ear. “I don’t completely follow, but basically you just lied a lot and got the girl’s parents to do your bidding, right?”

“Yeah, once the news got out, I just contacted the same maid to pose as the Thaumaturge again. ‘Repent by giving your workers respectable wages and start removing discrimination based on gender, social status, family records, etc.’ Can’t let them make it obvious that it was in favor for my mom, and there was no reason to not make it a better workplace, so it was all good.”

“So all of this was happening behind my back, huh. No wonder you didn’t want to explain earlier–this is a long ass story.” Akira sighed. “Well, I think I can guess this next part. The Toromis rehired your mom, but the job was located at Tokyo since there was a massive influx in workers. You and your mom moved there and you enrolled to Shujin after taking the entrance exams. You act like you do now because you wanted a fresh start, away from your background as possible.”

“Correct. That mess had a lot of risks in it and there was no guarantee that I could pull it off again, so I’m being extra careful this time around.”

“Welp.” Akira stood up. “I’m gonna go take a leak. I’ll be right back.” He left for the restroom, leaving, Ryuji and I behind. Wait, why is he taking his bag with him?

Before, I could complete my thoughts, Ryuji started talking. “All for the sake of your mom, huh….” Ryuji was staring at the ceiling. “There wasn’t any complicated ass plot that I pulled off, but wanting to help your mom when shit isn’t her fault? Totally understandable. Hell, I guess this makes us even more in common than what I thought.”

“What’s your story then? I did pour my heart for you guys.”
“Yeah right, you were talking about it like it was a lecture rather than an emotional heart-to-heart. Not that it needed to be.” Ryuji crossed his legs. “But seriously, it isn’t a long, convoluted story like yours. Basically, my dad was a big piece of shit. Used to hit my mom and I around. Thankfully, we managed to leave him, but my mom, being single and all now, is having to work ridiculously hard to take care of me.”

“It’s the same, huh….”

“Yeah. And when Kamoshida broke my leg? When I lost everything because I punched him in the face like he deserves? Do you know what she did?” Ryuji tightened his fists. “She apologized to me of all people. Like it was her fault for being a single mom. Like it was her fault that I was in deep shit. It’s complete bullshit.”

“I see…. That’s all the more reason why we need to take Kamoshida down.”

“Hell yeah. That guy needs to go. If only we knew how….” Right, the mental shutdown method has fatal results. We can only cross our fingers for Morgana to remember a different method….

Wait, I forgot that Morgana existed this whole time in this ramen shop.

Akira came out walked back to his seat. “You guys done now? I think I’m ready to head out. Gettin’ late and I don’t want the dude back where I’m staying at to chew me out.”

I sigh. “Then, let us go.”

Ryuji stood up. “Wait, let’s exchange contact info first. Number and chat ID, please.”

We exited the ramen shop and along the way to the train station, we made some small talk on the way. It was actually kind of difficult because we had to keep changing the subject when it got too close to our “tragic backstories,” as Akira puts it. In fact, it’s ridiculous how we can go from talking about potatoes to Akira’s parents abandoning him after the assault. Then again, lengthy conversations tend to do that. We’re just talking because we want to talk, not because we had a particular subject in mind to converse about.

At the end, I just gave up. I was already tired from talking from earlier and I didn’t have the energy to even bother to think of another subject. These two have miniscule knowledge about Featherman anyways and again, I have no energy to educate these two on it’s brilliance.

And of course, the subject just happened to land on my fading strength to face the crippling stress of today’s events.

Haha, great.

“Speaking of strangely hot nurses, how are you feeling, Goro?”

“Hmm?”

“You weren’t exactly at the best of shape after the Palace, or hell, even when we were still running around. The bags under your eyes are even showing up under your concealer.”

“O-oh well.” God damnit, Akira. You had to point it out. “Well, awakening my Persona was quite an exhausting experience.”

“No kidding, I’m still pooped.” Ryuji yawned. “But it not just that, man. When Kamoshida started
“Honestly, I don’t know what came over me that time. I don’t normally get panic attacks.” What were those voices? I don't remember what it was or how they sound…. Couldn't it just been a delusion?

“Do have an idea why?” Ryuji asked.

“Well… no, I might check in with the doctor, but I have a feeling it has something to do with the Metaverse. I can only speculate at the moment.”

“If it happens again, just call us over.” Ryuji gave a soft pat on the back. Honestly, even though I have more reliable associates, I can’t help but to imagine myself contacting him on a bad night. Maybe it’s because of his personality? Because of what we talked about earlier? Damn, I shouldn't let myself get swayed over this stuff. I just met this guy for the first time yesterday.

“Well, I suppose I’ll have to apologize for before as well, Ryuji.”

“Hmm?”

“It’s only fair since you already did. I knew rumors weren’t supposed to be trusted, but I allowed initial impressions to judge your character a bit hastily.”

“It’s cool man. I mean, it was mutual thing, so it’s water under the bridge. We all know now that it isn’t just because we have a common enemy now. I mean, we got superpowers and stuff! I’m sure we’ll figure out what to do.” How lighthearted of him. “Oh, but call me by my surname. No offence, but it sounds weird when it comes from your mouth.”

“Pfft, fine Sakamoto-kun.”

“No seriously, it just sounds weird like… like…” Ryuji paused. “Like a teacher calling you by your first name… like imagine that Ushimara dude calling you that!”

“So I act like a prick. Okay. I get it.”

“Do I come off as an old man?”

“N-No, just… just because you aren’t a prick doesn’t mean you don’t come off as a prick! I guess.”

“So all teachers are pricks? Wow, that’s a pretty big assumption. Not that I blame him considering the current state of things.

“W-well…. I guess…?” No denial. I feel wounded.

Akira spoke up. “It’s good to see you guys get along. I’d hate to act as mediator for you two. I mean, Morgana is already a handful on his own.” At those words, I noticed that Akira’s bag started rumbling around, only for Akira to put his hand down on it to keep it steady. Huh, I forgot Morgana was holed up in there. Again. Why? It’s not like we’re on the train or something. Morgana’s efforts were futile, but not without voicing his muffled complaints. Eh, as long as he can breathe, it’s alright. He had enough energy to get that worked up, so he’s probably fine.

“I wouldn’t guarantee that, Akira.”

“Ahh, please go easy on me, Senpai.” Great. A wink coupled with his signature smirk. “Though, I guess I wouldn’t mind it if you guys got a little… rough.” I held back groan. Why do I always get caught off guard over the same thing-- he’s been doing this for years!
“Uhhh… well.” Ah. Poor Ryuji. “My mom is going to get worried so uh, later!” After saying that last bit a bit too hastily, he inched away from us and made his way out. Wait… didn’t he want to go to the train station with the two of us? Is he seriously going to walk to his house? All because Akira made an inappropriately-placed joke?

What even.

As Ryuji’s figure fades away into the distance, Akira takes out a notebook and pen, and starts writing. The book was simple-- black on the the outside with red thread binding the paper to it.

“What are you doing?”

“Keeping up with my journal. It’s a requirement ‘cause probation and all of that.”

“Oh? Shouldn’t you leave that at home? You could just write everything at the end of the day.”

“Nah, too mainstream.”

“Being sued for assault doesn’t make you a hipster, Akira.”

“Y-yeah, he’s just bringing it along to ta-- Mmmph!” Akira held his journal under his arm as the other one opened his bag and took out Morgana with one hand. He stared straight into Morgana’s bright blue eyes.

“I will show no mercy, cat. Being sued for assault may not make me a hipster, but being a hipster got me sued.” That’s- “A good samaritan hipster.” You were never a hipster…! “You wouldn’t want to face punishment on the first day, right? We got house rules you know?”

“W-what punishment? Y-you wouldn’t resort to animal abuse, would you?” Ahh, so now you don’t mind being a cat now, huh? “Save me Goro!”

“Don’t worry, Morgana. Akira likes cats, you shouldn’t have to worry. I think.”

“What do you mean, ‘I think’?!” Just then, Akira stuffed Morgana back into his bag and sealed it up.

“Jeez, I was just going to button mash. Morgana needs to cool off.” Button... mash?

“Anyways, what are you even going to write in that journal? Are you going to write about your adventures into a supernatural cognitive world? Awakening your Persona and getting in a fist fight against a mop?”

“Hah, I would if it wouldn’t lead to me being sent to a mental facility. But yeah, I’m not.”

“Then what are you going to write?”

“I’m going to write about how both of my friends in my new school and I had a great bonding experience today.” He stopped writing and closed the book shut. “And also how much better you got at lying ever since I last met you.”

“...Hmm.” So he noticed.

“You didn’t think I’d noticed? Even if you didn’t lie, there’s no way that’s is the complete story. You know what happened to the Toromis.”

“Why didn’t you say so earlier then?”
“Ryuji said so himself, didn’t he? If you don’t want to talk about it, you don’t have to. And you aren’t exactly the type who slips confidential information very easily, so I know that you only said what I wanted to say. You also said that you didn’t want to leave it to his imagination. I’m just respecting what you both want.”

“But you want to know the truth, right?”

“Yeah, hence why I’m bringing it up now.” He stopped in his tracks. Apparently we have arrived at our destination, so now we just have to wait for the train. “It wasn’t national news or anything, but everyone at that town knows that the Toromi household caught on fire and killed a couple of people who didn’t make it out. It was labeled as an accident but… it happened not too long before you graduated middle school, didn’t it?”

Does… Akira suspect me? Despite the tinge of betrayal, I simply carried on. “Well, wasn’t it? There’s no reason to believe I set the house on fire, nor would there be a reason for the police to cover it up. And…” I took a deep breath. “I didn’t kill anybody.”

“Yes, I don’t think you did it. I’d know if you did something stupid.” Akira pursed his lips. “But are you sure you don’t know anything about it?”

“Why are you so sure that it wasn’t an accident?”

“Well…” Akira eyed towards the side. Hesitant. “I suppose I’m not.”

“…You’re hiding something, too?” God damn it, Akira. He just laughed.

“Hah, you got me. Hypocrisy at it’s finest, huh? Not that I mind.”

“Being a hypocrite is fine?”

“Yeah, it is.” That’s the thing about Akira. Sometimes I know what’s he’s saying more clearly than himself, and other times it feels like he’s talking in a foreign language. A troublesome friend. A damn good one. An absolute terrible one, too. “But it isn’t just that. Even if you entered the Toromi household, they have a security system that looks at who enters and exits. You’re not dumb, but I doubt that you would’ve been able to enter the front door without being seen. You would’ve known that, so if you didn’t plan on setting the house on fire, why go through that way like you said?”

“Confidential.”

Akira sighed. “Then what about that whole plan to get that girl’s parents to help you? That maid did end up confessing, but no one mentioned the Thaumaturge there as far as I know, even during the years you weren’t there. How would you even know about the affair? Would the Toromis actually believe that the Thaumaturge would contact them? How would you know that they even believed in the Thaumaturge in the first place? They were never at home, after all.”

“Private.”

“And lastly,” Akira gave me an unreadable gaze. “You told me you hated your mom. Wh--”

“I refuse to answer.”

“Hmm…. Alright then. Hey, our train is here.” Just as he said, the train stopped and the people started swarming into it. “Let’s get in fast.”

By a stroke of luck, we managed to get seats for ourselves, right next to each other at that. The loud
cacophony of the people’s voices and the friction between the wheels and the rails were irritating, and even now, I can’t seem to get used to it. I hate meaningless noises. Akira touched my shoulder briefly.

“Whatever you decide to do in the future, if you ever fill me in, would you tell Ryuji, too? I don’t like leaving people out of the circle.”

“Why should I?”

“Ryuji’s a great guy, Goro. I’m sure he’ll understand if you told him.”

“You talk as if you’ve known him for a long time, even though you met him the same time I did.” I sigh. “You’re not really in any position to say that.”

“Hah, maybe.” Akira’s cheeky grin expanded. He doesn’t really care, does he? “Let’s just say I have a strong intuition that he’ll be a valuable comrade of sorts in the future.” I scoffed. “And besides, it’s not like there’s anyone else in the world more stubborn than you.”

“We’ll see if that’s the case.” I crossed my legs. “Though I suppose the hero of the story does need the obligatory loyal sidekick. Sakamoto fits the role perfectly, and if not, better than I at the very least. I guess it’s only natural you’ll think of him as such.”

Akira’s lips curled in amusement. “You underestimate yourself, and comparing reality to comic books now, are we? I wonder if I’m supposed to be the childish one here.”

“That wasn’t my intention. I thought it was obvious that I was joking.”

“Never said that it was. I don’t even think you would’ve been totally wrong if you were serious anyways.”

“What do you mean? That Sakamoto would be a better sidekick than I?”

“No, no. Not that. The part where you said that it’s only natural for me to think Ryuji as a good man because he fits the role of a sidekick, is what I meant. So you suggest that applying meta, comic book logic in reality is childish, yet you go on to say that it isn’t a necessarily a fallacy? I wonder if you’re even aware of what you’re saying. Akira continues talking.

“I can already tell that even once we resolve this whole thing with Kamoshida, our involvement with the other world isn’t going to end. It would be too strange, wouldn’t it? For our little trip to end up being meaningless at the end.” True. Even just getting in the other world is a massive amount of power on it’s own, despite our current accomplishments. Entering a cognitive world is not unlike mind-reading if interpreted correctly.

“We’re probably going to form a group that will last for who knows how long--” Right, going solo in a place like that would just place unnecessary danger onto ourselves.

“--like the Feathermen you’ve always dreamed of being in.” Okay, stop there, sir.

“...And your point is?” I said, a bit more forcefully than intended.

“Shh, I’m getting there.” Akira cleared his throat. “The thing is, once this happens, wouldn’t it be no different than the comics we read? Er, you, I mean.”

I grumbled. “Akira, you probably brought several manga volumes from home. You have no place to exclude yourself from that statement.”
“Except I can because I didn’t, hah!” *Ugh.* “Anyways, just from comics, we got obligatory token characters and all in reality. It’s practically instinctive in that sense-- to act and assume based on what is considered the norm or ‘how things should be.’” Well. *Yeah, moral code, for instance, is something people should pick up from fiction, lest they want to lead a life of constant trouble by thinking the alternative. But what does that have to do with us conforming to stereotypes?* He sighs.

“At the end, there’s this permanent sense of order that is formed-- an order that we see as the correct way, which manifested from society’s beliefs. We’ll want to become heroes because that’s the ideal-- what we came to believe as desirable. Not even just any hero of course, the ideal one. The ‘ultra Superman-esque’ one. ‘Cause you know, this world is messed up.”

And here, I intervene. “That’s just how it is, right? You had to have learned what you know from somewhere, after all.” Akira had a complicated expression towards my words, like he want to say something, but I went on.

“But you don’t actually think it’s going to be as simple as people being so obsessive of fiction, that everything will fall perfectly into common archetypes because that what they see on TV or something, right? Hollywood tends to be far from reality, and yet here we are.”

“Hah, I suppose you’re right, it isn’t really. It’s just… what’s happening right now, even though it’s clearly taking place in reality, it’s not so different from what we read or watch in terms of ridiculousness. The parallels are uncanny, and for Hollywood-- well, it didn’t stop them from spreading misconceptions.”

“I’ll say.” *This is quite the situation, indeed.* “But isn’t something like us conforming to stereotypical archetypes is just a matter of perception? It shouldn’t be a problem if you aren’t an outsider. How we see Feathermen is going to be different than what Feathermen see each other. As incorrigible as you are, I don’t doubt you see Sakamoto or I as anything less than what we deserve.” *Was that the root of the matter? Is Akira scared of seeing others less than who they are? But that… doesn’t make sense.*

“But you don’t actually think it’s going to be as simple as people being so obsessive of fiction, that everything will fall perfectly into common archetypes because that what they see on TV or something, right? Hollywood tends to be far from reality, and yet here we are.”

“Hah, I suppose you’re right, it isn’t really. It’s just… what’s happening right now, even though it’s clearly taking place in reality, it’s not so different from what we read or watch in terms of ridiculousness. The parallels are uncanny, and for Hollywood-- well, it didn’t stop them from spreading misconceptions.”

“I’ll say.” *This is quite the situation, indeed.* “But isn’t something like us conforming to stereotypical archetypes is just a matter of perception? It shouldn’t be a problem if you aren’t an outsider. How we see Feathermen is going to be different than what Feathermen see each other. As incorrigible as you are, I don’t doubt you see Sakamoto or I as anything less than what we deserve.” *Was that the root of the matter? Is Akira scared of seeing others less than who they are? But that… doesn’t make sense.*

“But you don’t actually think it’s going to be as simple as people being so obsessive of fiction, that everything will fall perfectly into common archetypes because that what they see on TV or something, right? Hollywood tends to be far from reality, and yet here we are.”

“Hah, I suppose you’re right, it isn’t really. It’s just… what’s happening right now, even though it’s clearly taking place in reality, it’s not so different from what we read or watch in terms of ridiculousness. The parallels are uncanny, and for Hollywood-- well, it didn’t stop them from spreading misconceptions.”

“I’ll say.” *This is quite the situation, indeed.* “But isn’t something like us conforming to stereotypical archetypes is just a matter of perception? It shouldn’t be a problem if you aren’t an outsider. How we see Feathermen is going to be different than what Feathermen see each other. As incorrigible as you are, I don’t doubt you see Sakamoto or I as anything less than what we deserve.” *Was that the root of the matter? Is Akira scared of seeing others less than who they are? But that… doesn’t make sense.*

“Not now, no. I guess that’s what you call ‘the power of bonds.’”

“As cliche as it is, the ‘power of friendship’ shedding light on the truth isn’t totally false, in more ways than one.” *Though in many ways, it’s false.*

“I guess I’m just paranoid. Ever since you left, life’s been boring. As you know, boredom is a deadly poison for me, so I started thinking things a bit differently.”

“How so?”

“Thinking life is a game. I mean, I like having fun, but I never like, really thought about the end goal. The objective I’m supposed to achieve. There’s always the ‘I want to achieve my dream’ schtick or ‘I want to get a girlfriend’, but I never really cared about things like that. I was pretty much okay with just coasting through life wherever. Entertaining, but not competitive like a game. More like a dumb teenager messing around.” *I figured as much.*

“But you’re like, the source of the fun, Goro. Okay, maybe not the ‘source’, but it was really weird not having you around. You were the first person that I could see as someone I wouldn’t mind being a permanent part of my life. Everyone else is just in on it for their own goals and see, going against it is not worth it if it doesn’t change jack shit. Can’t say I blame the others knowing that.” Akira sighs. “I know I’m not alone. A lot of people don’t have dreams. Relatable, but those guys tend to be either asshats or people that are off my wavelength-- neither of whom I want to get involved with.” *So, these ‘asshats’ are on your wavelength? Can’t say you aren’t-- to a degree.*
“So it was easier to just, not try to replace you at all. Well, not you as a person, you’re special in your own way, but someone to like, be honest with, I guess? Gotta play this game that we call ‘life in Japan’ and run with it, and by doing that I’ll be set for life. I wouldn’t have to worry about these things called ‘bonds’ if I just see them as characters rather than people. Real ones, anyways.”

“Hmm, well you are the kind of person who jokes around when things get too uncomfortable for you, so I’m not surprised you can make a joke out of people when things don’t go your way.” Akira gave me the evil eye, but whatever. “But at the end, you were using me, too, right? Why me? Why do you value me over the others?”

“I could ask you the exact same thing.”

“True.” I couldn’t stop myself from gulping when I looked at Akira’s blank face. Empty. “I guess it’s something we can’t understand now.”

“Maybe. Though, I guess I shouldn’t pretend that I’m the only one falling into this ‘terror of societal consumerism’ and ‘the mask sewn onto my face’, hiding away what people call ‘the objective truth’. Humanity’s actions is dictated by the entertaining and the convenient. I’d know because I’m part of the same, dumb race.”

“Is that your conclusion? For this whole thing that started with me comparing Sakamoto-kun to a comic book sidekick?”

“The conclusion is that everything that we see as fiction is no different from reality. Reality’s a game. We might as well be pieces of cardboard because we might as well perceive each other as cardboard cutouts of our imagination. And...” Akira stopped looking at me and stared at some random guy’s shoes. “…I don’t think the world I see is going to change very soon. That why I’m not too sure if I can say to myself that we’re friends like we were before. It’s been too long.”

There was a brief moment of silence as I tried to think of a response. Akira’s fidget with each other and despite his calm exterior, a drop of sweat slid down his face as he waited, staring at the hard floor beneath his feet. Eventually, I forced myself to speak.

“That’s one way to look at it, but you don’t want that, right? Have patience and I’m sure things will work out. If I can learn it during high school, I’m sure you can, too.” I have no idea what I’m saying.

Akira froze, as if deep in thought, only to let out a laugh. It sounded hollow. Empty. “Hah, you always say the right things for some reason, Goro. Jeez… conversations can go in wild directions, huh.” Shifting the conversation topic... whatever I said, it didn’t satisfy him.

“No kidding. If I didn’t know any better, I would’ve thought you just thought all of that while taking a shower.”

“That isn’t completely false.” Akira smiled. “Didn’t really think about it until last night and it’s only just now that I get to let it all out. And even if you or others disagree, I’m betting it’s the truth that fiction and reality are the same to whatever higher being is looking over his balcony to watch the daily lives of the monkeys he gave birth to. Shady bastard.”

“Reality is God’s game? Or is it his novel?”

“Does it matter?”

“Not really. You can cheat in a game, can you not?”

“But we aren’t the players. Aren’t we just the pieces? The cards?”
“Then I guess he won’t see it coming. Attack of the NPCs. It’ll be his last surprise.”

Akira let out a boisterous laugh and honestly, I couldn’t stop myself either before Akira left for his stop. As Akira walked off, I eventually left the train to go towards my own destination. And yet, a nagging feeling bothered me on the way home.

I smacked myself in the face. Of course, I forgot to talk to him about what happened last night.

Chapter End Notes

wew, to think this was originally supposed to be combined with the last chapter

Thanks for everyone who are following this fic!

also ripp, i just finished the first two day of the game and i'm already 21k in
there are two different kinds of people in this world

Chapter Summary

those who I get along with, and those who I don't

investigation start

DATE: 4/13/2016

“Akechi-kun?”

The creaking of the door snapped me back into reality. The recent revelations served as an unavoidable distraction from other, much smaller matters. I half-expected it this to happen, thanks to Kamoshida’s machinations, but I suppose that wasn't enough to mask the small amount of surprise when met with Makoto Niijima at the student council club room first thing in the morning.

“Is there something you need, Niijima-san?”

“There’s something we need to talk about.”

“Can it wait until after the volleyball rally? It won’t be long and it’ll be awkward if our conversation cut short.”

“The last time I let you off, I didn't see you for the next two weeks. And even then, I wasn’t able to get a satisfactory answer from you. We need to talk about this-- rumor situation now.” Ah, right. The principal told her to keep an eye on me after he caught me that one time. I don’t even know why she even bothers; it’s not like anything the principal can offer her is necessary for her success.

Then again, why do I bother lying when she already knows?

“The rumors came up because I was late on the first day of school and nothing more. It’s going to die down sooner or later, given how ridiculously off base they tend to be. Not to mention the weak evidence.”

“...That’s what I thought, too. But I don't think how long the rumors last is the problem.”

“Hmm? Then what? I wouldn’t be concerned over my current reputation as far as I could tell.”

“It’s not just you, Akechi, it’s the student council’s reputation as well.” Niijima seemed irritated. Right, we are what people call a ‘team’. And ‘teammates’ aren’t supposed to be self-centered enough to put themselves before the team. Right, right.

Though to be fair, a loss of trust in the student council tends to correlate with the reliance on the faculty, since there would be no better alternative. At the school’s current state, that should be avoided. Was this Kamoshida’s intention as well? Not that I did anything to help it, but to be fair, I didn’t attack this council with lies. What I exposed was the truth.

“So you’re saying that even if I recover, you think the student council will face permanent damage? There’s no guarantee of that happening.”
“There’s no guarantee the other way either. Besides, you already have a fan following, so you as an individual will certainly have something to lay back on. The student council… has nothing like that. Even less than nothing.” The student council wouldn't be in such a state if the school wasn't composed of blind sheep, voting for whoever seems to be 'kind of smart' or 'kind of responsible', if not ignoring the elections as a whole. I mean, using their formerly large budget to pay for luxury and bribes? It’s basically corruption lite. We like to say that the young is pure from the corrupt adults, but lust for power doesn't have an age limit.

“And this is the year you plan to fix everything, correct? You know what was posted on the board were the truth.”

“…Yes, that was the main promise during the campaign. But now, we have these rumors coming up because you missed half a day. We can’t let it stay like this.”

“And what is it that you propose as a solution? I’m sure you’re aware I’m no stranger to slanderous talk about me.”

“Well… You see, the principal called me this morning.” Oh? “He suggested to me quite strongly to get ‘your subordinate under control’.” He stillsuspects me after all this time, huh. “He sugarcoated his words, but it was quite obvious that he’s doing this for the sake of the school’s image and the both of us know what measures he’ll take to keep it clean.” Niijima cleared her throat. “What I’m saying is, stop hanging around the transfer student and Sakamoto-kun.”

“…Cutting it at the root, huh.” It’s true that the basis of the current rumors is that I missed half a day of school on the first day, despite my previously clean attendance record. That much should be expected, people tend to put people on the pedestal. However, even that can be overlooked over time, and will probably be forgotten given the student’s short attention spans and the previously mentioned fanbase. If I were to continue hanging around those two, who have been already been labeled as ‘troublemakers’, the rumors would only evolve, which, depending what happens, could lead to an equal or worse situation.

“Which leads me to my next question, why them?”

“I already told you, didn't I?”

“We both know that it was a lie. It’s one thing if the transfer and Sakamoto was caught up in a mess of circumstances, but you? No offense, but despite what you try to sell yourself as, you aren't the kind of person to stop at the middle of the road to pick up a lost puppy. You wouldn't set yourself back for the sake of others.”

“I wonder where you got that impression.”

“...Don't act you don't know,” Niijima sighed. “Stalking is quite unbecoming of a member of the student council. Are exposing those secrets and invading privacy your brand of justice?” So, she’s going to be direct now? Surprising, but I doubt she’ll follow through it.

She never does.

“Proof?”

“...None.”

“Then that’s your answer.”

“…” Niijima knew for quite some time of my activities ever since the principal incident, but was
unable to enact on it. These activities started off from some student being an irritating piece of trash who, like me, was a damn good liar. I could’ve simply reported him for what he did, but… to put it simply, any motivation to hold back was thrown out the moment I found about his involvement with my background being leaked. Everything snowballed from there.

He’s not enrolled in this school anymore.

“Knowing you, I doubt you would come to that conclusion based off the whim another person’s opinion. I grant you that.” I crossed my legs. “However, the rumors has around me being that person has already been investigated and nothing was found. I don’t know what you saw, but whatever it is, it’s probably a mistake.” Of course, it’s not like the principal had the authority to control the police or something. Wouldn’t that be ridiculous?

“…Fine.” Huh, I actually thought she would put more of a fight. Not that she seems to believe me. “Just don’t cause any more trouble, okay? Those troublemakers are enough on our plate.”

“I wonder if they as difficult as you say they are,”

“What do you mean?” Niijima’s strained face gave it away. She already suspects that the real source of worry is Kamoshida. This question was probably just a formality.

But what can she do about it? Nothing, as far as she knew. Sad, that. I don’t have time for that kind of naïve justice.

“I can tell you already know. The real problem of this school.” I stood up. “I’ll lay low for now, but I don’t plan on ignoring the truth.” A half-lie, but a half more than usual.

“Alright then.” Niijima isn’t an idiot. A pushover, I suppose, but I’m not surprised that she chose this half-baked attempt to make a difference-- attempting to convince others to stop, but does nothing to enforce it. A half-baked resolve tends to result in that. “Class will be starting in about half an hour. Are you almost finished?”

“Yes, I’ve made up the work that I missed. I’ll be leaving now.” Right before I left the room, I looked at Niijima one last time. “You’re not going to asked what happened that day?”

“Why bother anymore? For the past two years, I still can’t understand you.”

“That was the intention.” And so I left.

Goro Akechi: Today is the volleyball rally.
Goro Akechi: Our plan is to interrogate the volleyball team, correct?

Akira Kurusu: > proper grammar in a group chat
Akira Kurusu: lul

Ryuji Sakamoto: ha yea, ikr
Ryuji Sakamoto: but yea, p much
Ryuji Sakamoto: everyone is gonna be busy with the game and all
Ryuji Sakamoto: including that kamoshida bastard
Ryuji Sakamoto: we just gotta get the info out of them
Ryuji Sakamoto: the volleyball team, i mean
Goro Akechi: I suppose it wouldn’t hurt. I know for certain that the newspaper club won’t help. Goro Akechi: The higher ups pressured them to back off when the rumors of Kamoshida’s abuses started. Goro Akechi: Same thing with other clubs or persons of interest. Goro Akechi: To be honest, I suspect the volleyball team won’t be better off, with Kamoshida being so close and all.

Akira Kurusu: ooo do you got a plan up ur sleeve then? Akira Kurusu: sneaky sneaky Akira Kurusu: sketchy akechi

<Goro Akechi kicks Akira Kurusu out of the group chat> <Goro Akechi invites Akira Kurusu> <Akira Kurusu joins the chat>

Akira Kurusu: rood

Goro Akechi: Anyways Goro Akechi: I don't have an alternative plan. Hence why I said it wouldn’t hurt. Goro Akechi: Particularly the first year members, since they’re more likely to slip Goro Akechi: And just to let you guys know ahead of time, I will be avoiding you two for most of the day.

Ryuji Sakamoto: y

Goro Akechi: It won’t be good if the rumors gain momentum. Goro Akechi: Especially since it’s Kamoshida’s doing, it’s best not to add fuel to the fire. Goro Akechi: In fact, it’ll probably be smarter if you two were to avoid each other as well. Goro Akechi: Just don’t walk together and split up the search.

Akira Kurusu: whatcha gonna do then?


Ryuji Sakamoto: oh ye. Ryuji Sakamoto: what’s up with that Ryuji Sakamoto: is she like, cahoots with kamoshida or what

Goro Akechi: I don’t know that girl very well to assume. Goro Akechi: On the contrary, it seems to me that you know her better than I do.

Akira Kurusu: she’s in my class if that’s anything

Ryuji Sakamoto: we just went to the same middle school Ryuji Sakamoto: wait wat

Akira Kurusu: sits right in front of me Akira Kurusu: there aren’t any great words about her as far as i know Akira Kurusu: but we know how reliable the word on the street is

Goro Akechi: Does she seems to be the kind of person who would be involved with someone like Kamoshida?

Akira Kurusu: nah, not really
Akira Kurusu: idk wat it is, but she seems like the bitter type
Akira Kurusu: looks aside

Ryuji Sakamoto: kamoshida ain’t her type, ik that

Akira Kurusu: like the first thing that came out of her mouth was “lies”

Ryuji Sakamoto: i haven’t talked to her in a while

Akira Kurusu: like in a low, dramatic way

Ryuji Sakamoto: i think she’s bffs with one of the starters on the team or something?

Akira Kurusu: referring to that excuse you came up with on the first day of school btw

Ryuji Sakamoto: suzui i think

Akira Kurusu: she def on to us

Goro Akechi: I’ll look into her then. Could be a potential ally, but I’ll need to confirm it myself. 
Goro Akechi: And yes, she would know it was a lie because she saw us on the way to school. 
Goro Akechi: I can only assume that she doesn’t appreciate dishonesty
Goro Akechi: I’ll talk to her while you two can try asking the rest of the volleyball team.

Ryuji Sakamoto: wait that’s all ur gonna do

Goro Akechi: I’ll try to get in contact with a couple of associates as well.

Akira Kurusu: who?

Goro Akechi: Private.

Akira Kurusu: boo
Akira Kurusu: probs some shady af connections
Akira Kurusu: in the underground

Ryuji Sakamoto: wat

Goro Akechi: No.
Goro Akechi: They’re just students like us.

Akira Kurusu: “students”

Goro Akechi: They go to our school, Akira.

Akira Kurusu: hmm
Akira Kurusu: could it be
Akira Kurusu: ur fangirls? :O

Goro Akechi: Maybe.

Akira Kurusu: …
Akira Kurusu: gdi

Ryuji Sakamoto: uhh
Ryuji Sakamoto: quick question
Ryuji Sakamoto: how long have you been on this kamoshida business
Ryuji Sakamoto: i mean, how long did u know about him being
Ryuji Sakamoto: well
Ryuji Sakamoto: an ass

Goro Akechi: Since last year. Found out after summer break though.
Goro Akechi: Why?

Ryuji Sakamoto: well
Ryuji Sakamoto: even if u ain’t the guy snooping into people’s deets
Ryuji Sakamoto: it still feels like you know a lot more than we do
Ryuji Sakamoto: well u did say you tried to investigate him

Akira Kurusu: oooo did u mess up

Goro Akechi: I didn't.
Goro Akechi: It’s not my fault that the principal just happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time

Ryuji Sakamoto: so u messed up

Goro Akechi: ...
Goro Akechi: :T
Akira Kurusu: > goro using emojis

Ryuji Sakamoto: holy shit

Akira Kurusu: wOA

Goro Akechi: :T
Goro Akechi: Afterschool then.
Goro Akechi: It’ll be easiest to explain if you’re at my place.

Akira Kurusu: ooooo
Akira Kurusu: is ur mom gonna be there
Akira Kurusu: cuz her cooking is bomb
Akira Kurusu: exploding fish

Ryuji Sakamoto: wat about exploding fish

Goro Akechi: I think so. She isn’t working overtime today.
Goro Akechi: The rally is about to begin.

Akira Kurusu: exploding fish is exploding fish

Ryuji Sakamoto: but y

Akira Kurusu: y naut

Ryuji Sakamoto: :v
Ryuji Sakamoto: anyways
Ryuji Sakamoto: wat about
Ryuji Sakamoto: wait nvm
The students are more or less required to go see the rally at some point. It’s somewhat ridiculous how they just allow an Olympic medalist into the teacher’s team (read: carrying the entire team as the other teachers do almost nothing). It’s just a way to stroke his ego, isn’t it? Even worse how some of the students admire him, as if they are seeing something inspirational, when it isn’t. He’s not even going against people on his level, or hell, even going easy on the volleyball team that are essentially malnourished. It’s the obvious. It’s nothing.

What purpose did this rally serve again? I don’t remember.

Takamaki was a fortunately noticeable person. Unfortunately for her, it was most likely the source of the rumors on her case (although the chance of it being true was still there). Relatable. Having a stigma placed on you for something you couldn’t control.

It wasn't going to be too difficult to lure her to a private location, or at least, as private as the school can be during an event. With the best smile I could muster, I approached her right before she was going to wave to what seems to be a friend of hers.

“Hey, you’re… Akechi-kun?” Now that I got a closer look of her, I could’ve sworn I’ve seen her face on a magazine a few times. A part-timer model perhaps. She does have the appeal.

“Greetings, Takamaki-san. There’s something I need advice on from you.” I glanced towards the girl with a ponytail just down the hallway. “Or am I interrupting you?”

“Oh, no. It’s fine. But...advice? I don't know what kind of advice I could give you, I mean….” She didn’t finish her sentence, as though she wanted to say something else, but couldn’t. Unlike middle school, I did devote a large amount of my time to studying, if not scheming for my next task-- not that the latter didn’t put my mental capabilities to use. Well, it’s a good thing that the advice I had in mind had nothing to do with academics. That would just be a bad lie.

“Oh, it’s something I know you have more expertise in than me.” I lowered my voice. “It’s a bit of a private matter for me, though. Do you mind if we talk somewhere else? I’m sure you’re aware that some people are… more privy to my activities than others.”

With a knowing face, Takamaki nodded. “That’s understandable. Lead the way then.”

“Ah, it would be strange if people saw us together. Can you meet me at the student council room a few minutes after? You can finish whatever you were busy first.” I moved away from her, towards the meeting area. “I’ll go on ahead. Try to be there before the game is over.”

Takamaki will most likely finish her conversation with Suzui in a few minutes, so I only have that much time to prepare myself to think on how to present myself to gain as much information as I could. Outright, risky lies should be avoided as possible, even more so than usual. Despite my minimal interaction with her, if I can trust Akira’s word, she isn’t a stranger to being told lies and rumors. Her status as an outcast would make her especially sensitive to certain subjects, to which, if I make a wrong move, could shut down the entire conversation in a flash. This particular subject is a land mine in that regard.

In retrospect, it might have been better if I observed her friend first and see if it would’ve been easier or safer to have her talk to her in my stead, but it’s too late to take it back.
If I assume that Takamaki is at least of average intelligence, the best course of action is the be blunt without being insensitive. Mostly honest without anything unnecessary. Unlike Niijima, who can see through casual pleasantries (thanks to interacting with me for quite some time) and has a generally hostile attitude, Takamaki is more or less a stranger, so I shouldn’t have to worry about her misinterpreting my words as an insult if I’m careful. She doesn’t seem to skeptical enough to immediately act hostile to those who has done no wrong to her. Granted, she is not a fangirl, and given my reputation, opinions of me tend to be strong. If she isn’t indifferent, chances are, she has a minor distaste considering her own status in this school, whether she realizes this or not. How she thinks of the current rumors is something I don’t know, or if it will impact the conversation to be.

The door of the student council room opened slowly and closed at the same speed, leaving Takamaki and I in the room.

“Wow, it’s… really empty in here.”

“The student council aren’t meeting here at the moment. They’re probably either at the game or skipping.” More likely the former than the latter.

“That makes sense. Though even then, this isn’t exactly the most private location. There are people outside who could hear us.”

“Don’t be too worried. In fact, there’s almost no way we wouldn’t be noticed given our reputation. That’s why I chose this place as our rendezvous point.” When she made a confused face, I took that as a cue to continue.

“It’s not foolproof, but I believe it’s better than meeting at the back of the school, or any equally conspicuous place. It’ll be harder to explain out of it if we’re caught there, since there is little we can do to dispel a misunderstanding if a guy and a girl just happened to be seen at a location like that. So why try to hide if you know you’re going to get caught? In that case, it’s best to just setup a situation that’s easy to lie about, even a handful doesn’t believe it.”

“What about the people who follow you around? Won’t they get jealous or stir something up anyways?”

“Thankfully, I maintain a decent amount of communication with them unlike typical celebrities. You could say I’ve managed to form a bond with them based on a kind of trust since they are limited to this school. I can manage them.” As for closet fans outside of the fanclub… hopefully they won’t do anything.

“Hmm, I guess your intelligence isn’t for show. I’m not the best actor, but I think I can manage with this. I could just say that I needed… advice from the council about clubs! Since I haven’t actually joined one yet.” She rests her back against the wall and crossed her arms. “So, what is it that you need advice on? I mean, the best I can guess is fashion tips, but I don’t think that’s what you want.”

“To be honest, I wouldn’t mind asking you that, but yes, that isn’t why I’m here.” I’ll need to remind myself to do that later. “I’ll get straight to the point then. There’s a friend of mine that needs help, but I’m not sure what I should do about it.”

“Hmm?” That caught her attention. If her friendship with Suzui is genuine, then there’s no way that she didn’t project herself onto me for at least a second. Alternatively, she could’ve asked why I’m asking her of all people, but…. “Who’s this person?” That isn’t the first thought that came to her mind, isn’t it?

“You heard of the rumors, right? It’s the transfer student, Akira Kurusu.”
“...Wait, they were actually true? I thought it was a load of baloney like usual.”

“Only the part where I grew acquainted with him.” *At least you didn’t believe anything else.*

“... What about Sakamoto then?” Now that I think about it, Ryuji remembered Takamaki, but I never questioned whether or not Takamaki remembered Ryuji. Hell, I forgot to question how close they were in middle school to begin with. I suppose that’s another topic of discussion that’ll come up later.

“I met him around the same time I met Akira. It was mostly just a coincidence, but after looking into it, he’s not as bad as I thought he would be.” *Not that it was a major difference. I think.*

“Hmm…." She seemed deep in thought. She seemed to have whispered something under her breath, but I couldn’t hear it because of the noise in the hallway. ‘Alright, though it’s strange. I didn’t think you were the type to approach others to make friends with on whim. No offense, but you seemed to be the kind of person who just happens to attract people with a flick of your fingers and be done with it. If… that makes any sense.” She scratches the back of her head in uncertainty.

“I get it. And no offense taken, in fact, I appreciate you honesty.” *Oh, if only she knew the truth.* “I suppose it would be more accurate to say that I have... ‘re-acquainted’ with Akira and that it was by chance that I ran into him that day. You were there, weren’t you? He was a friend of mine in middle school, so I wasn’t very fazed by the whole record scandal.” I unwittingly scoffed. “I wouldn’t say he was the most fortunate person when we were younger, either.”

“Huh, so that’s why. I hope he isn’t doing fine under all this attention. People can be pretty ruthless.” Takamaki fell silent for a moment. “Is this what it is about?”

“No, the rumors don’t really bother him, or at least, he braced himself enough so that it doesn’t.” *Even in middle school, he was hassled by others for interacting with me.* “The issue is that a certain someone has been on his case, and I can’t do much of anything to stop that person.”

“Who?”

“Kamoshida.” She flinched. “That man wasn’t just giving Akira the stink eye. He went as far as to threaten him when he got too close. And...” *Okay, here’s a bit of truth.* “I don’t have any solid evidence, but I suspect that he was the one behind his record being leaked for, most likely, no reason other than the fact that he has one. The rumors itself may not bother him that much, but... ever since that incident that got him the record, he doesn’t deal well with such adults.”

I prepared myself for an inquiry regarding to the assault incident, but thankfully, Takamaki’s concerns lay elsewhere. “Wait... you aren’t thinking on how to take out Kamoshida, are you? That’s--”

“Dangerous? Stupid?”

“Y-Yeah....”

“Then you wouldn’t be wrong.” I could hear Takamaki sigh in relief. “I’m not going to do something so drastic, especially since I’m aware that if I could do such a thing, it would’ve already been done.” *Not entirely false, to be fair. It’s just happening right now.* “What I want to know is what I could do for Akira in the meantime. I heard you had a friend in the volleyball team, so I thought you might have an idea...” I masked my face with false concern. “...You know why.”

“...Lemme think for a moment.” While Takamaki was pondering to herself, I couldn’t help but to relax. Checkpoint one has been reached. We ended up reaching the topic about Kamoshida without any repercussions. Next is to get an idea of Suzui’s situation through Takamaki’s advice, and see if
“I’m not sure if what I do for Shiho is the same as what is best for your friend, but… I think just being there for them is already good on its own.”

“That’s a bit vague… what you mean exactly?”

“Well, to be more specific… being a good listener to his problems is one part for sure. What you say is all on you, to be honest.”

“…That’s unfortunate. I can’t say that’s one of my talents.” I’m hardly the kind of person who be a good shoulder to cry on. As much as I could sympathize, I’m not keen on getting snot on my clothes.

“Really? I mean, I get if it’s awkward to sit down and talk to him about it, but if he approaches you yourself then… wouldn’t that that just be an obligation as your friend? I mean, I’m sure you aren’t bad at talking or something.”

“I can’t compare this to simply exchanging greetings with an adult, or appeasing a fan. Because you see…” I sat down and smiled. “…Akira likes to keep to himself. I doubt it’s because he does it for some noble reason like lifting the burden from my shoulders or something, but rather, it’s probably because he’s used to being alone.” I paused. “He’s a troublesome person like that. I don’t know how to talk my way around that.”

“…If you say so. Hmm…” Takamaki’s eyes lit up. “How about this, tell me more about your friend, Kurusu-kun, and I’ll try to give with what I can work with. How would you describe him?” Isn’t that what we’re already doing?

“Quite a bit, though he tries to hide it. He likes to divert people’s attention elsewhere with well-timed jokes and…”

“I don’t think the world I see is going to change very soon.”

“…he’s seems to be scared of something.”

“Scared? Of Kamoshida?”

“Perhaps. As stated before, he isn’t good with adults like him, but if I had to guess, it’s… indifference that he’s really concerned with. That people won’t care when injustice happens in front of him. That adults like Kamoshida won’t change. That he himself will stop caring at some point and give up.” Because everything is fiction… a game. “I actually talked to him last night and… I wasn’t sure what the right thing to say, so I ended up dodging the issue.” An absolutely shit response. ‘Have patience and it’ll surely work out’? Hah, no wonder he found it laughable.

Takamaki stood still in mild shock. Her face then transformed into something between concern and intense, as if she was trying to understand the tragic motives of a criminal. “Does he have any other friends?”

“In this school? There’s Sakamoto, but it has only been two days since they have met. He doesn’t know.”

“So it’s just you…”

“Yeah. We… haven’t talked in a long time until recently. After all, the only reason we met again was because of that assault incident.” I sigh. “I want to say that I’m the one who knows him best, and indeed, that might be the case, but… well, then that just makes it that much sadder, huh.”
Takamaki uncrossed her arms. “I don’t know much about you or the transfer, but after looking at what you’re trying to do, him having you as a friend isn’t a sad thing at all. Don’t sell yourself as anything less.” She sighed and approached the desk next to the one I’m sitting at. “...You know.” She sat down. “You got me thinking. A lot of times, I’ve thought about how things would be like without Shiho. Being alone. Being cold. Like your friend, she hides her problems from others. And... I feel it wasn’t my right to press onto it. And honestly, I’m not sure how long it’ll last. And yet...” Takamaki paused. “I don't do a single thing to stop it. I can't do a single thing.”

“So you’re hoping for a miracle?”

“...Yeah,” she choked out.

“Isn’t there another way?”

“I don’t know it’s just….” Takamaki presses her face into her hands, leaving her arms to support her from planting her face onto the desk. “For these past years ever since I enrolled Shujin, Shiho was always by my side. The only one. I remember when she first joined the volleyball team, how her condition seemed to get worse, and how things are now and and...!” Noticing the the crack in her voice, Takamaki exhaled deeply, as if to calm herself.

“I’m sorry, you brought me here for advice, and yet, I don’t know what should do either. I don’t know what I’m doing right now even.”

“That makes two of us then.”

Takamaki stifled a chuckle. “Huh, I’ve never thought I would be able to relate to the student vice-president of all people. We’re more similar than I thought.” Haven’t I heard those words before? “I’m just scared. Thinking about the future and all.”

“I apologize.”

“No, it’s not your fault for bringing it up. It has been this way for while. If anything, I’m grateful, you talked to me. What do you call this? ‘Cathartic’? It should be me who should be apologizing for not being much help.”

“You already did, and you never had to. I’m... glad I chose you to talk about this.”

“Mmm.”

“Attention, attention. All matches have concluded. Please get ready to go home for today.” The school broadcast, in all of its near-robotic glory, rang across the school.”

“I guess I should be going.”

“One last thing,” I stood up. “Do you think, it’s alright to leave things like this?”

“...No. It’s not alright, but...” Takamaki gulps, hands balled into fists. “I know for sure that the police isn’t an option. I already tried, and look where it got me, ha.” The school board doesn’t mind anything if it get’s a few yen in their pockets.... “But now, I’m thinking of putting all to an end.” She stood up and motioned towards the door. “Thank you, Akechi-kun.”

“I see... and thank you.” Before I could ask her what she was planning, she bid her farewell and disappeared from the room.

Now then.
Goro Akechi: Hello, Okumura-san.

Haru Okumura: Akechi-kun, I already told you to just call me Haru. ^D

Goro Akechi: I don’t see you doing the same for me.

Haru Okumura: I will if you do it in return. ^ ^
Haru Okumura: In all seriousness, is there something you need?
Haru Okumura: Don’t tell me you got in trouble again. >_<
Haru Okumura: Didn’t I tell you I’m not going to lend bribe money anymore if you’re not going to pay back.
Haru Okumura: Unless it’s sushi.
Haru Okumura: I can buy off the restaurant if you don't want to wait in line. ouo

Goro Akechi: No, it’s nothing like that.
Goro Akechi: Well
Goro Akechi: I’m going to try my hand at taking down Kamoshida again.

Haru Okumura: o-o!!
Haru Okumura: Did you get a new lead? :O

Goro Akechi: Something like that.
Goro Akechi: Though it’s not too much of an investigation for his deeds at this point.
Goro Akechi: More like a search for a way to take him down.

Haru Okumura: Honestly.
Haru Okumura: If only I knew who was sending the school board that huge amount of money to keep silent
Haru Okumura: I doubt even an Olympic athlete would have as much as my allowance to spare.

Goro Akechi: It’s strange.
Goro Akechi: He certainly has someone backing him.
Goro Akechi: Question is who and why.

Haru Okumura: Still upset that my father won't let me hire private investigators. >:T

Goro Akechi: It’s fine, what’s done is done.
Goro Akechi: I got a few allies to help anyways.

Haru Okumura: Who? ^O

Goro Akechi: Secret

Haru Okumura: Boo
Haru Okumura: How much do they know?

Goro Akechi: The general facts.
Goro Akechi: I’m planning on explaining everything to them tonight.
Goro Akechi: I’ll keep you name out of it, if you like.
Haru Okumura: Are you sure?

Goro Akechi: One of them probably isn't the best at keeping secrets.
Goro Akechi: The only reason I'm going to explain the rest is because it's a necessity to avoid wasting time

Haru Okumura: Hmm, if you say so o-o
Haru Okumura: And thank you.

Goro Akechi: Anyways
Goro Akechi: Rather than a favor, I suppose I'm just giving you the metaphorical 'heads up'
Goro Akechi: I don't know when it'll happen
Goro Akechi: Especially since we don't have a solid plan at the moment
Goro Akechi: But I'm sure of one thing

Haru Okumura: o-o?

Goro Akechi: Metaphorically speaking, one could say
Goro Akechi: 'shit is about to go down'

Haru Okumura: :^D
Haru Okumura: I look forward to it then. :^)
backup plans aren't the best plans

Chapter Summary

but sometimes they're more fun

DATE: 4/13/2016

Ryuji Sakamoto: wat did u do
Ryuji Sakamoto: akechi

Goro Akechi: What?

Ryuji Sakamoto: takamaki came up to us
Ryuji Sakamoto: and told us to ‘back off’ from kamoshida
Ryuji Sakamoto: and that we should follow ur example
Ryuji Sakamoto: dude

Goro Akechi: And this is my doing because...?

Ryuji Sakamoto: you def told her something
Ryuji Sakamoto: cuz that ain’t no ‘warning’ like she said
Ryuji Sakamoto: she’s out for our asses if we pull shit under her

Akira Kurusu: girl was more fearsome than a full grown panther

Ryuji Sakamoto: aaand u just happened to be excluded

Akira Kurusu: tbh tfb

Goro Akechi: Apologies, but it was necessary to gain her cooperation
Goro Akechi: I got the information that I wanted though, so I’m afraid you just have to ‘suck it up’

Akira Kurusu: ooooo
Akira Kurusu: the deets man, give us the deets

Goro Akechi: I can confirm that she is not on Kamoshida’s side
Goro Akechi: Her friendship with Suzui-san is genuine, so the rumors of her being, and I quote, “Kamoshida’s bitch,” is more or less false

Akira Kurusu: woa
Akira Kurusu: when u say ‘i quote’, do ya really mean it
Akira Kurusu: like word by word?

Goro Akechi: I mean it. I heard someone say it themselves in the hallway

Ryuji Sakamoto: seriously?
Ryuji Sakamoto: if it’s like that, there’s no way she’s getting anything out of this
Ryuji Sakamoto: idk how much she likes attention, but that’s def not the kind anyone wants
Ryuji Sakamoto: now that i think about it
Ryuji Sakamoto: when she got in kamoshida’s car that day
Ryuji Sakamoto: maybe
Ryuji Sakamoto: wait

Goro Akechi: After seeing her in the palace,
Goro Akechi: I’m afraid Kamoshida’s intentions are less than pure

Akira Kurusu: understatement of the century
Akira Kurusu: it’s ewwww

Ryuji Sakamoto: even more reason to take that bastard down

Akira Kurusu: but wait didn't he offer us a ride too

Ryuji Sakamoto: but then y she wants us to stop?

Akira Kurusu: could iT BE

Goro Akechi: Akira, stop that train of thought
Goro Akechi: I think she’s planning something on her own.
Goro Akechi: Somehow, I unwittingly encouraged her to take action herself.
Goro Akechi: She probably just told you guys that as a warning.

Akira Kurusu: wawoo
Akira Kurusu: and u don’t know what’s she’s going to do?

Goro Akechi: I don’t have a clue.
Goro Akechi: I do know that she isn’t just going to go to the police. She already tried that once apparently.
Goro Akechi: Whatever it is, she doesn’t want help

Ryuji Sakamoto: damn so the police are useless
Ryuji Sakamoto: and takamaki is up to something
Ryuji Sakamoto: how are we gonna take him down then

Goro Akechi: Akira, has Morgana come up with anything?

Akira Kurusu: o ye, i forgot he’s here

Ryuji Sakamoto: wait u brought him to school

Akira Kurusu: hold on a sec

Ryuji Sakamoto: it’s been one sec

Akira Kurusu: stahp
Akira Kurusu: okay he said
Akira Kurusu: “I think there is a way to stop his actions without resorting to a mental shutdown, but I don’t remember how to do it yet.” - Morgana

Goro Akechi: I see. We’ll wait for him to remember and hopefully it won’t take too long
Goro Akechi: If not, we’ll just have to come up with a Plan B

Ryuji Sakamoto: oof we have to wait for a cat to tell us what to do

Akira Kurusu: “i’m not a cat u little bich” - Morgana
Akira Kurusu: imma just say “- M” every time morgana talks
Ryuji Sakamoto: k
Ryuji Sakamoto: and tell him to suck it up
Ryuji Sakamoto: anyways let’s leave all of this when we get to akechi’s place
Goro Akechi: Alright.
Goro Akechi: Here’s my address
Goro Akechi: <SENT LOCATION>

<Goro Akechi pins a message: <SENT LOCATION>>

Goro Akechi: If you share this with anyone without my permission, I will promise you that you will face the consequences
Goro Akechi: And by consequences, I mean you will never see the light of day again
Akira Kurusu: u know that we can just walk together
Goro Akechi: Again, this is a measure to avoid rumors, so you two should go different paths as well
Goro Akechi: Plus, I’m going to run a few errands, so you can go ahead
Goro Akechi: I already texted my mom that you’ll be arriving, so don’t worry about it
Akira Kurusu: cool
Akira Kurusu: exploding fish hype

Ryuji Sakamoto: seriously, wat is this fish and y is it exploding?

Akira Kurusu: you’ll see
Akira Kurusu: ewe

“Akechi-kun!”

“Hmm?” A bubbly girl with twin pigtails dashed past me in the middle of the hallway, only to come to a screeching halt to turn back to face me. Her movements were exaggerated enough to make me think she was forcing it, but her bright expression seemed to imply otherwise. What is she, a real-life anime girl? “You’re… Serizawa-san, right?”

“Yes!” Mei Serizawa. The self-proclaimed president of the ‘Goro Akechi fanclub’. An unofficial club that is comprised of female fans (and some males) in the school who are admirers of Shujin’s beloved prince. Or so the description says. It’s funny how a few fake smiles and a freshly pressed uniform gets you far. Not that it wasn’t the goal in the first place.

“Is there something you need?”

“Y-Yes, ummm…” For someone who almost crashed into me, she got bashful quite quickly. “I want apologize!” This is… unexpected. She’s already looking heavily distressed in the span of two seconds. Emotional girl. Peripheral vision tells me of the glances being made towards our direction. Leaving now would just gather more attention and produce more assumptions. Best course of action is to maintain damage control.

“Calm down, Serizawa-san. Take your time.”

“T-thanks. Uh, you see… it’s about the rumors that were going around see. Like, like...” Tears welled up in corners of her eyes. “I was kind of panicking when I saw you and those two
troublemakers go to the rooftop together and… I kind of told my friends about it.” Ah. I see.

“But you didn’t say anything outside of the truth, right? I can’t hold you accountable over something you didn’t control.”

“B-But, if I hadn’t it wouldn’t have turned out like this….” She wiped her tears. “I should’ve known about that some people wouldn’t take it well, so….”

“What’s done is done.” I patted her shoulder lightly. “I’m sure it’ll die out sooner or later, so don’t worry about me taking a beating over all of this. After all, I have enthusiastic supporters like you. If anything, I should be thankful for those who aren’t swept up by that incident so easily.”

“A-Akechi-kun…!” Her face got even redder than before. “Of course! There’s no reason for you get involved. You’re a hero of this school, you know!”

It’s funny how much of a disservice they are to me by calling me as such. “Ah, I wouldn’t put it like that, but I appreciate the sentiment. Though I’m curious of one thing.” When she nodded for me to continue, I said, “What did you think when you saw me go to the rooftop?”

“Well…” She put her finger on her chin, eyes looking to the side, as if she was trying to seem cute. “To be honest, I didn’t really think deeply on it right away. I mean, people aren’t supposed to go up there normally, so I thought something might be going on up there. Something like chasing out delinquents hanging out there.”

“But didn’t you just say that you saw us go up there together?”

“Umm…” She paused. “Well, I saw you go up alone, but when I peeked past the door, I saw the other two so I kind of assumed….” Hmm… she corrected herself, so it’s possible that she did see me up there, but why didn’t she point out that my question was strange? Does she not notice, or is that deliberate?

“Is that so?”

“Yeah, I told my friends at the club meeting that since I thought they would agree, but somehow it got like this.” She exhaled deeply. “I’m really really sorry!”

“I already told you, it’s fine. Just be careful from now on, okay? Information travels fast.”

“Y-yeah, you’re right. I just didn’t think it would get this bad… did someone hear me tell the rest of the club? It was after school in the hallways….” If she said it outloud, then it’s possible but… it seems I can’t get anymore information from this conversation. I’ll just have to weed out my suspicions by hand.

“Hmm, perhaps. There’s no use worrying now, though.”

“You’re right. I’ll get going! Sorry for bothering!”

I didn’t bother reminding her to stop apologizing every two seconds as she ran off into the other side of the hallway, only to bump into someone and crash into the ground in a mere three seconds. As a crowd started to develop around the scene, I made haste to the stairs.

The rooftop was empty aside from a young girl with fluffy hair tending the plants at the corner. The sky is still as repulsive as ever, but at least it was a light blue rather than a sickly orange. Hearing the noise of the running automobiles below, outside of the fences of this school, seemed distant and
small from the top, just like it has always been ever since I came to this school. It’s noise. Outside.

No matter how high your status is behind bars, you are still a prisoner.

“Oh, Akechi-kun! The carrots you wanted won’t be ready until two days from now.”

“I know. Before I leave school, there’s something I want your input on.”

Okumura’s eyes widened for a split second. “This is unusual. Does it have to do with Kamoshida?” She said lowly.

“Yes. There are little options we can take at this point since the police aren’t reliable. More than likely, what we’re about to do will be outside of the jurisdiction of the law.” I sigh. “Are you okay with that?”

It didn’t take her long to respond. “If someone like Kamoshida is running free because of the limitations of the law, then it’s our duty to correct what is wrong with our own hands, until the law corrects itself.” She smiles. “Isn’t that what we agreed on?”

The first few incidents as the so-called ‘snitch’ of this school (though opposed to the implications, none of them are reported to the authorities directly) were done alone. It was good fortune in my part that I looked into Haru Okumura’s case with and her troubles (to put it lightly) with her fiance on whim. Although I was unable to do much to settle it (even I can’t do much when the CEO of a conglomerate is pushing the marriage), she has become an indispensable ally since then.

“You’re right, but what if it meant something like murder?”

“Wha—” The implication set her off guard. “Well that… should be avoided no matter what. Even if it seems like they deserve it.” She must be thinking of her father at the moment. CEO of Okumura Foods. A man of ambition and little ethics. “Why are you…”

“Don’t worry, we haven't reached that point of desperation.” Not to mention the possible consequence of painting Kamoshida as a martyr. “But what if it’s more on the… forceful side of things?”

“Akechi-kun, we already dabbled into blackmail and bribery. It’s a bit late to question our morality in concern of the law at this point.”

“Correction. The blackmail and bribery that I dabbled in. As far as I’m concerned, you just lend money to me as a friend.”

“Wouldn’t that still make me your accomplice?”

“That’s not what I’ll say if I get caught. Nor will I leave any proof.” I gave her a knowing smile.

“Of course.” Okumura exhaled in resignation.

“Still, both of those things doesn’t cause direct harm. To stop Kamoshida, simple words or money isn’t going to do the job. Force is the only option I can think of.”

“Akechi-kun…”

“Don’t worry, I won’t drag you with me if it comes to that.”

“That’s not…” She paused. “Just be careful, alright? I know you’re a good person at heart. You wouldn’t be doing any of this if people like Kamoshida didn’t exist.”
“I will.”

“And… you don’t have to do it alone, okay? I’m free to help. After all, I have the same goals as you do!” Okumura’s eyes are lit up in determination. People like her who wear their heart on their sleeve… reminds me of a certain blonde.

I just sighed. It’s better to accept that than letting her do what she wants on whim. I don’t need another Takamaki situation. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Just not more bribe money, okay? Give me call if you need help.”

“Actually, there is one thing— no, two.”

“Hmm…?” Okumura cocked her head to the side in curiosity.

“Can you look into my fanclub for a bit? More specifically, the president and her inner circle.”

“Why them?”

“I have some suspicions that there’s a mole in the club. My current information leads to me to believe that there is a possibility that an accomplice of Kamoshida’s in there.”

“Hmm… I suppose that after yourself, the fanclub would know the most about your activities. I’ll try my best. What else do you need?”

“If possible, could you keep track of Ann Takamaki’s movements? She might do something that’ll get her in danger.”

Okumura nodded. “The girl who is rumored to be involved with Kamoshida, correct? We don’t cross paths very often, with her being a year lower, but she works part-time as a model, I believe. I think I can get an acquaintance from the agency she works for to check up on her since I’ll be tending these plants in the meantime.”

“Thank you, Okumura-san. Contact me if anything happens.”

“Gee, I already told you Haru is just fine.” Okumura’s light tone made it obvious that she isn’t expecting me follow her advice any time soon. I don’t plan to.

As I walked away, Okumura waved her dirt-covered hands with her usual bright smile and even under this oppressive sky and noisy city, her face seemed to shine past all of that. Reliable. Trustworthy.

A partner in crime. Huh.

“I’m home.”

“Ah, Goro! You’re here!” A cheery voice resounded from the kitchen to the door. Not that it was particularly loud, my apartment is just rather cramped by normal standards. A brunette with shoulder-length hair was wearing an apron when she came into view, sporting a bright smile upon her slightly aged face. If anyone saw her for the first time, one would think she was a beautiful woman in her prime— unless they could see past the slight wrinkles and say she still is. “Your friends have been here for some time, so they already ate.”

“Was it fish?”
“We did have some leftovers from yesterday. You know how I am with wasting food.” She winked. *Then why did you buy 10 pounds of tuna? Why do you do this to yourself?* “Plus, Akira-kun brought a cute cat to dig in! I always wanted one, though cats don’t seem to like me….” *I hope Morgana didn’t act out to badly for being called as such… We don’t need another incident of a cat ruining the limited supply known as my mother’s clothing.*

“Where are they right now?”

“They’re in your room.” *Shit.* “Normally I wouldn’t let them since I know you like to be tidy, but since it’s Akira-kun, you wouldn’t mind, right?” *No, I do mind. I mind very very much.*

“I see, it’s no problem. I’ll go see them right now.” *If Akira wrecked my room like he did before, I will tear down his cat plushie collection one by one, rip out their cotton guts, and--*

Where is Akira staying at anyways? Someone must’ve taken him in since he’s staying at Tokyo.

“Let me know if you need anything, okay? I’ll be in my room, so just ask.”

“Alright.” She smiled and went off her way, carrying a box of what I assume to be sweets. She’s probably going into her room to gush over this actor she particularly likes and watch a marathon of all of the dramas he’s featured in. Going into her room without her permission was probably one of the top ten mistakes I’ve made in my life. Being a fangirl isn’t limited by age, I learned.

I opened the door to my room. It was small, just enough to barely fit all of the visitors, including myself. Textbooks and manga are all neatly stacked at the back left-hand corner, my desk right beside it. On the other side was my bed, currently occupied by a certain black-haired nincompoop, aimlessly turning the page of some magazine that I’m certain doesn’t belong to me. It’s fortunate that the absolute worst scenario didn’t happen, but the way Akira sprawled himself across my bed, shirt slightly lifted, exposing his belly, was for some strange reason, absolutely infuriating to look at. “Oh hey, Goro. Ryuji and I were just talking about your mom and stuff.”

Sakamoto was face down on the floor, surprisingly still and quiet. “I thought my mom was overly doting, but yours is a whole ‘nother level. I can’t even…..” He groaned. “Moms. Man.”

Even Morgana seemed tired, all curled up at the corner, right in front of the closet door. “You know…” A flicker of despair flashed in the corner of his eyes. “I’ve never thought the day would come for me to fear fish of all things.”

“Yeah, that was… something.” Ryuji exhaled. “I was kind of under the impression that the fish would explode in my mouth or something, but it actually tasted pretty normal….”

Akira rolled over. “Putting aside the amount of fish on the plate and the mysterious exploding noise in the kitchen, am I right?”

“Yeah. Freaked the crap out of Morgana.”

“I-I didn’t freak out!” Morgana jumped. *He sure got his energy back quick.*

“Dude, the neighbors knocked on the door because they thought we were beating up a cat ‘cause you yelled. Didn’t help that fish were exploding in the back. So many of them, too. I don’t even know how she does it.” Ryuji looked like he was about to get a migraine. “Why did we force ourselves to finish all of it, Akira?”

“Goro’s mom has these strange powers, you see. She can gush over her favorite celebrity for two hours until our ears bleed and we’ll still do what she wants. Must’ve gotten them from the god of
fish. Cursed to blow up every single fish she cooks, but has absolute authority over the human race. Individuality is dead. Free will is a myth. We’re all slaves to the fish god.”

“Holy shit, Akira.” Morgana sounds like he’s about at his limit.

I cleared my throat. “Don’t blame my mom because you’re pushovers.” Why do I talk to these guys again? “Besides, I didn’t call you guys here to fool around. We ne--”

“Then again...” Akira crawled closer towards Ryuji, fell off my bed, and put his hand on the blond’s shoulder. His grip visibly tightened. “You did say you like older women, didn’t you?” Ryuji’s face instantly flushed and spouted some incoherent noise. That face. It was the face of guilt.

Do I need to break some arms today?

“Sakamoto.” Ryuji’s fear started seeping into his expression. It’s funny how he jumped a little at the instant he heard my voice and starts sweating as I stared. “Did you--”

“I didn’t, I swear! Never! I-- I’d never flirt a bro’s mom! That’s against the bro code, t-the code of bros! Bro’s code!” This guy... thank god my mom is probably wearing headphones at this moment because I will literally shoot someone if the door behind me opens because of Ryuji’s sheer inability to control his volume.

“He called your mom a milf, Goro.” Akira gave a wink. God, Akira isn’t even trying to hide the fact that he’s lying. Ryuji stood straight up, escaping Akira’s grasp with a panicked look on his face.

“That’s a lie! That’s…!”

“Sakamoto,” I repeated. I walked up to him, and put my hand on his shoulder. “Don’t even think about it.”

We stood silent for a few seconds before Ryuji collapsed to his knees and curled up into fetal position, lying on his side. He stared off into space, past my feet, as if his entire worldview was destroyed and exploded like my mom’s fish on a frying pan. Fuck, what if he cries? I will burn all of our bodies in this room if he sheds a single goddamn tear, I swear to god, I--

I give up. “I’m just kidding, Sakamoto. I know Akira was just joking.”

Ryuji gave the largest sigh of relief I’ve ever heard in my life. Probably. “Oh thank god.” What was I thinking? Of course he wasn’t going to cry, this is Ryuji we’re talking about. I-- I slapped myself in the face.

Akira bursted out laughing. “Goro’s a soft boy. He acts tough, but he won’t hurt you.”

“Unlike a certain person.” Morgana sighed in annoyance. “I know I said this before, but you guys are such children.”

Akira gave a cheeky grin. “To be fair Morgana, we technically are.”

“Is that supposed to make it better?” Why do I feel like the cat is the adult in the room half of the time?

“Oh yeah, this adult talk reminds me of something.” Ryuji sat up. What now? “I didn’t expect you to be gung ho about this sort of thing or anythin’ like that, but seriously, not a single porno mag?” Are you fucking serious, Ryuji?
“That’s none of your business, Sakamoto.” Did he go through my room to find one? What was he planning to do-- defile my fucking room? Why couldn’t he just entertain himself with something else? I have the full Featherman collection on display... a masterpiece is right there! Entertain yourself! Just not that way!

“Yeah Ryuji, I already told you that he’s gay.” I glared at Akira. That’s also none of his business either!

“Somehow, I find that believable. Has an entire fanclub. Never in a relationship with a chick. Yeah. Can’t believe I didn’t guess that earlier.”

“Can we not talk about my sexual orientation?”

“But Goro, didn’t you say you didn’t care what people think of you yesterday?”

“What I don’t mind you knowing and what everyone else knows are two vastly different things.” Also, I was referring to my middle school self-- why is he wasting time with questions he already knows the answers to?

“Hum, but Ryuji isn’t everyone else, right?” Akira lowered his voice. “He’s a special boy ain’t he?”

Ryuji stared at Akira in the eye. “Dude.”

Akira stared at Ryuji in the eye. “Bro.”

“Oh my god, can we get back on topic?” I’m surprised Morgana was patient enough to tolerate it for this long.

“Ha ha, what topi--” Before Akira could finish his statement, I shoved my hand onto his mouth for him to shut up before he derails the conversation even more.

“Thanks, Morgana.”

Morgana sat up straight. “Anyways, where do we start? You said that it would be easier to explain the stuff you knew about Kamoshida if we’re here.”

“Before that, care to tell about your findings today?”

“Oh yeah, that.” Ryuji crossed his legs. “Didn’t find much. We didn’t get through everyone, but no one wanted to talk at all. All of them we sportin’ some massive injuries… I don’t get how anyone could brush off as ‘practice’.”

Akira seemed to phase out of his joking persona and adopted a more neutral expression. Finally. “A person’s name, Yuuki Mishima, came up from one of the first years. We saw him before we left the school, but he didn’t say anything new either. He said that getting proof is useless since everyone, including the parents, are keeping silent.”

I nodded. “Mhm. Like Sakamoto stated, most claim that their wounds are from practice, but anyone with a working brain and two eyes can deduce that’s not the case. Well, saving those who legitimately believe that it’s normal because the team is at the national level.” I sigh. “Anything else?”

“Apparently Mishima got something called ‘special coaching’ and seeing what was in Kamoshida’s palace, we can guess what that means,” Ryuji explained.
“Both men and women are objectified within his mind. Albeit in slightly different forms, they were
slaves nonetheless….” Morgana’s eyes—no, his entire body seemed to droop. “Agh, if only I could
remember what to do to change his heart!”

“...Change his heart?” Wait...

“Well, a change in cognition. You know what I mean.”

“No, that’s not it, it’s just…” Akira leaned forwards, chin supported by his interlocked hands. “Isn’t
the Thaumaturge rumored to be have been able to do that?”

“Supposedly, yes, but it’s not as if we’re going to pray for an urban legend to come save us, Akira.”

“I guess.” Akira sighed in disappointment.

“At least this way, I guess it doesn’t make my attempts to remember a waste of time.” Morgana
whispered to himself, as if he’s trying to make sure no one heard him clearly. He straightened up.
“But we came here to discuss a plan B, right? No need to get worked up over it now.”

“Weren’t you the first to get worked up?” Ryuji gave an amused grin.

“D-details!”

“Right.” I walked towards my desk. “Anyways, yes, we do need to get to that, but first, let’s get all
of the information we know sorted out.” From the top right corner, I took a notebook that lied on the
bottom of a stack of other books.

“What’s that for?”

I took out a pen. “Notes. Even if I don’t find it necessary to look over this again, they say that things
are easier to remember if you write them down at least once. Plus, it’ll keep our thoughts in order.”
As I opened up the notebook, the others sat up and approached my desk to have a better view. In
Morgana’s case, he leaped onto my desk.

“First, we got information from the Palace.” The word ‘Palace’ was written and underlined. “As
stated before, Kamoshida’s desires has become so distorted that the students he’s supposed to be
teaching as objects for his own pleasure and ego. He views himself as a king, one of absolute
authority, and his followers as his ‘knights’ or ‘pawns’. Pretty straight forward as a distortion. I want
to confirm one thing though. Morgana,” My hand stopped writing for a moment. “Are Shadows,
specifically the Shadow Kamoshida we saw, capable of deception within the Metaverse?”

“Are Shadows capable of pointless recaps?”

“Shut up, Sakamoto.”

“Well… Shadows have personalities just like us, albeit generally more one-dimensional since they
simply represent a single aspect of the human cognition. The kinds of Shadows we encounter in a
Palace would differ depending who’s Palace we’re talking about. In that sense, I suppose they could
lie, especially if said person is cunning or deceitful.” Makes sense. If a Shadow is supposed to
represent their host in some way, there has to be a way to represent the trait of a liar.

“However, if we’re talking about the Palace rulers, it can only go so far before their base desires
come out. These Shadows are the ruler’s suppressed selves-- the part that they don’t want to see.
That’s why if we talk to the Shadow, the Kamoshida in real life won’t remember, even if said
Shadow is technically part of himself.” So the deceitfulness of a ruler’s Shadow counterpart will only
be apparent if they don’t see themselves as a liar consciously…. Otherwise, they would just boast about fooling others.

“So it shouldn’t be a concern whether or not Shadow Kamoshida is hiding things from us. Kamoshida knows he’s lying, so instead of covering it up, his shadow would just boast about it.” That makes it less troublesome. “Applying that same logic, Kamoshida wouldn’t necessarily call himself a king of a castle to himself in the morning, but he accepts it as truth subconsciously?”

“Something like that, yeah. No matter what Palace you go into, it only accounts the side of them that the ruler doesn’t consciously see, hence why a school isn’t a school in his mind. If they don’t care about it or if their view wasn’t distorted on the subconscious level, it’ll just appear as normal, just like the area outside of the castle.” That’s why only the school itself seemed odd….

“I see. Anyways, with that, we know for sure what Kamoshida sees and how his desires distorts his worldview to fancy him at the center. We cannot use this as proof, however. Our phones do not work in the Metaverse, and I doubt explaining it wouldn’t grant us the results we need.”

“Question.” Akira raised his hand, as if he wanted to be called on by a teacher. “If telling them won’t work, how about we just show them it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, we know that only one person needs to use the app. I mean, Ryuji was the one who pressed it, but then we all got dragged into it anyways. What’s stopping us from dragging some cop in with us?”

“That’s… risky. There’s a reason why people keep their powers secret in manga, Akira. If it’s known by the police, who knows what kind of things would be done to us or what impact it’ll make on society. Even if the police kept it a secret somehow, there’s nothing that could stop someone from taking advantage of the Metaverse. It’s best if we kept it to ourselves. The world isn’t prepared for this kind of power.”

“Hmm… I guess it’ll be kind of funny them trying to handle this in the grand scheme of things though.”

“Let’s not cause society to collapse on itself because you thought of something funny, alright?”

“Right, right.”

I went on. “After the Palace, we got what we found out today.” I wrote another heading labeled ‘Reality - 4/13’. “Aside from confirming our suspicions regarding the volleyball team, I can confirm that Ann Takamaki is not on Kamoshida’s side, as I have already told you.”

“About that.” Ryuji scratched the back of his head. “What is it she said that makes you think that? Well, aside from what you told us already.”

“Rather than what she said specifically, it has more to do with her general attitude. The way she spoke about her friend, Shiho Suzui, didn’t seem to be imitated” Unless if she just happens to be a genius actress. “Plus, in retrospect, it does explain one thing that was nagging me.”

“What is it?”

“Why people fell into despair over the situation in the first place. Somebody must’ve at least tried and failed to get back at Kamoshida at some point. Takamaki claimed that she had reported to the police at some point and if that’s true, that explains it.”
“How? It’s just one person.”

Before I could say anything, Akira spoke. “Think about it, Ryuji. Remember what happened with the track team-- why didn’t they do anything?”

“Well, it’s ‘cause Kamoshida was breathin’ on our backs with expulsion and his abuse weakened us pretty damn well.”

“And what about after you left? How did that leave the track team?”

“It… destroyed them. Our shot in nationals went down the drain….”

“See, even if it’s just one person, it could make the difference between being simply obedient to completely broken. Their will just has to be right before the breaking point. If a bunch of people tried to report Kamoshida at the same time, there’s no way it wouldn’t be unnoticed by the media, so all Kamoshida would have to do is to manipulate them from grouping up by setting up an example-- a scapegoat to lay the blame away from him.”

“Exactly. An organized protest among the students would be a hard hit, no matter the result of the trial. Kamoshida isn’t dumb, he knows how to use people and get away with it.” All of this for something so simple as being unable to control his desires…!

“And that manipulation comes in the form of abuse and false rumors… wait, so then the reason why Takamaki’s rep is like that was because…!”

“The next group people most involved after the victims are people like Takamaki. Friends. Family. He’ll need a way to silence them, too,” Akira said darkly.

I nodded. “Even with human stupidity and cruelty taken into account, it’s hard to believe that every single parent turned a blind eye at the face of obvious abuse. From loved ones to casual friends, all of those people could’ve done something without the fear of Kamoshida beating them to the ground. But why hasn’t that happened?”

Morgana eyes widened in realization. “The rumors….”

“Takamaki must’ve got Kamoshida’s attention in some way. That’s why the rumors around her are specific to her, and thus, alone in that department. It helps her be isolated from the rest of the student body, a target for ridicule to ignore the bigger picture.”

“And that’s only because Takamaki stepped out of line.” Akira interjected. “For everyone else, a good threat or two would be enough. Fear that that their child might be hurt even worse if they get involved. Fear that what they can do isn’t enough. Fear that defying Kamoshida will damage their own reputation. No matter how you spin it, there some kind of risk on all sides. The odds less than favorable.”

“He made an example out of Takamaki, similarly to the way Sakamoto was for the track team. Well known enough for everyone in the school to know and inevitably, their parents. Not enough for the media to make a big deal about it.”

“Dude… this is starting to feel like a massive conspiracy or some crap. One dude having this much influence? Even for volleyball and his rep as an Olympic athlete, it’s…”

“You’re right,” I said. Ryuji shot up. He didn’t expect someone to agree with his guess. “He has to have someone higher up backing him. I’m not the kind of person to fall back on government conspiracy theories of all things, but… there has to be some…”
necessary resources to pull all of this off. That or the faculty are way too good at what they are told to do.”

“Hold on, I know I’m the one who said it, but why so sure that someone outside the school is helping him?”

“Does it have to do with what you already knew, Goro?”

“Yes. I won’t disclose that person’s name, as per request, but even with their help, I was unable to bribe the school board to ditch Kamoshida.” Being out paid by the daughter of a conglomerate as large as Okumura Foods… just who is doing this? “And that person was by no means poor.”

“What?! You tried to bribe him out?” Morgana and Ryuji spoke at the same time.

“Didn’t work, so I’m not going to try again.”

Akira changed the subject. “Hmm… so picking a fight with Kamoshida might actually mean provoking a larger enemy?”

“An unknown one at that.” With unknown motives… I understand the principal, but what does a third party have to gain out of this?

“Damn…! What are we supposed to do!?”

A voice outside of the room echoed. “Goro? Are you okay up there?” Agh.

“We’re fine!” I turned towards Ryuji. “Keep quiet, getting my mom involved is the last thing I want.”

“Right… sorry.”

“Anyways, I don’t intend to give up, but it does limit our options. We don’t know exactly what they’re capable of, but fortunately, they probably don’t know what we can do either.”

“...The Metaverse, right?”

“Yeah, I sincerely doubt any of these adults have access to it, the supposed Thaumaturge aside. Even they can’t do anything if Kamoshida gave himself up. That’s why whatever Morgana comes up with is plan A, it’s the safest method we got despite the dangers in the Palace.”

Ryuji was visibly confused. “So a plan B to take down Kamoshida down would be…?”

“Something that none of the adults would expect from mere high school students. Ones under constant watch at that.”

Akira chuckled. “Huhu… so something with big risk and big gains, huh.”

“Inevitably, yes. Normal, tasteful methods are not an option because Kamoshida already covered them. To make up our lack of allies, we have to work with our limited resources to pull off something just as effective as Plan A.”

“But what do we have other than the Metaverse?” Morgana made a curious expression.

I couldn’t keep myself from smiling. “There’s one idea that has been on my mind. We’ll just need some rope and a good pair of fists.”
impatience isn't a virtue

Chapter Summary

but you only got one shot at it anyways

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“So that’s how you came up with that plan.” The silver-haired woman stated matter of factly. Memory wells up. Sae… Niijima. Right, that was her name. That person’s sister.

“There were little options available to us.” A mistake was the cause. A mistake. Limiting options is a consequence to cover mistakes. That’s why we….

She sighs. “Little options, you say… and yet, you decided that such measures carry fewer consequences than if you hadn’t done anything. Parading such actions as ‘justice’ doesn’t make you better than a criminal. Kidnapping? Murder? On top of that, embezzlement and drugs were somehow involved. These aren’t even actions a rebellious high schooler would normally take, much less resembling anything worthy of justification.” Not all of those things happened during the first heist. Not all of those things were our deeds at all. Lies-- not Sae’s lies, someone else’s. There’s no use in trying to dispel them.

“Even after knowing what the adults have done? What would’ve happened if nothing was done?”

For a split second, there was a crack in her facade. Her lips tightened. “...Even after knowing.” Under this dim lighting, the dark circles under her eyes probably seemed darker than it should be. Nothing much to blame her for, especially after recent events. “Look, no matter your reasons, it’s a crime under the eyes of the law, so let’s continue your testimony if you want a chance for a lesser sentence.”

“Very well.” There will be no need to beg for a lesser sentence. There’s no need to spread the truth. The end is already coming.

But I can still hear that voice in my head-- Akira’s voice, to push onwards.

Of course, of course, he would say that.

“If that plan you mentioned was your backup and this so-called Metaverse is your tool for the original plan, how and why did you end up executing both of them?”

“The reason was simple.”

“Simple?”

“Too simple.”

DATE: 4/14/2016
Ryuji Sakamoto: okay so lemme get this straight

Akira Kurusu: GO TO SLEEP -M
Akira Kurusu: go to sleep it’s 3 am

Ryuji Sakamoto: dude u don’t have to do it twice

Akira Kurusu: it ruins the effect
Akira Kurusu: also wat do need to get straight
Akira Kurusu: cuz there r many things i can think of
Akira Kurusu: both literally and metaphorically

Ryuji Sakamoto: ew nah
Ryuji Sakamoto: it has nothing to with that
Ryuji Sakamoto: whatever ur talkin about

Akira Kurusu: then about plan B?
Akira Kurusu: i mean, it’s pretty straightforward
Akira Kurusu: we don’t even do that much cuz goro is paranoid and stuff

Ryuji Sakamoto: it’s just
Ryuji Sakamoto: i feel we forgot to talk about something

Akira Kurusu: ye?

Ryuji Sakamoto: well we kinda did but not really
Ryuji Sakamoto: we know takamaki is gonna do something

Akira Kurusu: ?
Akira Kurusu: arytyju

Ryuji Sakamoto: but what do you think she’ll do?

Akira Kurusu: sagiu;h;

Ryuji Sakamoto: dude???

Akira Kurusu: sorsory moragraona is
Akira Kurusu: hearijoehjlp

Ryuji Sakamoto: actually nah, i get it
Ryuji Sakamoto: just put ur phone on silent and throw it across the room

Akira Kurusu: kkkkkkkkk

Ryuji Sakamoto: so i’m just gonna go on a
Ryuji Sakamoto: wat do ya call it, a monologue?
Ryuji Sakamoto: ye, i’m gonna do that, just read it in the morning
Ryuji Sakamoto: back on topic
Ryuji Sakamoto: takamaki knows basically the same stuff we did, minus the palace and all of that.
Ryuji Sakamoto: aannnnnd she’s targeted by kamoshida. wondering if that maybe, her plan isn’t that different than ours? like maybeee?
Ryuji Sakamoto: i mean, if she comes up with something like that
Ryuji Sakamoto: wouldn’t that be like, bad?
Ryuji Sakamoto: cuz like, the plan depends on us not getting caught and her getting in trouble is a no
Ryuji Sakamoto: so uh
Ryuji Sakamoto: idk might just be nothing
Ryuji Sakamoto: it won’t be a problem monanana picks up the pace
Ryuji Sakamoto: and uh maybe takamaki just, idk doesn’t do it
Ryuji Sakamoto: uh
Ryuji Sakamoto: i think that’s all I want to say??
Ryuji Sakamoto: damn i still can’t sleep
Ryuji Sakamoto: pickin some coffee now
Ryuji Sakamoto: wait we ran out
Ryuji Sakamoto: should i go get one outside
Ryuji Sakamoto: actually nah, too dark
Ryuji Sakamoto: um
Ryuji Sakamoto: uhhhhhhhhhhhh
Ryuji Sakamoto: uhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh
Ryuji Sakamoto: gonna spam some memes i guess

Goro Akechi: do that and i’ll find you w/ a knife in hand
Goro Akechi: and u will not like the result

Ryuji Sakamoto: --
Ryuji Sakamoto: <SENT IMG: thisisameme.jpg>

I carried a butter knife with me to school, but unfortunately, Ryuji didn’t show up. Seeing his cowardliness was enough to make me give in and provide a small bit of mercy, so I messaged him back that he was off the hook. Akira also didn’t come since he overslept. Apparently, he actually threw his phone across the room, so when his alarm rang, neither he nor Morgana heard it. Also, it may or may not of have been badly damaged so he’ll need a new cell. He could’ve just came in late like the first day, but he just said “nah” and didn’t bother.

It’s pretty nostalgic, to be honest.

Regardless, classes passed without a hitch. Morgana hasn’t reported anything regarding his missing memories nor has Okumura reported any abnormalities on her end either. To prepare for future journeys into the Metaverse, Akira advised this morning to stock up in medicine and weapons. Apparently, he lives in an attic of a cafe named Leblanc, so there is plenty of space to store these items nearby. Akira went to visit a clinic with Morgana and Ryuji to the same store where he got the model gun. I should go visit that cafe later.

In short, there was little for me to do. Strange, as the past three days have been chock full of extraordinary events mashed together like a rushed piece of literature. There is this… certain emptiness because of that. Nothing unwelcoming, of course. Rest outside of sleep is by no means tiring.

But still.

There wasn’t a reason to rush home. Mom shouldn’t be home until late at night today. Homework? Eh. Not much was given out, so it could be done later. Procrastination isn’t a habit of mine, but sitting at a desk isn’t what I need. I recall being called something like a workaholic, but I wouldn’t describe it like that. Doing work just happened to be the most productive use of my time is all.

After checking the time, it became clear that I was pacing back and forth in the hallway for the past 20 minutes. Something to do, something, something, something….
Cycling around the city seemed like a nice idea, though now I suppose I have a reason to walk back home. It’s a hobby I picked up when I first arrived in this city. Unlike the small, countryside village Akira and I used to live in, Tokyo was crowded, and yet expansive in its own way. Exploring the nooks and crannies of the city eventually became a habit and I found the bicycle to be a useful tool to be swift without missing out on the great sights that a subway wouldn’t provide. Although I haven’t done it as often as before, cycling itself is still a good stress reliever.

Right when I made that decision, I felt a tap on my shoulder.

“Uhh, I’m not disturbing you or anything, right?” When I turned, I saw a familiar girl with a black ponytail. Upon closer look, there were faint discolorations on her skin. Bruises. If my memory is correct… she is the girl who was with Takamaki yesterday.

“Oh, no it’s fine.” In the corner of my eye, I see groups of girls and guys. I know I built my reputation for a reason, but it’s a little suffocating to know that every movement I make during the day is being watched. “Is there something you need, Suzui-san?”

“Yes, um… have you seen Ann today? You were the one who called her yesterday, right Akechi-kun?”

Ah. “That’s correct. Though unfortunately, I haven’t. Were you two planning to meet up?”

The girl nodded. “We do almost every day. I contacted her and she said she had a photo shoot earlier than usual, but….” Could it be, she…?

I don’t want to spare her any unnecessary details…. “Did Takamaki-san tell you about it?”

Suzui shook her head. “No… well, she did, but I’m pretty sure it’s a lie. She isn’t exactly the best actor I know.”

“Oh, what did she say?”

“That you asked her for fashion advice. Pretty ridiculous, isn’t it?” Of course, she said that.

“I suppose. Though, please understand that it was supposed to be a private conversation for a reason. She’s only unwilling to tell you the details under my request.”

“I see… then it really has nothing to do with that time?”

“Well…” How to go around this… giving the same excuse as Takamaki might be too weak for Suzui to drop the issue, but perhaps getting her off my tail is enough. “I can’t speak for what Takamaki is thinking, but what we discussed didn’t really concern an issue you or Takamaki are involved with. I spoke with her because I thought she was the next best person to ask for advice.”

“The next best?”

“Yes, I spoke with Niijima-san before since she the closest person, but I couldn’t help but feel that her advice was fairly… lackluster. I suppose she didn’t know what to say. Takamaki was helpful though, so I’m satisfied now.”
Suzui gave a small smile. “I won’t pry, but let me know if you see her, okay? I’ll give you my number.”

“Are you sure that’s alright?”

Suzui nodded. “It’s no problem. Ann is usually good at judging a person’s character. If you were a bad person, I’m sure she would’ve told me.”

Exchanging numbers is a trivial task, but it’s almost concerning how easily Suzui trusts people, despite what she’s going through. Maybe it’s better to think of it as her trust in Takamaki, rather than myself, but even then….

Bah, no use thinking about it. I don’t see myself regretting giving Suzui my number anyways.

“I’ll let you know if I see her. I’ll be off now.”

Suzui waved goodbye, wilting just a bit when she clutched her elbow in pain. You’d think she’d be more careful.

I hope she’ll be alright on her own.

It’s almost comical how easy it was to find Takamaki.

Alright, I wasn’t actually trying to find her when I did. After thirty minutes cycling, the idea of scouting Kamoshida’s actions popped into mind. Stalking is a crime, but really, I don’t need to monitor Kamoshida’s every move every day. (not that I haven’t before) It’s simply a matter of means to get that man’s address, as that information is, understandably, private. If plan B needed to be executed, it would be much easier to do it when he’s at home after school rather than at Shujin, so I might as well know now. I have a few hours to spare before curfew.

I suspected that a gym teacher would hang around, well, a gym, but I suppose that was a bit too optimistic after stopping by a few. With little clues, I suppose trying to look around on a bike is an inefficient endeavor, but I’d take that over doing nothing. Nothing is the worst choice I could make. Even something meaningless is better than nothing at all.

Minutes become hours and before I knew it, it was already past sunset. Night sets itself comfortably over the red light district. I thought of coming here earlier, due to Kamoshida’s status as a predator, it’s more likely he’ll come here at night, for obvious reasons.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a familiar pair of bouncy, blonde pigtails, not too far away. And that’s when it hit.

“Heeey, wha- what *hic* are ya doin’ with that, missus?” A drunk leering over the nearest girl at the front of a seedy bar. Of course.

Takamaki, who is visibly uncomfortable, tucks away what she is holding under her arm. A box about the size of a basketball-- no, a little smaller than that. “Uh… do you need someone to pick you up?” She’s already being way too considerate.

“The only… *hic* the only thing I need to pick up is the… the, uh, I forgot.” Whatever the pickup line was, the drunk not only staggered over his lines but also over his own feet.

“Uh. Just. Turn around and, uh…” Takamaki clearly didn’t know what to do. She started pushing the man back into the bar nearby. “How about you go back in! The night is, uh, still young and all of
that!"

“B-But, you, the thing you’re holding… is it mine?”

“No no, you’re mistaking it for something else, I swear!”

“Mmm, you’re pretty cute, though. Familiar. Maybe… just maybe…” That slobbering face grew even more distorted and as his face got closer to Takamaki… “You came here… you came here to--”

A loud SMACK resounded.

Her patience wore thin as she ran off. Most people were minding their own business, so hopefully, she won’t have to worry about even more of those incessant rumors. I gave quick chase. Takamaki stopped in her tracks at a dark alley soon enough, holding the cardboard box in her hands tightly. I approached her as if I just saw out of the corner of my eyes.

“Takamaki?”

“Akechi-kun! What are you doing here?” She seems to be still rattled by the previous incident.

Ah. Right, there isn’t much I could say about why I am at the red-light district without giving myself away. “I could ask you the same. This isn’t exactly the safest place in Tokyo, though I suppose you know that the drunk man from earlier is proof of that.”

“Eh? You saw that?” I’m more surprised that so little reacted at all.

“I saw the part where you smacked him and ran off, yes.”

“Ah, yeah. He was kind of…”

“No need to explain.” I cleared my throat. “Suzui said she was worried about you. Said you didn’t meet up with her like usual.”

“Yeah, I uh…” Takamaki fiddled with the ends of her hair. “I told her that I had an early photo shoot. Guess she didn’t believe me, haha.” A brief silence fell upon us. No, this conversation has to keep going.

“For the integrity of my duties as part of the student council, I hope you don’t mind if I asked what you’re up to?”

“Yeah, it’s… nothing, really.” She sighed. It only took a few moments for Takamaki to relent as my silence was enough to tell her that ‘no, you aren’t getting out of this one that easily.’

“I guess it’s fine if I tell you. Not ‘cause the student council-- but well, you know.” Takamaki scratched the back of her head. “You know how I told you that I wanted to stop Kamoshida instead of waiting even more?” I nodded for her to continue.

“You see, Kamoshida has been… approaching me. He hasn’t done anything serious yet, but I know what he’s up to. Calling me to his home….”

“Ah.” That’s concerning.

Okay, that’s really concerning, but I already saw this coming judging from what we could inference from Kamoshida’s Palace.

“Yeah, it’s pretty bad. He said all of that stuff, and told me if I wanted Shiho out of the front-lines for
volleyball… I’ll have to comply.” At that last part, Takamaki made a resigned— no, that’s not it—a
disgusted face.

“So, that’s why….”

She nodded. “Yeah, he… really pisses me off.” Somehow, that felt like an understatement. Like she’s holding herself back from shedding tears. No, upon closer look, it looks like her tears already
dried up a long time ago. “And after what you told me, I now know it’s not just me or Shiho or even
just the volleyball team. As long as he’s there, he’ll always be a threat, whether it be transfer students
or incoming freshmen. That’s why… I thought of a plan.”

“And that is…?”

“…Promise me you won’t tell anyone.”

“I promise.” I offered my pinky, and Takamaki gave a slightly amused face for some reason.
Regardless, she hanged her pinky over mine and gave it a good shake.

“Thing is… I want to kidnap him. I won’t go as far as killing him or anything like that, but… that’s
the only thing I can think of since I can’t rely on the police.”

“Hmm.”

“You don’t seem surprised.”

“Well, if I have to be honest, the thought did cross my mind once. However, I don’t think I have the
resources to pull such a dramatic operation. If it fails, not only would Kamoshida would be painted
as a victim, but you’ll be put in jail, and I doubt you’ll be able to recover socially once you get out.” I
let out my breath. And that isn’t even including the worst possibility. “Are you sure this is the correct
decision?”

“If I don’t do anything, people will continue to suffer. I don’t think there’s anything I could do about
that doesn’t have some sort of risk.” Takamaki’s shoulders relax. “Besides, I got an accomplice to
agree with me. My parents work overseas, so I live with my family’s servant. She’ll help me with
carrying his body once I knock him out with this.” She raises the box she was holding, gesturing that
she was referring to the object at hand.

“What’s inside?”

“I didn’t think I could overpower Kamoshida even if I were to take advantage of his invitation to
catch him off-guard. Apparently, the servant I mentioned used to work around here and contacted
some of her ‘friends’ to get this stuff. Unfortunately, our rendezvous place happened at a bar, so I got
some… unwanted attention.” I nodded along to show I was still listening. Interesting. I can see that
Takamaki trusts her servant, probably because they act as a stand-in parental figure when her real
parents aren’t around.

“Anyways, about what’s inside.” Takamaki opened up the box. There was a long coil of rope, a roll
of duct tape, a pair of unassuming gloves, and a plastic container that contained two syringes.

“Most of it is stuff that I could get myself, but it’s this—” She holds up the container “—that I really
needed help with. A high school girl wouldn’t normally have access to tranquilizers, yeah? Nothing
fatal, so don’t worry about that. Plus, with security cameras and stuff, my servant told me that even
paying in cash could create evidence, since I’m buying suspicious stuff like ropes and what not.”

“I’m somewhat worried what your servant was up to back then, considering how… knowledgeable
“Yeah… I don’t know the full story, but she’s good friends with my parents and she always acts prim and proper when I’m around so it’s kind of surprising that she has a wild side inside of her. Not that it changes my opinion on her or anything. She’s great, really.”

“Huh. And once you kidnap him, what do you plan to do? You don’t think words only are going to be more effective once he’s tied up, do you?”

Takamaki puffed her chest up and gave a prideful smirk. “Let’s just say my servant has a way with words.” Her smile is supposed to be reassuring, but really, it just made me even more concerned about this ‘servant’ of hers.

“I assume that there is nothing I can say to dissuade you from making this highly illegal and incredibly dangerous course of action, correct? Jail isn’t the only possible consequence, you know.”

“Yup!” Takamaki seems way too enthusiastic.

“Seriously.”

“Hey! You said it yourself that you thought of it!” What were the chances, honestly? Of course, she came up with this plan. Sakamoto warned about this possibility this morning, didn’t he?

The off chance that Takamaki just so happened to be planning the same thing as us.

Seriously.

Though if Takamaki’s servant is as reliable as she says she is, then she’s arguably more prepared than we are. I mean, c’mon, the best we got was getting Sakamoto to knock him out with a folding chair. I mean, I suppose it fits the delinquent image and all, but what kind of a crass person would actually use it as a weapon? Not to mention using a tranquilizer would be more effective than blunt force trauma. (and a bit safer, would be troublesome if Kamoshida actually died)

Maybe…

“Since you’re telling me all of this, you sure trust me a lot, huh.”

“I like to think I’m a pretty good judge of character. I mean, I’m sure you already know how people are at school. Makes the good people stick out, you know? And even though yesterday was the first time we talked-- like really talked-- I can tell that what you say weren’t lies. It’s pretty excessive for a lie, and Kamoshida isn’t as good as hiding his distaste for others as he thinks he does.” Takamaki gave a knowing wink. It was that obvious, huh.

“Hmm. A girl is planning a kidnapping, and yet she is without an ulterior motive?”

“Well… I was kind of hoping you would, uh, help me make sure the operation goes smoothly. I was gonna ask you tomorrow anyways.”

“As an accomplice.”

“Yeah. Partners in crime, whisking away their victims into the night.” Takamaki lowly chuckled. “Sorry, I always admired villainous women, they’re pretty cool.”

I sigh. “Your strange tastes aside, I can’t say the notion that the idea isn’t attractive. You weren’t wrong to say that Kamoshida needs to be put to justice.” I need to contact Sakamoto and Akira about
this. Kamoshida is very much Takamaki’s problem as it is for us, and it’s not like I plan to drag her to the Metaverse. “Very well. I’ll cooperate if that’s what you wish. Planning a kidnapping isn’t exactly a specific duty as part of the student council, but for the safety of the students, I’m willing to make an exception.”

“Aweome! Kamoshida sent me his address. Let’s go. We’ll talk on the way there.”

“Wait, now?”

“Well, yeah. Kamoshida isn’t going to wait forever.”

“Even so, isn’t it better to have a full map of the house. Information gathering and all of that.” Somehow, even with a thorough plan, I feel underprepared.

“And the only way that’s going to happen is if I go in and risk… things that I don’t want to risk, or if you guys break in there in broad daylight.” Takamaki said that as if that was the obvious thing. “We might as well act fast and stop him as soon as possible.”

Really, there’s no stopping this dangerous woman. I could only sigh and go along. I have a feeling it’ll be better this way than leaving her alone.

Takamaki gave full details of her plan.

It was straightforward. Takamaki knocks on the door and Kamoshida invites her in. When he’s distracted, she punctures him with the syringe. I will be watching in the background, and enter when I hear sounds of the struggle. The tranquilizer’s effects should be instantaneous, and I will be holding on the spare syringe just in case. The two of us will reprimand the weakened Kamoshida with the rope and duct tape. Takamaki will then call her servant (Helena was her name, apparently) who will bring a large instrument case to store Kamoshida’s body in. After that, all we need to do is make our escape with Kamoshida in tow. Fortunately, Kamoshida lives in a house, not an apartment, so we don’t have to worry about other people as much as we could’ve.

I felt my phone vibrate in my left pocket. A message.

Ryuji Sakamoto: o i see u, akechi
Ryuji Sakamoto: wat r u doin
Ryuji Sakamoto: akechi oMG
Ryuji Sakamoto: WHAT ARE YOU DOING
Ryuji Sakamoto: FK IT I’M COMING OVER THERE

...

What.

Kamoshida’s house is not far from Tokyo, but the quietness of the neighborhood is something to behold after living in the heart of the city for so long. It made the raging blonde running towards us from the distance that much more obvious.

“GORO AKECHIIIII!”

Takamaki was unsurprisingly confused. “Hey… isn’t that Sakamoto?”

“Unfortunately.”
Ryuji ran at top speed, arms flailing about, and slid to a stop. Before I could get away, Ryuji’s hands gripped my arms, shaking slightly and panting.

“I finally… caught you.”

“Hey.”

“‘Hey’, huh. Haha…” Ryuji starts laughing. I’m concerned. His grip is getting tighter. Voice getting louder. “That’s all you have to say, huh. Just ‘hey’. Do you know how hard it was to reach you when I first saw you near the train station at Shinjuku? Do you?!” How am I supposed to respond to that? I didn’t notice the messages going off earlier, probably because I was giving my full attention to Takamaki. Ah, but he’s not actually going to listen, is he?

“Listen, Akechi. People are relentless. I thought I was going to be free when I got off the train to follow you, but then an old lady dropped her coin purse so I had to pick it all up, and then this lady’s baby started crying really loud, so I tried my best to calm, and then—”

“You could’ve ignored all of that.”

“No.” He said that a bit too quickly. At the end, Ryuji’s that kind of guy, huh.

Takamaki interjected. “Anyways, what business do you have with us, Sakamoto? We’re kind of busy.”

“I’m not an idiot, you know. You guys came here for a reason, so you’re def up to something. I ain’t goin’ back til I get some answers.”

Takamaki was about to object, but I beat her to it. “Very well. You don’t need to be wary around Sakamoto.”

“B-But—”

“It’s fine, really. He knows about Kamoshida’s actions just as much as you do.”

I ended up spilling everything regarding Takamaki’s plan. Ryuji was surprisingly quiet, but I suspect it was mostly because he was tired rather than him being a good listener. As I went into the finer details, Ryuji’s face contorted into something that conveyed the message of ‘hey, isn’t this the plan we were talking about earlier?’ Hopefully, he’s intelligent enough to keep it to himself.

“Hey, isn’t this the plan we were talkin’ about with Akira?”

Oh my god, Ryuji.

“Wait, Akechi. You were planning on kidnapping Kamoshida, too?”

Cat’s out of the bag. I sigh. “We were, but it was more of us contemplating on what to do as a last resort. Even among us three, none of us has an overpowered maid, you see.” I mean, it isn’t a lie, yeah?

“Ah.” Good, Takamaki isn’t going to press further. “Anyways, you coming with us or not, Sakamoto?”

“Wait, why?”

“Cause we just spilled all of the deets to you, so as long as you don’t report to the police, you’re a partner in the crime regardless. I already told Akechi, but just to make the message clear, I’m not
planning on backing out now. Might as well join us, am I right?”

Ryuji looked towards me as if he’s trying to judge whether or not I consent to her plan with his eyes alone. Just like Takamaki said, might as well make it clear. “Let’s just go along with it. Stealth isn’t the biggest part of the plan, so the more people the safer it is. We’ll tell Akira tomorrow, once he gets his new phone and all.”

“Alright. Can’t say no to an opportunity to punch Kamoshida’s face in.” Ryuji punched his palm in determination. “Seriously though, it’s really late. Didn’t he tell us that he was going to skip when we met in front of the school?”

“He’ll still need to meet us in the morning to exchange numbers again. I doubt he has ours memorized.”

“Hey, if you guys are done chit-chatting, we got an asshole to abduct.” Looking up, there was no malice on her face. She’s just way too pumped. Understandably so, but still. We continued walking to Kamoshida’s house. This time, we got Ryuji in tow.

We fucked up.

Holy shit, did we fuck up.

The living room is a mess. Takamaki is bruised and is struggling to even stand up. I’m hiding in the damn corner like a fucking coward, and most importantly, Kamoshida got Ryuji pinned on the ground with his beefy right hand wrapped around Ryuji’s fucking neck.

The plan was running smoothly at first. Kamoshida accepted Takamaki’s visit way too eagerly for a supposedly ‘wholesome’ adult. He locked the door behind him as expected, but with my ‘expertise’, locks aren’t an issue. The real question is finding the best point of entry for Ryuji and I. Kamoshida’s strength is no joke, so the element of surprise is essential to retain him before he harms Takamaki, even when he’s weakened by the drug. There was only so much we could tell from the outside, but I could conclude that there were only two options: the front door and the back door. Thankfully, Kamoshida didn’t cover the windows with blinds or curtains, so it wasn’t as if we were completely clueless of the interior design. Seeing that he’s conversing with Takamaki in his living room(?), I made the assessment that the back door was probably safer. As we slowly opened the door (oh good, it doesn’t creak), closed it, and locked it behind us. It seems like the only to get here is through the kitchen. Using the darkness and walls to our advantage, we lie in wait, watching Kamoshida and Takamaki walk past us toward, what I assume, is Kamoshida’s bedroom.

Now, here’s when it fell into shit.

I don’t want to go into detail (I don’t even have the heart to repeat what he said in my own mind), but the shit that came out of Kamoshida’s mouth was beyond disgusting. I think it’s obvious how it started. I mean, I was having really big trouble holding myself back, so one could imagine how Ryuji was doing, no?

Not very well, and I can’t even blame him. Despite me holding his wrist, he broke free and stormed right in. Chaos immediately broke out. When I peeked into the room, Takamaki was grasping for dear life for some kind of leverage as she tried to puncture Kamoshida’s neck. It seems like it got in, but she’s struggling to inject the actual drug. Ryuji tried to lock Kamoshida’s arms, holding a syringe in his right hand, but with great force, Kamoshida managed to push the two off of him. Takamaki’s body hit the wall hard. One syringe was flying through the air and broke when it came in contact with the floor.
My role in the entire operation was supposed to be the one who gives off the final blow. Takamaki had one syringe, Ryuji had the spare syringe, and I had the rope and the duct tape. (All of us, are wearing gloves, though we bought less conspicuous ones for Takamaki and gave the gloves that were in the box to Ryuji on the way. I had my own pair.) Takamaki gives the initial blow, Ryuji goes in and restrains him, using the spare syringe if needed, and I get the rope to tie Kamoshida up as quickly as possible. Except now, Ryuji and Takamaki both were on the floor, and I saw no good opportunity that wouldn’t lead me to a similar fate.

The plan can’t recover at this point.

Ryuji got up and tackled Kamoshida. I have to remember. The element of surprise isn’t gone yet. Kamoshida hasn’t noticed me yet. I need something. I need something to take him out in one go…!

No. Not a knife. I promised not to do that.

Creeping a little closer into the room, I sneaked around the cabinet that fell over from Ryuji’s and Kamoshida’s struggle. Lamps were falling over and breaking. Kamoshida’s flat screen TV was cracked and fell back. The coach seemed more sluggish than earlier-- Takamaki must’ve been at least somewhat successful. Ryuji has been holding solid ground for a while now.

Kamoshida pushed Ryuji harshly into the ground. If only I could find the other syringe dropped. It might be broken already, so maybe it would be better if I go for something else. Before I could complete my thoughts, I looked around the corner.

And that’s how we got here.

It was all a mistake. Maybe I should’ve argued with Takamaki. Even if breaking in during broad daylight is dangerous, charging straight in isn’t much better in the first place. No, maybe I should’ve rejected Takamaki’s offer in the first place. Maybe she wouldn’t have done anything. Maybe, this wouldn’t have happened. Maybe Takamaki would be safe. Maybe Ryuji wouldn’t be fucking dying. Maybe, just maybe--

“Ha, what are you even trying to be? Some multi-colored heroes in spandex?” Kamoshida slowly stood up. “Fitting enough for you to imitate characters from children’s cartoons. Though in this case, you’re not even that much.”

I snapped out of my daze. Excuse me? Did he just--

“You brats already crossed the line. I was about to spare you with just a mere expulsion if you just remained at the school like good kids, but it looks like you young criminals require a more… permanent solution.” Takamaki and Ryuji were holding their breaths (assuming if Sakamoto is breathing at all), shocked by the sudden declaration. They really shouldn’t have been, but whatever.

Kamoshida kept on spouting threats while keeping his grip on Sakamoto’s neck, thankfully preventing from noticing me sneaking around the sofa. As quietly as I could, crawled behind him and I saw the fallen syringe. It was underneath a few papers and books from the scuffle he had with Sakamoto earlier, so if I nab it quickly, I could use it before Kamoshida reacts. He’s hiding it, but the effect of Takamaki’s attempt had taken a toll on him.

But you know what?

I’m not going to let his earlier comment slide, and there’s a chair just nearby.

The cold, iron leg of the folding chair felt like nothing in an instant. I stood up. Without restraint, I raised the chair above my head and just when Kamoshida turned around--
“Hey! What are y--”

The chair slammed downwards onto the top of his head. Kamoshida fell unconscious.

...

Ryuji catches his breath and spoke up. “Welp.”

“So the reason why you kidnapped Kamoshida is that you impulsively knocked him out with a folding chair, and thus left with little choice but to go through with it.”

“Yes.” Not that there was one the moment we broke in.

“Because he, and I quote, ‘insulted a modern masterpiece’?”

“Yes.”

If I wasn’t already beaten up and dizzy, I would have seen her mind collapse solely from the expression on her face.

Not that I needed to see it to know that Sae-san is overdue for a break.

Chapter End Notes

weeeeeeaaaaaaaaaaaaaaw

Finally finished this chapter. Got a huge block while writing this one. I know all of the plot's twists and turns, but not much in between. I have all of Kamoshida's arc planned out now, though. It should end around Chapter 14, if you include the prologue as the first chapter. I also have Madarame's arc somewhat planned out, though in much less detail. It's around the same number of chapters as Kamoshida's, but I can't guarantee it's the same length in terms of word count.

To make the passage of time easier to tell, I put the date at the start of each chapter. Later chapters will cover multiple days, so it may help in the future. (Not including the future part with Sae and Akechi)

And yes, the date of Shiho's attempted suicide hasn't even passed yet.

also the tranquilizer thing is like, 100% a plot device, legit did zero research afoagjsg

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!