The Evil Queen

by vivvav

Summary

An alternate universe reimagining of the beginning of Persona 5.

What if Shujin Academy was a nice place, free of corruption among the faculty? What if Mr. Kamoshida had long ago been exposed and ousted from the school? What if everything was nice and orderly? Not because that is the natural state of things, of course, but by somebody's design?

In this world, Shujin Academy is not ruled by a corrupt teacher, making the lives of the students hell. In this world, it's ruled by the Student Council President, who makes sure that everybody is on their best behavior at all times. Makoto Niijima does not care for troublemakers. So when Akira Kurusu is framed for a crime and enters Shujin Academy as the "delinquent transfer student", he's going to learn very quickly just how scary Shujin's Student "Queen" is.
The past month had not been good to Akira Kurusu. One moment of trying to be a good samaritan had turned his life into a living hell. He was framed for assault, had everybody he know turn their backs on him, and was sent off to Tokyo, even though he’d never so much as set foot in a city before. The first day he was there, he was so overcome by sensory overload that he even hallucinated some kind of fiery demon thing standing in the middle of the street for a moment. To make things worse, pretty much every authority figure already hated his guts. The faculty at his new school made it abundantly clear that they considered him a piece of shit, and were more than willing to flush him away the second he started to stink. In addition to this, his new guardian was a mean-spirited curmudgeon who considered him so undesirable that Akira was being forced to live in the attic of a coffee shop like he was Cinderella or Harry Potter or something. At one point he joked to himself that maybe a fairy godmother or giant with a pink umbrella would show up to whisk him away to a greater destiny, but between that hallucination he’d had, strange dreams involving a creepy long-nosed man, and some creepy piece of Malware that kept downloading itself onto his phone, Akira thought that maybe it’d be best if whatever supernatural entity that had taken an interest in him just stayed away.

It was gonna be tough, but he could do this. That thing with the guy who had him framed for assault was really the first time Akira had ever been in any kind of trouble. For his entire life up until then, he had been a well-behaved kid who kept his head low and his nose clean. All he really had to do was be himself for a year, and his probation would be over and he wouldn’t go to jail. And yeah, having a record would probably make it harder to get into colleges, but it probably wasn’t the end of the world or anything. Who knows, maybe somebody would even be impressed by his “reform” and it may prove to be in his favor in the long run. And hey, in spite of everything crappy going on, it was a nice and sunny spring day in Tokyo when he arrived. The city itself, while totally overwhelming for a kid from the sticks, was pretty cool. Maybe it was a sign that things would get better. Maybe he should see all this as an opportunity.

The rain felt like an omen.

Akira was on his way to school. The skies had been grey when he stepped out of the cafe, and he just hoped it wouldn’t start raining soon. Sadly, by the time his train had arrived in Aoyama-Itchome, it was coming down pretty heavily. And he didn’t have an umbrella. Though he wasn’t alone in that. A bunch of students were running down the street with newspapers or some other odd item over their heads. Akira considered using his schoolbag as an erstwhile umbrella, but felt it wouldn’t be particularly effective. At best, his face and maybe part of his chest would stay dry that way. And he really didn’t want to be late to his first day of school, especially considering his circumstances, but he really didn’t want to get drenched either. He had a feeling that if he got a cold, his new “caretaker” Sakura-San would be less than sympathetic.

As he contemplated what to do, a girl appeared next to him, emerging from the subway station. Akira had never seen anything like her before, at least not in person. She was taller than most other girls, with very light skin, green eyes, and blonde hair tied into twin pigtails. She didn’t look like a total foreigner, the shape of her face still being pretty Japanese, but Akira was pretty sure she had some European or American blood in her. She was also wearing a pretty heavily modified version of the Shujin Academy uniform. She wore the black school blazer over a white hoodie that just
barely had the official school skirt peeking out from under it, and bright-red leggings with brown boots. Every other girl he’d seen was wearing black leggings and black shoes. The girl looked at Akira and smiled. He stared back at her awkwardly, unsure of if he should say anything. He couldn’t even begin to imagine what kind of person this girl would be. She was the first to break the silence.

“Hi there!”

“Uh… Hi.”

“I’ve never seen you around school before. Are you a transfer student?” The girl had an upbeat manner to her speech. She kind of reminded Akira of a cheerleader from one of those American TV shows.

“Uh… Yeah. I’m just… you know… starting today.” Akira got a nervous smile on his face.

“You don’t have to be scared of me, you know.” The girl crossed her arms.

“Excuse me?”

“I know I look a little different from the other girls, but I’m not gonna bite your head off or anything.” She smirked at Akira. “Are you always this stiff, or is that first-day jitters?”

“Oh… Uh…” Akira rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. “First-day jitters… kinda… I guess.”

“You guess, huh? Not really sure about that?”

“Well, my circumstances are a little… uh… unique.” Akira eased up a bit. Maybe it was just the fact that she was literally the first person who hadn’t tried to kill him with a stare since arriving in Tokyo, but this girl was surprisingly easy to talk to. “I just moved to Tokyo from the countryside, so everything’s kind of intimidating and-“

“Oh wow!” The girl’s smirk broke and her eyes widened. “No wonder you’re acting so freaked!” She smiled at Akira again, this time warmly. “Well, you don’t have to be scared of me. My name’s Ann. Ann Takamaki.” Ann held out her hand. “Welcome to Tokyo!”

“Oh, uh… thanks.” Akira slowly grabbed Ann’s hand. He’d never actually done a handshake with anybody before. It felt a little awkward, but he figured that’d be par for the course for the entire day. “I’m Akira Kurusu. It’s nice to meet you, Takamaki-San.”

“Don’t be so uptight, Akira!” Ann shoved Akira’s shoulder lightly. “You keep on being so stiff and everyone’s gonna think you’re a dead body!”

“Well, if I don’t get to school soon, I probably will be dead. I really can’t afford to be late today.”

“Strict parents, huh?”

“Something like that.” Akira looked down at the ground, tiny white pins of water making contact with the hard asphalt and exploding into droplets, creating ripples from the impact. He sighed. “Guess I’m just going to have to get wet.” Akira began to take a step forward but Ann put her hand on his shoulder.

“Hey, there’s no need to get all soggy on your first day!” Ann grinned at Akira as he looked at her. “I’ve got backup!”
“‘Backup’?”

“Hey, Ann, over here!” a new voice yelled. Akira turned to the source of the noise to see a girl with a large white umbrella approaching them from down the street. She seemed to wear the standard school uniform, sans the blazer, leggings, and swapping out black shoes for white sneakers. She also had her hair done up in a ponytail with a pink hair tie.

“Shiho!” Ann called back. “There you are!” Shiho caught up to Ann and held out the umbrella.

“You ready to go?”

“Totally!” Ann stepped under the umbrella. It was certainly large enough for two people to share. She pointed to Akira. “By the way, this is Akira. He just transferred here. Do you mind if he squeezes in under here with us?”

“Of course not!” Shiho handed the umbrella to Ann and turned to Akira, bowing to him. “Hello, Akira-Kun. My name is Shiho Suzui.”

“Akira Kurusu” Akira said as he bowed back. He stepped under the umbrella and gently took it from Ann, trying to hold it in a way that would cover all three of them. He finally settled into a position where Ann and Shiho were completely covered, and a little bit of his back was poking out into the rain. Yeah, he’d have a wet butt when he sat down in a classroom seat, but it was preferable to the alternative. The group started to walk slowly towards the school.

“My, what a gentleman you are, Akira” Ann said teasingly. Akira started to blush.

“Don’t make fun of him!” Shiho said. She looked back at Akira and smiled. “So, Akira-Kun, is there anything you’d like to know about the school?”

“Oh, uh, sure!” Akira thought for a minute. He’d heard that Shujin was a really prestigious prep school in Tokyo, but he never really got any of the details as to why. “What kind of place is Shujin Academy?”

“‘What kind of place’?” Ann fiddled with one of her pigtails. “That’s kinda vague, isn’t it?”

“I mean, the school is supposed to be famous, isn’t it?” Akira asked. “We don’t really know a lot about Tokyo prep schools out in the country.”

“It is” Shiho said. “Shujin Academy takes pride in the many accomplishments of its students and faculty. A higher-than-average number of students test high and get into prestigious colleges once they graduate from here, and our sports programs produce some of the top high school athletic teams in the greater Tokyo metropolitan area.”

“The best athletes in the whole city?” Akira was awed. For as populous as a place that Tokyo and the surrounding area was, that was no small feat.

“That’s right!” Ann said cheerily. “In fact, Shiho here is the star of the girls’ volleyball team!”

“That’s amazing, Shiho-San” Akira said. “Sports here must be really fun. Or really tough. Maybe
“Well, they are tough, yes” Shiho said. “But they’re a lot more fun than they used to be.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“She’s talking about Kamoshida” Ann said.

“What’s a ‘Kamoshida’?” Akira asked.

“Wow, you really DON’T know anything about the school!” Ann gawked at Akira. “You really don’t know Kamoshida!? It was a huge news story!”

“That big, huh?” Akira tugged at his collar with his free hand and laughed nervously. "No, I never heard about it. What happened?”

“It’s very unpleasant” Shiho said. “I’m not certain you want to hear it. It’d be bad for you to be thinking of such things on your first day of school.”

“Hey!” Akira raised his voice for the first time in the entire conversation. “You can’t just NOT tell me after building it up like that!”

“He’s right, Shiho.” Ann poked Shiho on the cheek. “Besides, if we don’t tell him, he’s gonna go nuts wondering about it all day. It’ll just keep nagging at him like…” Ann poked Shiho a few more times to drive the point home.

“Fine, I’ll tell him!” Shiho slapped Ann’s hand away. “Just stop doing that!” Shiho sighed and stared at Akira sadly. “Kamoshida was the old gym teacher and volleyball coach. He was an Olympic Gold Medalist, so the school was really thrilled to have him. But he was a very cruel and selfish man. He acted like he was in charge of the school… And in a way, he was.”

“What do you mean?” Akira asked.

“Kobayakawa turned a blind eye to his many misdoings.”

“Kobayakawa?” Akira scratched his head, then remembered the very strict and very fat man he met yesterday. Impossibly fat, even. He didn’t even look like an actual human. “Oh! You mean Principal Dumpling.”

Shiho giggled a bit. Ann burst out into a fuller laughter.

“‘Principal Dumpling’!” Ann slapped Akira on the back. “That’s rich, Akira! I mean, it’s kind of mean, but that’s exactly what he looks like! And here I was thinking you didn’t have a sense of humor!”

“Getting back to the subject…” Shiho cleared her throat and returned to her previous dour mood. “Kamoshida was a truly horrid man. He would overtrain the students on his athletic teams, exhausting them beyond reason and trying to break them. He had some kind of ‘survival of the fittest’ mentality where he only wanted the hardest students who could take the most punishment playing for him.”

“That sounds like a nightmare” Akira said.

“That wasn’t even the worst of it” Ann said, her cheery attitude notably fading away. “Kamoshida would outright abuse students he didn’t like. He’d call somebody to his office and use them as his
personal punching bag. And if a girl caught his eye, he’d hound her and force her to… well…” Ann started to slump over a bit. All of the life seemed to leave her.

“You don’t have to finish that” Akira said. He kept a very calm outer facade, but in the pit of his stomach, there was a raging storm. He was also starting to see red a little, but managed to remind himself that everything he was being told happened in the past and kept his anger in check.

“Whatever he did to you, I don’t want to force you to revisit-“

“Oh, no!” Ann said, some of her energy returning. “He didn’t do anything to us!” She then looked at Shiho with a look of horror on her face. “Wait, that’s not right either! I mean-“

“He overworked me on the volleyball team, but that’s as far as it went” Shiho said. “There were a few times that he made some movements towards Ann, but he was stopped before any of his plans for her came to fruition.”

“What happened?” Akira asked.

“Well,” Shiho said, “the official story is that Principal Kobayakawa, who had no idea what was going on, discovered Kamoshida’s discrepancies and turned him in to the police.”

“Of course, everyone at school knows that’s a big fat lie” Ann said. “Principal Kobayakawa would’ve let it go on forever so long as he could say that Shujin Academy had a famous athlete coaching its students. The only reason he did anything is because Makoto Nijima made him.”

“Nijima?” Akira was trying to remember where he’d heard that name. “The prosecutor?”

“No, that’s Sae Nijima” Shiho said.

“Wait…” Ann put her hands on her hips. “You never heard about Kamoshida, but you know who Sae Nijima is? How does that work?”

“I heard her name on the news this morning” Akira said.

“Makoto Nijima is Sae Nijima’s younger sister” Shiho said. “Last year, she was vice-president of the student council. This year, she’s president. She has quite a bit of influence over Kobayakawa.”

“How does a student council member force a principal to do anything?”

“Nobody knows for sure,” Ann said, “but most people think it’s blackmail.”

“She sounds scary” Akira said.

“She is” Ann said.

“She’s not all bad” Shiho replied. “Nijima-Senpai is a very smart and determined person who wants what’s best for the school and its students. Just don’t get on her bad side and you should have no problems with her.”

“Seriously, Akira…” Ann stared straight into Akira’s eyes with a serious glare. “Nijima-Senpai hates troublemakers. You seem like a good person, so you should be fine, but you really don’t want to make her mad. Other students have taken to calling her the ‘Queen of Shujin Academy’, and upsetting the Queen is a really bad idea. Got it?”

“Got it.” Akira gulped. He was already entering this school with a pretty bad label attached to him. Whoever this Makoto Nijima was, she sounded like she could be very bad news for him. He’d just
have to stick to his plan of keeping off anybody’s radar and being on his best behavior. He was really glad that Shiho and Ann had told him about this. He considered telling the girls about his full situation right there, but figured he’d wait until they got to know him a little better first. That way they’d know that his polite nature wasn’t an act, and maybe even believe him when he told them that he was framed.

The group kept talking as they approached the school. Akira learned that Ann was a part-time model. He wasn’t expecting that, but it didn’t really come as a shock either. He also learned that she had a voracious sweet tooth, and her diet seemed to largely consist of cake, parfaits, and crepes, yet she somehow did not gain weight. Or rather, she didn’t gain any weight in unflattering places, as Shiho pointed out. Ann pinched Shiho on the arm for that comment. Akira made sure to remain tight-lipped over it. Soon enough, they reached the school. There was a fat male teacher standing in the doorway glaring at them as they headed inside.

“Does that guy have something against you?” Akira asked. The trio stepped into the school and he folded up the umbrella and gave it back to Shiho.

“That’s just Mr. Ushimaru” Ann said. “He’s a total grump who hates everybody. He basically thinks all teens are troublemakers and are guilty until proven innocent.”

Well, that was the last thing Akira wanted to hear. Because according to the courts, Akira WAS guilty. He had a feeling that Mr. Ushimaru was going to be especially hard on him. Add in the rest of the faculty and what would happen if that Queen of Shujin learned about his record, and he was really grateful to have Ann and Shiho on his side.

“Don’t worry about him” Shiho said. “He’s all bark and no bite.”

“Well…” Ann said, “there's SOME bite.”

“Right.” Shiho looked at Akira with a grave expression. “Don’t let him catch you drifting off in his class, or he’ll throw chalk at you. He coaches the baseball team, so he throws really hard and has really good aim.”

"Noted" Akira said. "Do not look away from Ushimaru.'

“We’ve got a few minutes before classes start” Ann said. “Want a quick tour of the school?”

“Maybe later” Akira said. “I’m supposed to meet my homeroom teacher Ms. Kawakami in the teacher’s lounge. I think she wants to introduce me to my class or something.”

“I’m in Ms. Kawakami’s class!” Ann said excitedly. “I’ll take you to her!”

“That’d be great” Akira said.

“Well then, I’ll let you two get to it” Shiho said. She bowed to Akira again. “It was very nice meeting you, Akira. We should meet again for lunch and you can tell me how your first day is going.”

“I’d like that” Akira said, returning the bow.

“Let’s meet up in the courtyard!” Ann said.

“What if it’s still raining?” Akira asked.

“There’s a table with a ceiling over it” Ann said. She started to head down the hall and gestured for
Akira to follow her. “C’mon, let’s get you to Miss Kawakami. Later, Shiho!”

“Bye, Shiho-San.” Akira waved, following Ann.

“Until later, Akira-Kun.” Shiho waved back.

Ann led Akira to some stairs at the end of the hall and up a flight. As they walked along, Akira noticed a lot of people staring at the two of them. Both boys and girls looked at them, mostly with looks of anger, suspicion, or wariness. Two boys in particular seemed particularly focused on solely Akira, and not Akira and Ann as a pair. One was a shorter, more timid boy with bluish hair. His uniform was kind of like a male counterpart to Shiho’s, forgoing the school blazer and just wearing the white shirt and black pants, although he had suspender loops dangling from his waist for some reason. He was staring at Akira out of the corner of his eye, his head turned away from him, and he seemed really freaked out. The other boy was dressed in the proper Shujin uniform with no modifications, jacket buttoned and all, and had naturally spiky black hair and a thuggish face. He looked directly at Akira with a sneer that could kill. Nobody had looked at Akira so harshly since the judge glared at him in the courtroom. Akira really hoped he never had to talk to that guy.

“Here’s the teacher’s lounge” Ann said, stopping outside a room on the second floor.

“Huh?” Akira stared at Ann, then remembered what they were doing. “Oh! Right! Thanks, Ann-San.”

“‘San’? You’re still so uptight, Akira.” Ann looked at Akira and noticed all of his nervousness had returned. “Hey, are you ok?”

“Everyone was looking at us…”

“Oh. Yeah. That’s…” Ann crossed her arms and sighed, a tired look on her face. “That was because you’re with me. Look, people think some bad stuff about me, and… I promise I’ll explain it to you later. It doesn’t have anything to do with you, I promise.”


“You got it!” Ann grin and flexed her arms. “I’ll be fine. I’m used to this kind of thing. I’m pretty much immune to it. You go talk to Ms. Kawakami, and I’ll see you in class, ok?”


The Student Council Meeting Room of Shujin Academy was much like any other. There was a table large enough to seat all of the council’s members, and a bunch of folding chairs lined up along it. But there was also a separate large, luxurious desk a few feet past the head of the table, much like one that would be found in a corporate office, and sitting there in a plush office chair was Makoto Niijima. She wore the proper Shujin Academy girls’ uniform, with white shirt, a little black bowtie at the neck, a buttoned-up black blazer with red buttons, pleated skirt, and black leggings and black shoes. She wore a red braided headband on her head that stood out from her natural brown hair. She was going through paperwork of club budgets, looking for one item in particular. Finally, she found the drama club’s budget, taking her pen and slashing it in half with a satisfied smirk on her face. She was sure that the drama club president, Daisuke-Kun, would be unhappy about it, but she had warned him about choosing more appropriate material to perform. The incestuous themes of *Oedipus Rex* were simply too unsavory for a school of Shujin’s stature.
And if Daisuke-Kun had any complaints, she had ways of dealing with it.

Four loud bangs came from the other side of the door, shaking it. Most people would be startled by such a violent happening. This had long stopped being disruptive to Makoto.

“Come in” she said, calmly looking up from the club budgets. She had a serene smile on her face as the door opened.

Ryuji Sakamoto entered the room, moving past the meeting table and standing between it and Makoto’s desk. He stood up straight, arms at his side like he was in a military line-up.

“I’m here to report, Miss Prez.”

“Of course. Please have a seat, Ryuji-Kun.” Makoto gestured to the chairs at the meeting table.

Ryuji grabbed a folding chair and plopped it down in front of Makoto’s desk, the back of the chair facing her. He sat on the chair backwards with his legs spread out, one on each side of the chair, his elbows leaning forward on the chair’s back. Makoto kept smiling, but shook her head.

“I know that you know that’s not the proper way to use a chair, Ryuji-Kun.”

“Right.” Ryuji got up and turned the chair around, sitting in it the correct way. His posture was completely upright and his hands were firmly planted on his knees. “Sorry. I’m just a little pi-Uh… upset.”

“Why is that, Ryuji-Kun?” Makoto gave a sympathetic frown.

“I got eyes on that new transfer student like you wanted, but I didn’t really get a chance to talk to him. He was with Ann Takamaki, and just as I was about to approach him, they stopped outside the freakin’ teacher’s lounge.”

“Takamaki-Chan, hm?” Makoto spun her pen in her hand. “It seems our school’s new delinquent is keeping interesting company already.”

“I’ll pin him down, I swear.” Ryuji looked at Makoto with worry, speaking frantically. “I’ll grab him at lunch today and let him know what the score is around here, just like you asked me to. I won’t screw up again, I promise!”

“Calm down, Ryuji-Kun.” Makoto got up from her desk and walked over to Ryuji. She smiled softly and patted his head like a dog, her fingers pushing down his spiky black locks, only for them to pop up again when she removed her hand. “I should have realized that Kurusu-Kun’s teacher would wish to meet with him. All things considered, it’s my fault for asking you to handle this so early in the day.”

“You’re just tryin’ to make me feel better” Ryuji said, pouting.

“I am,” Makoto said, looking down at her cohort, “but that doesn’t mean it’s not true.” She crouched down to be eye level with Ryuji. “You have the entire day to meet with Kurusu-Kun. I’m confident you’ll come through before he returns home today. You’ve never let me down before, after all.”

“You know it!” Ryuji stood up, a big grin on his face. “I’ll let that criminal chump know what happens if he tries anything funny at Shujin Academy!”

“I’m certain you will.” Makoto looked at her watch. “Oh my. We should hurry to our classrooms.
It would be very unseemly if we were late. We must serve as role models to the rest of the student body, after all.”

Chapter End Notes

Finally, I'm dipping my toes into the fanfic subgenre of "what if the plot of the game, but X was different?" I am very excited to see where this'll go, because as usual, I do not have a map for this road I'm on. I've been wanting to write Makoto as an antagonist again since finishing "The President's Investigation", so this is going to be fun. I hope you kids enjoy the ride.
Ground Rules

Chapter Summary

Akira meets Ryuji Sakamoto.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“You actually made it.”

Ms. Kawakami remained seated at her desk in the teacher’s lounge, looking up at Akira in dull surprise. He wasn’t really sure what to think of his new teacher. On the one hand, he probably should’ve been offended by how little she thought of him, but she just knew what she was told, so it wasn’t exactly her fault. More than anything, she seemed perpetually exhausted. With her unkempt hair, the bags under her eyes, and her general grouchininess, this woman could have been the mascot for a shirt saying “I don’t need coffee to function, but I need it to put up with your shit” or something equally hackneyed.

“We were you expecting me not to?” Akira asked. He was feeling oddly calm about this situation. Meeting Ann and Shiho had really given him some confidence. This was just a school. A much bigger school than he was used to, and all the teachers had something against him, but Akira just had to remember that he wasn’t actually a criminal. So long as he stayed true to himself, he wouldn’t give anybody a reason to expel him.

“I dunno.” Kawakami leaned back in her chair and stared at the ceiling. “I guess I figured you’d be late. Get lost on the trains or something.”

Akira rolled his eyes. Just how dumb did this woman think he was? Sure, trains were new to him, but the fundamental concept was not a complicated one. Know the name of the place you’re going, and step out when you get there.

“Yes, well, as intimidating as the mighty steel undergods that you city people worship are to a country bumpkin such as myself, I found that I only had to sacrifice two of my three favorite cows to be granted swift passage to your mighty halls of learning.”

“Do you really think you’re in a position to be making jokes like that?” Kawakami looked back at Akira, clearly unamused.

“Sorry. I’ve been having a bad… series of weeks.” Akira tilted his head down, looking over his fake glasses directly into Kawakami’s eyes. “Look, I don’t expect you to believe me when I say that I’m not what you think I am. But I do want you to believe this: I’m not an idiot. So if you don’t treat me like one, I won’t act like one.” Akira pushed his glasses up, covering his eyes with the fake lenses again. “Whatever you think of me, we’re stuck together for a whole year, and I don’t plan on doing anything that will jeopardize my freedom. So if you believe that I need to be rehabilitated, it’s not going to help the process if you treat me like I’m incapable of rehabilitation at all.”

Akira noticed a couple other teachers in the room, all eavesdropping on the conversation. Most
were keeping on a poker face, but a couple had more visible reactions. One older woman with
glasses rolled her eyes. A younger-looking well-dressed pretty boy of a teacher actually seemed
kind of impressed. Kawakami stared blankly at Akira, mulling over his words for a moment.

“You’re very eloquent. I’m not sure if that’s a good thing or a bad thing.” She slowly rose out of
her chair, putting her right hand on her hip. “I don’t know if you really mean that or if you’re just
feeding me some line to try and get on my good side, but I can’t argue with the logic of what
you’re saying.” Akira wasn’t sure, but it looked like maybe a very small smile had formed on his
moody teacher’s face. “You’ve got a deal. For now at least, I’ll treat you the same as every other
student. Let’s go to class.”

Ms. Kawakami led Akira to classroom 2-D. He could hear a lot of mumbling when the door
opened, but everybody became quiet the second he stepped into the room. Everybody in the
classroom was staring at him, curious looks of interest on their faces. Some were angry, some were
a little afraid. One person, that blue-haired boy from earlier, went completely white, his eyes so
wide he practically looked like an anime character. Akira noticed Ann sitting by the window in the
back half of the room. She smiled at him nervously, a big awkward grimace on her face and worry
in her eyes.

“Class, we have a transfer student joining us today” Kawakami said. “This is Akira Kurusu. He’s
just moved to Tokyo from the countryside.” Kawakami turned to Akira. “Would you like to say
anything?”

“It’s nice to meet you all” Akira said. He bowed before the class. “I hope we can all get along.”

Everybody started mumbling to each other after that. Akira couldn’t really make out what they
were saying.

“You can take that seat over there.” Kawakami pointed to the only open seat in the whole
classroom. It was right behind Ann. Akira slowly made his way over. He could make out little
half-statements as he walked along.

“...seems normal...”

“...probably an act...”

“...goes nuts at a moment’s notice...”

As he passed Ann, she whispered to him.

“We need to talk.”

“What’s going on?” Akira whispered back.

“I’ll explain at lunch.”

Akira sat down in his seat, and two girls nearby started gossiping with each other.

“Did you catch that? Do those two know each other? Does that mean he hit on her before
transferring here?”

“Wow, first Kamoshida, and now this guy! I can’t imagine any girl having a taste in men like that!
Then again, this is Takamaki-San we’re talking about...”

“For real. That side of the room is totally awful.”
Akira looked at the back of Ann’s head. He couldn’t tell for sure, but she seemed really wound up about something. Classes continued mostly without incident. At one point, that fat teacher, Ushimaru, called on Akira out of the blue to answer a question. When Akira answered it right, Ushimaru actually seemed to hold him in contempt for it, rather than being pleased. Apparently the notion of a smart delinquent didn’t gel with his sensibilities. The rest of the class started murmuring, though Akira couldn’t hear what they were saying, except for one guy saying it had to be a fluke. Akira didn’t get it. The question really wasn’t that hard. He didn’t get why so many students were treating him like this. Was it because he was seen with Ann? The way those other two girls were talking, she seemed to have some kind of reputation. Akira shuddered to think what it would be like if these people knew about his record. Thankfully, that piece of information was only for the teachers to know. If Akira was lucky, he could live a normal high school life for the next year.

When lunch came, Ann turned around and looked at Akira.

“What is going on?” Akira asked. “Why is everybody so weird about me being here?”

“Something happened” Ann said. “I’ll tell you all about it when we meet Shiho. But first I’ve got to run to the bathroom. Stay here, ok?”

“Sure” Akira said. “We all said we’d eat lunch together. And it’s not like I have anywhere else to go anyway.”

As Ann left, a bunch of people started staring at Akira. He just tried to ignore it, looking out the window. Akira could see the sky again. The rain had finally passed, and it was sunny now. There were still some clouds, but none of them dark.

Akira felt some shadows looming over him. He turned around to see a trio of male students standing next to his desk, looking down at him. It was hard to read their faces. They seemed curious about him, but where that curiosity came from, he couldn’t really tell. Maybe they just wanted some guy talk about Ann. He’d just clear up that they weren’t dating, and then who knows, maybe he’d make a few new friends.

“Hi there” Akira said, a small smile on his face.

“Uh…” The three boys looked at each other, even more uncertain than before. One of them looked back at him. “Hey.”

“Something I can help you guys with?” Akira asked.

“Is it true?” one of his friends asked.

“I don’t know” Akira said. “What is ‘it’?”

“Don’t play dumb!” the first guy shouted.

“I’m not dumb, I just don’t know what’s going on.” Akira looked at the three quizzically. “Is this some kind of hazing thing? Because I’m not swallowing a live fish.”

“You think you’re real tough, huh!” The first boy cracked his knuckles. “You don’t look so tough to me!”

“Ok, wow, this is not funny anymore.” Akira glared at the guy puffing up his chest. “If you’ve got something to say to me, will you stop wasting our time and just say it? Because I am really lost
A loud voice rang out through the classroom. Everybody except Akira stiffened up and turned to the source. Standing in the door was that guy with the black spiky hair Akira had seen earlier.

“WHERE’S KURUSU!?”

Akira’s heart started racing at the mention of his name. He didn’t know what this guy wanted with him, but whatever it was, it probably wasn’t good.

All three boys backed away from Akira, pointing at him. Spiky hair marched over to Akira, looking pissed. He reached Akira’s desk and stood there for a moment, sizing Akira up with his eyes. Finally, he spoke again.

“‘Sup?”

“Uh…” Akira drew a blank for a moment. That was a weird start to wherever this was going. “You know. Not much. First day of school. Getting used to my surroundings and all that.”

“You likin’ Shujin so far?”

“It seems nice, yeah.”

“Yeah. It is.”

The two stared at each other for a moment. The spiky guy was still looking at Akira like he was kicking a cat or something. Akira’s eyes just darted around nervously. Suddenly, spiky guy got a look of realization on his face and bowed.

“My name’s Ryuji Sakamoto.”

“Oh.” Akira stood up and bowed back. “I’m Akira Kurusu.” Akira rose from the bow. “But I’m guessing you already knew that.”

“Yeah.” Ryuji put his arm around Akira’s shoulder and pulled him away from his desk, headed towards the door. “Say dude, you busy right now?”

“Well, actually, I’m waiting for a friend-“

“Yeah, I didn’t think so.” Ryuji’s fingers painfully dug into Akira’s shoulder. Akira gritted his teeth. This guy had a powerful grip. “C’mon, let’s go up to the roof.”

Ryuji walked Akira down the hall and up two flights of stairs, leading to a double door. They stepped out into the fresh air, and Akira could see a fair bit of the Minato prefecture from here. All in all, it was a lovely sight. The only thing ruining it was the scary boy who’d dragged Akira up here and was now blocking the only exit.

“You got a lunch?” Ryuji asked.

“Uh… No.” Akira wasn’t sure what to expect, but he certainly didn’t think it would be that. Did this bully drag him up here to steal his lunch?

“Here.” Ryuji reached into his bag and pulled out something wrapped in foil, handing it to Akira. Akira unwrapped it and saw some yakisoba bread.
“Wait, really?” Akira looked up at Ryuji. “What about you?”

“I came prepared.” Ryuji grinned and pulled another yakisoba bread wrapped in tin foil out of his bag. He walked over to a table with a few chairs around it and tilted one, letting the leftover rainwater pour off the seat. He sat down, put two bottles of water on the table, and gestured for Akira to come over to him. “C’mon! Let’s eat!”

Frankly, Akira had no idea what he should do. He was supposed to be meeting with Ann and Shiho right now. But this guy seemed to command the respect and/or fear of the other students, and running away might piss him off more. Ann and Shiho would probably understand. He could apologize to them after class. Right now, Ryuji was being personable, and Akira didn’t want to do anything to set him off. So he joined him at the table.

“Mmmm…” Ryuji was chewing on a bite of his lunch. “This bread is a school specialty. One of the many awesome things Shujin Academy has to offer its students.” Ryuji swallowed and stared at Akira. “Go ahead. Dig in.”

Akira bit into the bread and felt a flavor explosion in his mouth. He couldn’t believe this was school-provided food. He got a big smile on his face.

“Great, right?” Ryuji laughed at Akira’s face.

“This is amazing” Akira said.

“Yeah, they sell out super fast every week. You gotta be pretty lucky to get one.” Ryuji cracked open his water bottle and took a sip. “Technically speakin’, the lady at the school store ain’t s’posed to give me two of ‘em. But I convinced her it was for a good cause.”

“A good cause?” Akira took another bite.

“Yeah. You know why I brought you up here?”

“Uh… Well…” Akira thought back to Ryuji sneering at him earlier. And Ann mentioning rumors about her, and the things those two girls were saying about Akira and Ann. “I figure either you’re the welcoming committee, or you’re Ann’s boyfriend and are going to tell me to keep away from her.”

Ryuji burst out into laughter. Excessively loud laughter. Even though they were outside and had a table between them, Akira still covered his ears. After a moment, Ryuji calmed down, wiping tears from his eyes. Akira took another bite of his lunch.

“Oh man. You are a funny guy, Kurusu. Nah, me and Ann were kinda tight back in middle school, but we ain’t really been pals for a couple years now. Still, datin’ her? That’d just be weird.” Ryuji stood up. “As for the ‘welcomin’ committee’ theory. Well, you ain’t too off.” Ryuji walked over to Akira and looked down at him, his smile disappearing. “I know you’re here on probation.”

Akira looked up at Ryuji, his eyes wide in panic. He had stopped chewing the bite still in his mouth.

“That’s right. Akira Kurusu, delinquent convicted for assault. I know all about it. The whole school does, actually.”

“WHA-“ The unchewed food in Akira’s mouth slipped down his throat, blocking his windpipe. He held his hands up to his neck, pulling at the skin as if that would stretch it out somehow, breathing through his nose rapidly.
“I’m gonna be honest, lookin’ at you, I find it hard to believe.” As Akira’s face started to change color, Ryuji just stared at him with a bored look on his face. “You seem like the kinda poindexter who’s never been in a fight in his life. Not the type to just attack a dude. But then again, ain’t that always what they say on the news when some kid loses it and kills a bunch of people? ‘He was always so quiet’.”

Akira’s face had turned blue at this point. Ryuji rolled his eyes and wound back his hand, slapping Akira hard on the back. Akira lurch forward, coughed and then swallowed, the food he’d been choking on sliding down his gullet while his glasses leaped off his face and flew over the table and onto the ground. He kept coughing, grateful he could breathe again, although the soreness that remained in his back was a shallow comfort. Akira hadn’t exactly made a habit of getting hit by people, but this was by far the hardest he’d ever been hit, and he had a feeling that this guy wasn’t even trying. If Ryuji Sakamoto wanted to, he could probably kill Akira with his bare hands.

“Now, from what I hear, the principal let you in because reformin’ you’ll be good for Shujin’s rep. Not that we need much help, if you ask me, but he’s kinda greedy, I guess.” Ryuji started walking towards the spot on the roof where Akira’s glasses were. “Shujin has a lot to offer. Not just good food and a nice view either. Kids come here for a quality education, an opportunity to get into a good college so they can get a good job and make somethin’ of themselves. You get what I mean?”

“Uh… Kind of?” Akira stood up and slowly walked towards Ryuji, trying to see what he was doing with his glasses.

“My point is, this is a nice place.” Ryuji picked up Akira’s glasses and looked at the lenses. A bit of roof dust had gotten on them. He started rubbing it off with his sleeve. “And we don’t need delinquents causin’ trouble and makin’ it a not-so-nice place for the other students.”

“I don’t plan on doing anything like that” Akira said.

“Maybe you don’t. But that don’t mean you won’t.” Ryuji held up the glasses in front of his face to see if he missed a spot. He raised an eyebrow. “What the…” Ryuji put the glasses on and looked around. “Are these glasses fake!?”

“Uh…” Akira’s blood started rushing. “Yeah. They’re accessories.”

“See, this is exactly what I’m talkin’ about!” Ryuji tossed the glasses to Akira, who just barely managed to catch them. “I can’t trust what I see on the surface with you! I wanna believe you when you say you ain’t up to no good, Kurusu, but what am I s’posed to think after seein’ that? What else are you lyin’ about!?”

Akira didn’t answer. He just put his glasses back on. Ryuji sighed and walked to the edge of the roof, leaning his back against the fence. He gave Akira a tired glance.

“You know why they put this fence here, Kurusu?”

“To stop people from falling off the roof” Akira answered.

“Yeah. Or jumpin’.” Ryuji approached Akira again, stopping right in front of him. “But the fence don’t mean squat if somebody’s determined to jump. If you really wanna, you can climb around it or grab a box cutter and put a hole in it. It’s not an invincible barrier.”

“Ok…” Akira looked at the fence then back at Ryuji. “But I don’t want to jump off the roof.”

“Of course you don’t. Jumpin’ off the roof’s stupid. And people come here to get smarter.” Ryuji crossed his arms. “See, there’s pretty much two things you can do at Shujin Academy. You can do
the smart thing: Take advantage of the fine education provided by our hard-workin’ teachers and excellent extracurricular activities ’n’ junk, all while followin’ the rules and not bein’ a pain in everyone else’s ass…” Ryuji raised his thumb over his shoulder, pointing back at the fence. “Or you can do the dumb thing and jump off the roof.”

“Are you threatening me?” Akira took a step back. “Are you saying you’re going to throw me off the roof if I cause any trouble!?”

“Whoa, relax, Kurusu.” Ryuji grinned and shook his head. “The roof is a… Whaddya call it… A ‘metal four’.”

“You mean ‘metaphor’?”

“Yeah, that!” Ryuji gave Akira a little finger gun motion. “See, the thing about jumpin’ off the roof is that once you do it, you can’t undo it. You hit the ground. Hard. And hey, you may not die, but even if you live, you ain’t walkin’ away unhurt.”

“And the metaphor is…?”

“Jumpin’ off the roof is doin’ anything that causes trouble.” Ryuji pointed his thumb to his chest. “And I’m the ground.”

“I… What?”

“I guess you’re one of them visual learners, huh?” Ryuji sighed and grabbed Akira’s shoulder again. “You cause any trouble, whether it’s harassin’ other students, or causin’ problems for the teachers, or damagin’ school property of whatever, that’s jumpin’ off the roof. And then…”

Akira’s vision blinked out for a second. All of his senses did. The whole world was gone. And when it came back, he was hunched over, Ryuji’s fist driven into his gut. Akira was in incredible agony, like he’d just been hit by a sledgehammer or something.

“You hit the ground.”

Ryuji removed his fist from Akira’s stomach and Akira fell to his knees. Tears started to stream from the bespectacled boy’s eyes and he went to cover his mouth.

“Today, Kurusu, you’ve seen what happens if you jump off the roof and live. It sucks.” Ryuji took a step back and looked down at Akira with an evil grin. “Just remember that it can get even worse.”

Akira opened his mouth to say something, but vomited instead. Barely-disgested yakisoba splattered out on the rooftop.

“Now see, that’s just a waste of good yakisoba.” Ryuji shook his head. “Still, I guess this is technically my fault, so I’ll come back here and clean it up after school.” Ryuji walked back to the table and grabbed his lunch and bag, then went to the door to the stairs. “Anyway, I’ve done my job. Now you know the score. Make sure to look before you leap, delinquent.”

Akira slowly regained control of his faculties and moved away from the puddle of his own vomit. He left behind his lunch and slowly made his way inside and downstairs, trying to process his new situation.

Everybody at school knew he had a record. That wasn’t supposed to happen. The teachers were supposed to know, sure, but it was supposed to be a secret from the other students! So that meant
when everybody was staring at him and murmuring, they were talking about how he was some dangerous freak, not speculating on if he was dating Ann!

Oh no— Ann— and Shiho too. They had been so nice to him and by now they must’ve heard about his delinquent status. Even if they didn’t think he was a monster, he couldn’t hang out with them anymore. If people saw those girls hanging out with him, it’d just make everybody think less of them. He couldn’t let them get dragged down with him. And nobody else would want to either. He couldn’t have any friends at all!

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Lunch period was almost over and Ann was sitting back at her desk, wondering where Akira had disappeared to. She had of course heard the rumors about him by now, but there were a lot of false rumors flying around about her too, so she wasn’t too inclined to just immediately believe them. Still, she really wanted to know why Akira had ditched her. What if he really was a delinquent? What if he was just screwing with her earlier, pretending to be nice so he could get up to something later? What if-

Ann’s train of thought was interrupted when she saw Akira come stumbling into the classroom, holding his stomach. He had this look of terror on him like he’d just seen the face of death and barely got away, and Ann noticed wet trails on his cheeks from what must have been tears. All her rage had immediately been replaced with worry. Something had clearly happened to Akira. The only anger she had left was at herself. How could she just judge Akira like that? He’d been nothing but polite to her all day, and she was ready to assume the worst of him because he went missing? Well, even if he didn’t know she’d thought that, she was going to make it up to him now. Ann stood up as Akira got near her, trudging along to his desk.

“Akira, what happened!?”

Akira didn’t answer. It was like he didn’t hear her at all. He just sat down at his desk and held his head in his hands, that same mortified look on his face.

“Akira, are you ok!?”

“Give it up Takamaki” a boy’s voice said. Ann turned to see three boys snickering at her. The one who spoke up was giving her a particularly smug grin. “Sakamoto came along and took your boyfriend up to the roof for a chat earlier.”

“Ryuji!?” Ann looked back at Akira, horrified. Ryuji had always been rough and kind of a meathead, even back when they were friends, but he’d gotten especially bad over the past year. Students at Shujin Academy feared his wrath far more than they did any teacher’s and for good reason.

“Thank goodness for that” one of the girls said. “Who knows what that delinquent would get up to if he didn’t know that Sakamoto-Kun had his scent?”

“How can you say that!?” Ann turned towards the girl, pure rage in her eyes. “You don’t even know him!”

“Alright, settle down” Ms. Usami said as she walked into the room. She noticed Akira and raised her eyebrow. “What’s the matter with him?”

“He’s feeling ill, ma’am” Ann said. There was no point in telling the teachers what really happened. Ryuji was untouchable.

“Do you need to go to the nurse’s office?” Usami looked directly at Akira.
“No.” Akira had completely regained his composure. “But thank you for your concern.”

“Very well then.” Usami turned to face the whole class. “Let’s get started.”

When the final class of the day ended, Ann immediately got up and turned to face Akira, but he was already moving past her. He was the first to reach the door and started running down the hall. Ann ran after him.

“Akira! Wait!”

Ann chased Akira across the street. He seemed to have overdone it, stopping to lean against a wall in an alley near the school.

“Akira, are you ok!?”

“No.” Akira held his hand out to stop Ann from coming any further. “Just leave me alone, Ann.”

“What!? Why!?”

“Because I thought everything could get better but it’s so much worse than I thought so you should just forget you ever met me!” Akira sat down on the ground with his back to the wall, burying his face in his hands. Just yesterday he’d thought the worst of it was over. Now he was afraid of things spiraling even further out of control.

Ann sat down next to Akira and put her hand on his shoulder.

“You wanna talk about it?”

“Yeah.” Akira looked up at Ann. “It all started when I was walking home one night…”

Chapter End Notes

I am having so much fun with this story you guys have no idea. Thug Ryuji is a blast to write and I always get an odd amount of satisfaction from making Akira suffer.
Chapter Summary

Akira and Ann wind up in a strange and surreal world.

Ryuji returned the mop to the janitor’s closet and headed for the student council room. He waited by the door while the student council held their budget meeting. Makoto felt it would be improper for him to sit in on council meetings while waiting to discuss their own business, seeing how Ryuji wasn’t actually a student council member. That was fine by him. He was certain that those meetings were boring. Yeah, Ryuji cared about making sure the school was the best it could be, but he and Makoto had their own system that was entirely different from what the student council did. That and the other members of the student council seemed to resent him. He wasn’t sure if they were just afraid of him or jealous that their president liked and confided in him more than any of them, but every time he got close to one of them it was awkward. Like right now, as they were all coming out of the room. One of them glared at Ryuji, a couple looked at him in fear, and the last one just kept his head forward like Ryuji wasn’t even there. Ryuji made his way into the room, where Makoto was still at her desk, pushing some files to the side.

“Here to report, Ryuji-Kun?”

“Yes, Miss Prez.”

“Please have a seat, then.”

Ryuji grabbed a chair and sat across from Makoto in front of her desk.

“I talked to Kurusu at lunch. Brought him up to the roof and laid down the law like you asked me to.”

“I see.” Makoto had a composed, neutral expression on her face. “And how did Kurusu-Kun respond?”

“He was pretty freaked out for most of it. I think he got the message.”

“Excellent work, Ryuji-Kun.” Makoto’s lips curled up into a smile. “A scared delinquent is a placid delinquent. I am certain he won’t be causing any problems around the school from here on out.”

“Yeah, about that…” Ryuji looked down at his feet, a note of uncertainty in his tone.

“Hm?” Makoto’s smile vanished and she cocked her eyebrow. “What’s the matter, Ryuji-Kun?”

“I think I mighta overdone it a little.”

“How so?”

“Well, I kinda…” Ryuji looked up at Makoto nervously. “Slugged the guy.”

“Is that all?” Half of Makoto’s face turned into a smirk. “It would hardly be the first time, Ryuji-
Kun. It’s one of the things that makes you so effective at maintaining Shujin Academy’s standards of excellence.”

“I know, but still…” Ryuji slumped forward, his elbows on his knees, propping his head up with his hands. “The guy didn’t actually DO anything to deserve it! I got totally carried away!”

“Please calm down, Ryuji-Kun. You are being far too hard on yourself.” Makoto shook her head. “I just feel like I oughta apologize to him or somethin’, y’know?”

“Your attitude is commendable, Ryuji-Kun, but I’m afraid I must ask you to refrain from doing that.” Makoto got out of her chair and walked around her desk, standing in front of Ryuji, looking down at him. “Such an action would destabilize the foundation of everything you and I have accomplished.”

“Huh?” Ryuji sat up straight and looked up at Makoto in confusion.

“If you admit any sort of wrongdoing to the delinquent, it could compromise all authority you hold over him, invalidating everything you said to him previously.” Makoto crossed her arms over her chest. “And if that happens, he could become emboldened to get up to all sorts of illicit acts that could endanger the rest of the student body.”

“I dunno. He really doesn’t seem like the kinda guy who’d do that. He was just like, some confused nerd who didn’t know what to do when somebody gets mad at him.”

“Are you hearing yourself, Ryuji-Kun!? He’s a convicted criminal! He has an assault record! Just think about it!” Makoto scowled and tapped her fingertip against his forehead a couple times “Has it occurred to you for one moment that he could be putting on an act so you’ll let your guard down!?”

“Well…” Ryuji scratched his chin and his eyes narrow. “I DID find out that those glasses he wears are fake. That was kinda suspicious…”

“It is highly suspicious!” Makoto threw her hands up in the air. “He probably wears them to appear more gentle than he actually is! He’s deceiving the entire student body!”

“I guess… But I still don’t feel good about hittin’ him for no real reason.” Ryuji slumped back in his chair and started sulking.

“Of course you don’t.” Makoto’s upset demeanor vanished and she gave Ryuji a kind smile. “That’s because you’re a good person, Ryuji-Kun. You want to see the best in people and believe they’re as good as they appear to be. As admirable as that optimism is, it’s also naïve. Reality is often not as kind as we would like it to be. But that’s what you and I are working for.” Makoto moved behind Ryuji and put her hands on his shoulders, causing him to sit up straight and stiffen up. She began rubbing his shoulders, which made him loosen up again, sinking into the chair. “I realize that this work can be taxing, Ryuji-Kun. But that’s why we have each other. I rely on your strength to make the school the utopia it can be for all of our students. You’re my cherished partner. You feel the same way about me, don’t you?”

“Ooooh yeeaaaaah…” Ryuji was awash in ecstasy as Makoto’s fingers dug into his shoulders, easing up the constant tension he felt pretty much all the time. Frankly, the hardest part of his job was trying to be so proper. It was at Makoto’s insistence, and it made sense. The model student should have good posture and manners and all that, but all of that stuff was just so contrary to Ryuji’s nature. Makoto had pretty much given up at getting him to change his speech patterns, settling for
cleaning up his potty mouth. So when she encouraged him to relax like this, it felt like the weight of the world was being taken off his shoulders.

“I’m happy to hear it.” Makoto leaned forward and spoke softly into Ryuji’s ear. “I know that the things we do confuse you sometimes. But I want you to know that you can always trust me, Ryuji-Kun. All I want is what’s best for Shujin Academy’s student body, and that includes you. So just keep on doing what I tell you to, and there will be a brighter future for all of us.”

“Damn brat, I’ll sue!”

“…and when the cops came, I wound up the one being arrested. The drunk guy went free and now here I am.”

Akira looked down at his feet, dejected. Ann stared wide-eyed at him, her face a mixture of sadness and anger.

“That’s terrible! How could that lady do that after you tried to help her!?”

“Yeah, it sucks. But you know what? I don’t blame her.”

“What!?”

“I mean, it’s like…” Akira looked up at Ann, a strange tired smile on his face. “That guy clearly had something on her. The way he was talking, sounds like she could’ve gone to jail for life. If somebody’s gonna suffer because of that bald asshole, better that it’s some kid on probation than some woman who’d probably worked for years to get where she was and had a family and stuff, right?”

“Are you some kind of saint!?” Ann gawked at Akira.

“I mean, it’s like, I guess I’m just still trying to find the good in this.” Akira stretched out his legs on the ground in front of him. “Getting a criminal record and having my life uprooted sucked, but I kind of saw it as an opportunity. Like, getting to live in the big city for a year could be an adventure or something. And I just had the idea that since I wasn’t a criminal, so long as I acted like nothing was wrong, eventually it’d all be over no sweat. I even began to believe it when I met you and Shiho! My first day of school and I might have actually made a couple friends before classes even started! How great would that have been!?”

“Would have been?” Ann huffed and shoved Akira’s shoulder. “Don’t you go counting me out just yet, mister! Shiho neither! It’s going to take more than some dumb rumors to get rid of us!”

“Thanks, Ann.” Akira tried to keep up his smile, but it was clearly forced. “I could really use a friend or two now. Because everything else has gone to shit. The guy looking after me hates my guts and has me living in an attic, everybody else has learned about my record even though it was supposed to be a secret, and on top of all that, I’m getting random crap that has nothing to do with anything happening to me! Like this weird piece of malware that keeps downloading on my phone!” Akira pulled his phone out of his pocket and showed the screen to Ann, pointing to an application with a red eyeball icon.

“Metaverse Navigator’?” Ann looked up from the phone at Akira. “What’s that?”

“I don’t even know. But it keeps downloading on my phone. Maybe it’s some software update?” Akira tapped on the icon.
“PLEASE ENTER A DESTINATION” a female voice said.

“Anywhere but my phone” Akira responded.

“DESTINATION NOT FOUND.”

“Figures.” Akira looked back at Ann. “And if all the mental and emotional anguish wasn’t enough, now that gorilla Sakamoto’s punching me in the stomach just to prove he’s king of the apes or whatever.”

“So Ryuji really DID hit you…” This time Ann was looking sadly at the ground. “Wish I could say I was surprised.”

“Yeah, what’s that guy’s deal anyway? He said you two used to be friends?”

“Yeah, back in middle school.” Ann sighed. “Ryuji’s always been a short-tempered idiot meathead, but he also used to be really sweet. He’d get in some fights, but it was always to help somebody else out. He cared about people, and hated seeing them get bullied or taken advantage of.”

“That doesn’t sound at all like the guy I met today” Akira said. “What happened to him?”

“Niijima-Senpai happened” Ann said.

“The student council president you were telling me about?”

“Yeah.” Ann look at Akira sadly. “The thing is, I think Ryuji still wants to help people. He wants to do right by people and protect them from bullies.” Ann’s brow furrowed. “But ‘Queen’ Makoto Niijima got her hooks into Ryuji and made him all twisted. Now he’s her attack dog, and she sics him on anybody who she thinks poses a threat to Shujin Academy’s perfect image, no matter how minor.”

“Wait, so SHE sent him to rough me up!?”

“Uh-huh.” Ann nodded. “Probably trying to scare you straight so you won’t cause any trouble at the school.”

“I don’t get it” Akira said. “Why is she so obsessed with making Shujin look great? Doesn’t it already have a good reputation?”

“Because when she became student council president, she promised to make Shujin Academy exactly what people thought it was. She calls it a ‘Utopia of Higher Learning’ or somethi-”

“DESTINATION FOUND” Akira’s phone said. “BEGINNING NAVIGATION.”

There was a strange noise and Ann and Akira both grabbed their heads. Everything seemed different, their senses acting out, the world around them distorting. After a moment, it came to a stop.

“What was that!?” Ann asked.

“I don’t know!” Akira responded.

“Was that the app on your phone!?”

“Maybe!?” Akira looked at his phone and tried to close the app, but he couldn’t. “What the-“
“Akira, this is serious!” Ann stood up. “I think that thing sent out some kind of pulse that messes with peoples’ brains! It’s like an electronic dog whistle for people!”

“Yeah, and I can’t delete it from my phone either. I can’t even close it now that it’s open!” Akira got up and started pacing back and forth angrily. “Because why should I be able to!? Clearly my existence itself is an affront to God! I’ve got to suffer! That’s just the rules now! The rest of the world seems to know it, you might as well get on board with it too, Ann! Just go ahead and stab me or something! If I died, it’d be an improvement!”

“Don’t say that!” Ann raised her hand to slap Akira’s face, then realized it would probably be counterintuitive. She decided to hug him instead.

“Uh…” Akira became rigid as Ann wrapped her arms around him. “What are you doing?”

“You seem like you could use a hug right now” Ann said.

“But you barely know me” Akira said.

“I know enough. I know you’re a good person.” Ann squeezed tighter. “And I figure that if you’ve got all this bad stuff happening to you out of the blue, you deserve something good to happen to you too.”

“I…” Akira slowly wrapped his arms around Ann, returning the hug. It felt nice. After everything he’d been through and everybody turning their back on or thinking the worst of him, there was one person who was willing to treat Akira like he was worth something. “Thank you, Ann.”

“Feeling better?” Ann let go of Akira and stepped back. He had a red-faced smile.

“Kind of, yeah.”

“We should do something fun! You didn’t really eat lunch, right?”

‘Nope.” Akira’s face returned to its normal hue.

“Then let’s go to Shibuya! I know this place that makes the best crepes in the city! It’s my favorite!”

“Crepes, huh?” Akira’s stomach growled and he put a hand on it. “I’ve never actually had a crepe before.”

“You haven’t!? Then we are DEFINITELY getting them!” Ann grabbed Akira’s shoulders and turned him around, pushing him out of the alley. “Come on! Let’s go!”

“Whoa, hey!” Akira started laughing, moving his legs to outpace Ann’s shoving. She was surprisingly strong. “I’m perfectly capable of moving forward on my-“

Akira stopped moving and his jaw locked up. He just stared ahead. He was sure that he had exited the alley the same way he came in. But now, instead of seeing Shujin Academy, there was… Well…

“Akira, what are you doing?” Ann moved around to Akira's side and saw what he was seeing. Her jaw dropped.

Where once had stood a school, now there was an entire city. The sky itself had turned an unnatural midnight blue with crimson auroras swirling about it. Even without illumination
provided by a sun or moon, the city seemed to glow on its own. Tall, beautiful pale gold skyscrapers and ornate white spires made up the skyline. All of the smaller buildings were pristine as well. The tallest building was right in the center of the city, with most of the body being thick like a fortified tower. The top part of the building was spherical and kind of looked like a giant ivory and crystal eyeball with irises and pupils looking in every direction. It was beautiful, but kind of scary at the same time. The bits of street Akira and Ann could make out seemed to be made of light, and there was a marble archway right where the school’s gate would be with a sign reading “Shujin City”. Akira and Ann were silent for a minute, taking it all in.

“Uh…” Akira broke the silence. “So, I promised myself not to say anything that made me look like an ignorant hick, but Tokyo doesn’t just change entirely when you’re not looking, right? Like, the school is supposed to be here, isn’t it?”

“I have no idea what any of this is!” Ann kept staring at the city in amazement. “Do you think we were drugged by your phone?”

“My phone?” Akira looked at Ann in confusion.

“Yeah! When it did that dog whistle thing to us!”

“I don’t think a phone could be hacked to make people see things. I mean, I don’t know- Wait!” Akira pointed to the city. “Ann, what do YOU see right now?”

“I’m seeing a big glowing city” Ann said. “What about you?”

“Same. Hm…” Akira crossed his arms and furrowed his brow. “Even if a sonic pulse could be used to make somebody hallucinate, I doubt a phone app would be capable of giving two people the exact same hallucination. I don’t really know anything about it for sure, but I just feel like the human brain doesn’t work that way.”

“So you’re saying this is real!?”

“Now, this is just a theory, but hear me out.” Akira took out his phone again. The app was still on his screen. “This app said it was some kind of navigator, right?”

“Yeah…” Ann had a feeling she knew where Akira was going, but didn’t want to be the first one to say it.

“What if it actually took us somewhere? What if this ‘Metaverse’ is another world?”

“I mean, it makes sense…” Ann shook her head, her pigtails flopping back and forth as she did so. “But that’s impossible! Isn’t it!?”

“I mean, it should be, but I guess lots of things are until they aren’t.” Akira saw that Ann was confused and wracked his brain for some kind of clarification. “Like, people probably thought TV was impossible until someone invented it, you know?”

“I guess…” Ann looked at the city again. “So how do we get back?”

“I don’t know. But since we’re here, we might as well check it out, right?”

“Wow. You REALLY want your big city adventure, huh?”

“Kind of.” Akira gave Ann a big dopey grin as his stomach growled again. “Plus I want to see if they’ve got anything to eat.”
“Fine, let’s go.” Akira and Ann headed across the street. “Shiho’s not gonna believe me when I tell her about this.”

As the two passed under the archway into the city, a big black blob appeared before them and exploded into tendrils. Akira and Ann screamed in unison and took a step back as the swirling mass of shadow reshaped itself. It took the form of a police officer, albeit it unnaturally tall and with twisted proportions. Its limbs were slightly longer than they ought to have been, and it had a hunched back. Its skin was dark black, seemingly made of the same shadowy stuff that it had been formed from, and it had an expressionless blue mask with glowing yellow eyes on its face. It was carrying a billy club in its right hand and held out its left hand to the teenagers.

“Stop right there!” The police officer’s voice was that of a stern woman, but kind of distorted and echoey, like somebody had run it through an audio editor or something.

“Is something the matter… uh…” Akira looked directly into the cop’s yellow eyes. They were expressionless, but Akira felt like they were probably off to a bad start. “Officer?”

“None may enter Shujin City without identifying themselves! State your names!”

“Oh. Well, ok.” Akira spoke calmly. “My name is ‘Akira Kurusu’.”

“‘Kurusu’…” The cop held open its free hand and a clipboard appeared in it. It began flipping through the pages, stopping when it found what he was looking for. “Yes, you’re on the watchlist.”

“Huh?” Akira was confused. How could he be on a watchlist for a place he’d never been to before? “What watchlist!?"

“I’m getting to that” the cop said grumpily. “‘Akira Kurusu: 16 years old, convicted of assault, known delinquent. Potential danger to Shujin’s inhabitants.’” Akira opened his mouth to say something, but was cut off by the cop pointing its billy club at him. “HOWEVER, it also states that you have been issued a warning and told what will happen if you step out of line. You will be permitted entry on the conditional basis that you understand any misbehavior will be grounds for immediate arrest. Do you accept these terms?”

“Of course.” Akira hated that he was already labelled in this world too, but at least he’d be able to go about his business. Still, he had a feeling he probably didn’t want to stick around this city too long.

“Very well. Welcome to Shujin City, Akira Kurusu.” The cop turned its focus to Ann. “And what is YOUR name?”

“Ann Takamaki” Ann said. She felt like she should be scared, but everything was a little too weird to be freaky at the moment.

“Let me see…. ‘Takamaki’… Ah, yes. You are also on the watchlist.”

“For what!?” Ann asked indignantly.

“‘Ann Takamaki: 16 years old, known to be highly promiscuous—’”

“EXCUSE YOU!?”

“Any further interruptions will result in arrest” the cop said harshly, looking directly into Ann’s eyes. It looked back down at the clipboard. “‘Previous associate/sexual partner of the exile Suguru Kamoshida.’” Ann was about to yell again but Akira covered her mouth. “‘Report in if seen
associating with any suspicious characters.” The cop looked up to Ann with Akira’s hand over her mouth. “Hmm…” The cop reached into its pocket and pulled out a police radio. “Wait right here.”

The cop walked a bit into the city and started holding a conversation. Akira and Ann couldn’t hear what it was saying. Ann pulled Akira’s hand off of her face.

“What was that for!?” she asked.

“Sorry” Akira said. “Look, I think we should get out of here.”

“Why? We haven’t done anything wrong!”

“That doesn’t guarantee anything.” Akira gave Ann a deadly serious look. “Trust me.”

“Well when you put it that way…” Ann nodded. “Let’s get out of here.”

The two turned around and started to head back to the alley from whence they came. They were cut off by the appearance of two more shadowy blobs, which turned into two more cops.

“STOP RIGHT THERE!” The new cops were yelling with the same voice as the previous cop.

“Oh come on!” Ann yelled. “We were just leaving!”

“You’re not going anywhere until we determine what to do with you!” one of them declared.

“Just think for a second. You don’t want us here, and we don’t want to be here” Akira said. “There’s an easy solution for all of us!”

“Got orders from HQ” the original cop they were talking to came back. “The Queen wants to speak to the girl directly. Cuff her.”

One of the cop grabbed Ann and slapped a pair of handcuffs on her.

“HEY!” Ann started struggling as the cop grabbed her shoulders to keep her in place.

“Let go of her!” Akira yelled.

“She wants to talk to the boy too” the first cop said. The third cop grabbed Akira and cuffed him just like Ann. Unlike Ann, Akira didn’t scream and struggle.

“Oh Akira…” Ann stopped struggling for a moment when she saw the expression on Akira’s face. Or rather, lack of expression. Akira just stared at the ground blankly, like nobody was home. Ann was guessing he just completely shut down so he wouldn’t have to process the fact that he was being unjustly arrested a second time.

The cops started marching Akira and Ann forward. Akira just barely had enough presence of mind to move his legs, it seemed. They made a beeline for that giant eye tower in the middle of the city. It was a long walk, and Ann noticed that most of the city’s residents seemed to be wearing the Shujin Academy uniform. She even recognized some of the peoples’ faces, all scowling at her and Akira as they were escorted by the police. But thinking about that would have to wait until later. Right now, she was just trying to bring Akira back down to Earth. Or, well, wherever this place was.

“Akira, can you hear me?”

No response.
“Come on, say something!”

“Quiet, you!” The cop escorting Ann gave her an extra hard shove.

“What are you gonna do, arrest me MORE?”

The cop didn’t respond. Ann returned her attention to her silent friend.

“Akira, please, just talk to me! Just give me some sign you’re ok!”

Akira mumbled something. Ann couldn’t hear it.

“What?”

“I’M NOT OK!” Akira yelled. He looked up at Ann, brow furrowed and eyes watering. “Why does this keep happening to me!? I never did anything wrong! Why is everybody in two worlds out to get me!? I can’t do this all again!”

“Don’t think like that! It’s not the same this time!” Ann tried to give Akira a reassuring smile, but she was a terrible actress. “I’m here with you!”

“That makes it even worse!” Akira closed his eyes and turned his head away from Ann. “This is all happening because you’re with me. I’m cursed, Ann! I don’t know why, but I am! You should’ve just stayed away from me.”

“Well I AM here” Ann said. “And wherever these guys are taking us, we’ll get through it together!”

“No, Ann.” Akira opened his eyes but didn’t look back up at her. He had a completely defeated look on his face. “They’re arresting you because you were seen with a suspicious person. If you’d come here on your own, you probably would’ve been fine. When we get to whatever’s at the top of that tower, I’m going to tell them that whatever they think is going on is all my fault. Then they’ll let you go.”

“Are you an idiot!? I’m not letting you do that!”

“Don’t fight me on this!” Akira looked at Ann angrily. “No matter what happens, I have no future. Whether it’s in this weird world or back in Tokyo, I’m labelled and everyone hates me. If Sakamoto didn’t kill me today, he’ll probably do it some other time. Or somebody will get the wrong idea and accuse me of something and I’ll be expelled and go to jail. I’m doomed no matter what I do.” Akira’s expression lightened a bit, and a small smile appeared on his face. Not the most convincing in the world, but certainly better than Ann’s attempt. “But it doesn’t have to be that way for you. If I can get you out of this, I promise that I will.”

Ann didn’t say anything. She didn’t know what to say. The fact is, while she wanted to be friends, she didn’t actually know Akira Kurusu at all. His record aside, she didn’t know what kind of food he enjoyed or what shows he liked to watch or any of his hobbies or goals or anything. All she knew was that he seemed like a nice guy in a bad situation. A genuinely good person who life knocked over and wouldn’t stop kicking while he was down. But that was enough. Because she knew what it was like to be victim to unfair treatment, to be labelled forever. And she knew that Akira would argue with her, which is why she decided not to continue their conversation. Because right then and there, she decided one very important thing.

There was no way in Hell she was leaving Akira to suffer.
Ann and Akira were led through the doors to the massive tower. It resembled a busy, bustling police station. Tons of those weird police monster people were lurking about, as well as more normal-looking humans. Ann noticed some of the members of the student council sitting at desks, doing paperwork. They were led to a large elevator in the middle of the sprawling lobby, and ushered inside. The control panel had no button, instead containing a touchscreen displaying a numbered keypad. The first cop typed in the number 100, and two icons popped up in place of the keypad, one resembling a key, the other a camera. The cop hit the camera button and looked up at the ceiling.

“State your business” a familiar husky voice said over a speaker.

“We’ve been asked to bring these dissidents to the Queen” the cop said.

“Ah, yes. The Queen is expecting you. One moment please.”

The elevator's doors closed and it started ascending rapidly. Akira and Ann looked at each other grimly, both wondering just what was waiting for them at the top. Truthfully, the speed at which it was rising was uncomfortable. They really had to keep themselves braced not to fall over, and when it started to slow down, they feared they may be tossed into the air by the stop. Thankfully, the elevator slowed down significantly, and Akira and Ann were not the victims of any sort of G-forces. They didn’t get injured or throw up or anything.

And then the elevator opened, and they were almost certain they were going to vomit.

The cops pushed Akira and Ann out of the elevator, into what looked like a waiting room for the office of somebody very important. The room was quite lovely. There were plush chairs lined up against the walls, a nice big secretary’s desk built into the floor and partially attached to the wall, and some large double doors with an elaborate gold carving of the flower found on the badges of members of the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department.

One wall of the room was all glass, allowing a view of the entire city, but from here, there was something peculiar about it. They were looking down upon the buildings and streets of light, but one street’s light seemed to have gone out. There were a bunch of tiny figures moving towards the street, presumably police officers, filing into the dark street one after another, where they were no longer visible. Every few moments, a blue light could be seen from the darkness, burning up and vanishing, like a distant firework.

Yes, the room itself was quite something to behold. It was the person sitting behind the secretary’s desk that was disturbing. The body was about what you’d expect from a secretary. A sleek, petite frame dressed in a cream-colored blazer and dress skirt, a white blouse visible under the blazer
with a cute red bowtie at the top. Her hair was a long, flowing, luxurious wavy blonde. But it was between the bowtie and hair that the true horror lay. Propped on that cute female form like some rubbery monster mask was the dumpling-like head of Principal Kobayakawa, tiny ears almost vanishing into vast expanses of fat and harsh eyebrows and all. It was completely disproportionate to the body, like some sick joke instead of a functioning human. Kobayakawa stood up and walked away from his/her desk, holding open one of the double doors to the next room.

“The Queen awaits you, officers” Kobayakawa said in his normal voice. It was the same voice that had come over the elevator speakers.

The three cops pushed Akira and Ann through the door and it closed behind them. They found themselves in a large room with high ceilings and a floor made from stone. The walls were also made of stone, and the room was lit by candelabras with actual candles in them and torches. Compared to the rest of the building they’d been in so far, it was positively archaic.

The focus of the room was on a second story above the stone floor, where regular stone had been replaced with marble. Polished white stairs led up to an area with a plush red rug. Adorning the wall was a well-lit portrait with an onyx frame of a man dressed in a police uniform. He had a few extra pounds and his hair had gone grey, but most striking about him were his crimson eyes. Standing next to the portrait was a stone statue of justice, blindfolded as always with a sword in one hand and scales in the other. What was peculiar about her was that she did not look as she usually did. She was tall, had long, straight hair, and dressed in a contemporary business suit instead of ancient Greek attire. Akira thought he had seen this woman somewhere before, but wasn’t sure where.

A large hole opened in the ceiling, and a heavenly light shined down through it. A throne floated down from above, made of white gold with plush red leather seating. It placed itself right before the portrait of the man, the back of the throne obscuring a good part of it, but not the eyes. Sitting in the throne was somebody Akira had never seen before. She was a teenage girl, possibly a year or so older than Akira, but who’d probably be a bit shorter if they stood right next to each other. She was dressed in a white pantsuit with red buttons and red floral embroidery on the blazer. On her feet were white shoes with two-inch heels. Pinned to her chest was a small white gold broach with a flower-shaped red gem in it identical to the flower on the room's outer door. Sitting on top of the girl's short brown hair covering her head was a white gold tiara with more red jewels in it. She had a haughty smile on her face, scanning Akira and Ann with glowing yellow eyes.

“Niijima-Senpai!?” Ann stared at the girl before them in amazement.

“DO NOT SPEAK TO THE QUEEN UNLESS SPoken TO!” One of the cops pushed Ann down onto her knees.

“KNEEL BEFORE THE QUEEN! BOTH OF YOU!” Another cop forced Akira down onto his knees as well. Chains rose from the floor, wrapping around Akira and Ann’s cuffed hands and pulling tight, keeping them affixed to the floor, unable to rise.

“My Queen…” The lead police officer bowed before his queen. “These prisoners we have brought before you are-“

“I am aware of their identities, Officer” Makoto said, her voice also distorted and echoey like her police force. “I am the one who requested they be brought here, after all.”

“Of course, My Queen.” The cop fell to his knees and bowed, lowering his head and hands to the ground. “Forgive my foolishness. I merely wished to do my due dilig-“
“Cease your groveling. It’s unsightly.” Makoto rose from her throne and slowly walked down the stairs. As her white shoes moved beyond the bottom of the white stairway, each stone her feet touched suddenly turned to marble. When she removed her foot from the spot where it had been, the marble would return to regular stone. She looked at the three cops and shooed them away with a slight wave of her hand, causing them to retreat to the room's back wall as she approached. She stopped before Akira and Ann, standing above the two.

“Niijima-Senpai, what’s going on here?” Ann asked.

“Such impertinence” Makoto said, a mocking frown appearing on her face. She leaned forward, bending over to be eye level with Ann. “You should really put more thought into how you address your Queen, Takamaki-Chan.”

“Pardon my speaking out of turn,” Akira said, “but I’m still new here and trying to understand the situation. You’re Mak- I mean, you are Queen Makoto Niijima of Shujin Academy, yes?”

“That is correct.” Makoto’s haughty smile reappeared and she walked over to Akira. She bent down and grabbed Akira’s chin with her hand, moving around his head and taking in his appearance with a close eye like she was inspecting a horse for sale. “And you are Akira Kurusu, the violent delinquent that my foolish servant permitted into MY school without my express permission.”

“What servant?” Akira’s eyes trailed off for a second. A look of realization dawned on him and he returned his focus to Makoto. “Do you mean Principal Kobayakawa?”

“Yes. He is only the principal of Shujin Academy as much as I permit him to be. Sadly, he forgets this sometimes.” Makoto kept her hold on Akira’s face, looking at him with a keen interest. “Still, I have chosen not to punish him. He is not wrong in his notion that reforming a criminal such as yourself will only bring further prestige to the school. So long as you know your place, I will permit your continued presence.” Makoto’s face got closer to Akira’s. “You DO know your place, don’t you, Kurusu-Kun?”

“I believe so, Queen Niijima.” Akira sighed. “Out of the way and not causing trouble, right?”

“That’s correct!” Makoto let go of his face and petted his head like a dog. “You are very smart for a delinquent, Kurusu-Kun. And you are not unattractive either. If you continue to show such promise, I may just see fit to find you a proper station in my court. Of course…” Makoto turned her head to look at Ann, her facial features shifting to express disdain. “You would have to stop associating with filth such as her first.”

“Who are you calling ‘filth’!?” Ann screamed.

“Do you see what I mean, Kurusu-Kun?” Makoto stood tall and walked over to Ann again, looking down on her. “No concept of her station or situation, speaking with such disrespect to her better. But it’s hardly as if I would expect any less from Kamoshida’s little foreigner-fetish gutter whore.”

“WHAT DID YOU JUST SAY!?”

“I’m afraid you are mistaken, Queen Niijima.” It took all of Akira’s willpower to remain calm. Getting riled up would not help this situation. “Ann has told me all about Kamoshida. Including how he NEVER got the chance to touch her.”

“Yes, well, that’s not what the student body believes.” Makoto turned her back and started to head back up the stairs. “The fact is, there is no proof beyond conjecture that you ever had an actual
affair with Kamoshida. But sadly, rumors are so hard to quell. Even if you presented concrete proof of your innocence in this matter, there would still be those that would doubt it. As far as the school knows, you were Kamoshida’s willing little toy while he abused the rest of the student body. Whether it is accurate or not is irrelevant.” Makoto sat in her throne, looking down at Ann. “Everybody says that is what you are, and so that makes it true.”

“But it ISN’T true!” Ann tried to stand up but her movement was cut off by the chain connecting her to the floor. “Aren’t you supposed to be the smartest student in school!? You have to know it’s all a bunch of lies!”

“I am, and I do.” Makoto put on another fake frown and shook her head sadly. “But the rumors persist. An ugly little blonde mark in our school’s history of excellence. Though even without them, you would still be a disgrace to Shujin Academy, Takamaki-Chan.” Makoto practically spat out the end of that sentence.

“Hey, that’s not fair!” Akira’s anger slipped out. “Ann is great person! She just met me today, not knowing anything about me, but has been nothing but nice and welcoming! She’s one of the best people I’ve ever met! How can you be so cruel to her!?”

Ann smiled at Akira, but her ego boost was quickly ruined by Makoto chuckling. “Oh, Kurusu-Kun, you really are a strange one.” Makoto tilted her head upwards in thought. “That belief in fairness reminds me of another sweet fool I know. Of course, I think you’d make a far more entertaining servant. And as for Takamaki-Chan…” Makoto lowered her head and focused on Ann with a cunning smile on her face. “Well, today has presented a marvelous opportunity, hasn’t it?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Ann gave Makoto the meanest glare she could muster, but the student queen seem unaffected.

“I’ve been trying to come up with a way to rid the school of your stench for some time. Having Ryuji-Kun deal with you wouldn’t work, as it wouldn’t actually stop the rumors. And I take great care not to have any students expelled unless absolutely necessary. Every student kicked out of Shujin is the school admitting failure. But now I’m presented with a third option…” Makoto looked past Ann to one of the cops in the back of the room. “Lock her up. Throw her into some deep dark hole where nobody will ever see her face again.”

“Yes, My Queen.” The cop began making its way towards Ann.

“You can’t do that!” Ann yelled.

“You can’t be serious!”

“I am not known for my sense of humor.” Makoto stood in front of Ann, snapping her fingers. The chain keeping Ann held to the floor disappeared, but before Ann could do anything, the cop was on her, grabbing her by the hair and pulling her up to her feet.
“This is totally messed up!” Ann started crying. “You can’t just throw me in jail because you don’t like what people say about me! I have a life!”

“Don’t worry, Takamaki-Chan. I’m certain you’ll be fondly remembered.” Makoto dug her thumbs into Ann’s cheeks and pulled up, twisting the younger girl’s face into a false smile. “See? A beautiful smile like this isn’t easily forgotten. I’m sure you’ll live on in the fantasies of your male classmates for years to come. In a way, it will be like you were never really gone.” Makoto looked up at the police officer holding Ann. “Take her away.”

“As you wish, My Queen.” The cop began to walk away, trying to pull Ann with it, still holding her hair. Ann refused to move, getting pulled to the ground, and she started kicking and screaming as she was dragged away by the hair like some old cartoon about cavemen and cavewomen.

“Wait!” Akira called out. “You don’t have to do this!”

“I would disagree” Makoto said, turning her head to Akira. “I wish for something, and so it must be done. That is simply how things are in this place, Kurusu-Kun.”

“Then let’s make a deal!” Akira strained against his chains, trying to get just a couple inches closer to Makoto as if that would somehow make his words more convincing. “What if I offered you something more satisfying than Ann’s imprisonment? Would that stay your hand, My Queen!”

“Well now, that is certainly an intriguing notion. And since you have addressed me with such propriety…” Makoto held up her hand, causing the cop to stop. It let go of Ann, who stood up, but a chain and shackle emerged from the floor and clamped around her ankle before she could do anything. Makoto walked over to Akira and looked down at him like a cat that had cornered a mouse. “I suppose I would be willing to hear you out.”

“That’s very gracious of you, My Queen.” Akira bowed his head to Makoto.

“Yes, it is. But enough flattery. What is your proposition, Kurusu-Kun? What do you have to trade that is worth Ann Takamaki’s freedom?”

“You mentioned wanting me for a servant, right?” Akira looked into Makoto’s glowing yellow eyes, and though they terrified him, he showed no fear. “Then I’ll do it. You can have me. I’ll be whatever you want me to be, do whatever you want me to do. One hundred percent devotion. Just let Ann go home unharmed.”

“Uh-uh! No way!” Ann tried to take a step towards Akira, but the shackle wouldn’t let her move from the spot. “Akira, I’m not gonna let you throw away your life like this!”

“You have no say in this matter!” Makoto snapped at Ann. “Do something smart for once in your life and keep your vapid mouth shut!”

“Is that a yes?” Akira asked. “Do we have a deal?”

“You truly are nothing like what I expected, Kurusu-Kun.” Makoto crouched down and cupped Akira’s face again, giving him a tender smile. “Well-spoken, caring, self-sacrificing… I’m starting to doubt that you’re actually a delinquent at all. That you’re willing to give up everything to save a girl you’ve just met speaks volumes about the content of your character. There is, however, one significant detail you’ve overlooked in this negotiation.”

“What’s that?” Akira’s fearless facade started to peel away a bit.

Makoto let go of Akira and backhanded him on the right side of his face. It was a hit unlike any
he’d ever experienced before. He thought it couldn’t get any worse than Ryuji, but while Ryuji was strong, Makoto Nijima was somehow superhuman. Her offhand strike was so powerful that it made Akira airborne, launching him across the room. Or at least it would have were he not still chained to the floor. Thanks to that chain, Akira’s hands stopped and the rest of his body kept moving, but not for long. The strong pull of his confines on his wrists brought a sudden and painful stop to his momentum, and for a moment Akira believed his arms were going to be ripped out of their sockets. As the side of his body hit the stone floor, the only thing distracting him from the soreness filling his entire being was the excruciating agony in his face and the taste of blood. Miraculously, Akira had broken no bones, but the blow had pushed the inside of his cheek against his teeth, cutting it open. He moaned in pain, allowing some of the blood in his mouth to drain out in an unseemly, drool-like fashion.

“What the hell are you doing to him!?” Ann screamed, still struggling against her chain in vain.

“Whatever I want” Makoto said, reaching down and grabbing a handful of Akira’s hair. “That is my right as Queen.”

New pain introduced itself as Akira’s hair pulled against his scalp, his entire body being yanked back into a sitting position. As he was forced upright, a large, ugly scrape could be seen on the side of his face that had made contact with the stone floor. He once more found himself peering directly into the monstrous yellow eyes of Makoto Nijima, looking back at him with such a sinister, gleeful intensity that he felt like they were staring into his soul.

“You see, Kurusu-Kun, I do not wait for the things I want to happen. I MAKE them happen. I got rid of Kamoshida. I made Ryuji-Kun motivate the school’s under-performers to improve their grades. I saw to it that the student body knew that a dangerous criminal was joining their ranks.”

Akira’s mouth opened, but no words came out. There was a quick whimper, but before he could say anything, he started coughing up blood, some of which hit Makoto’s face. She wiped it away with the back of her hand nonchalantly, then wiped her hand off on Akira’s chest.

“YOU leaked his record!??” Makoto turned her head to see Ann glaring at her. “Why!? He never did anything to you!”

“Because the students deserved to know. Because I would not allow a delinquent to skulk about Shujin undetected until he was ready to strike. Because Kobayakawa let a criminal into my school without running it past me first, and I wanted to give him a headache from having his terrible decision made public. Because when I want something, I see to it that it gets done. And that is why you have no bargaining chip, Kurusu-Kun.” Makoto let go of Akira’s face and walked around to his side, looking at his scraped-up cheek. “I don’t have to choose between you and Takamaki. I can have both. Because I want you to be my servant, you will be.” Makoto lifted her foot and pushed the toe into Akira’s head, forcing him to lie down on the ground. The ball of her foot kept him pinned to the floor, and she started grinding it against his temple, drawing grunts of pain from the boy.

“STOP IT!” Ann was worked up into a frenzy, stomping the chain connecting her to the floor as if it would actually break it. “Haven’t you done enough to him!?”

“I’ve hardly even begun.” Makoto traced Akira’s profile with foot. “I’m growing ever fonder of the prospect of Kurusu-Kun as a member of my court.” She pressed her heel into Akira’s raw cheek, drawing a scream from him. “He looks perfect under my heel like this. As if it’s where he was always meant to be.”

“Get your foot off of him, damn it!” Ann’s rage was building up. She didn’t care about her
bindings, or the cops in the room, or her pending imprisonment. She just couldn’t stand to see Akira being abused like this.

“Really? More of this?” Makoto looked at Ann, rolled her eyes, and gave a little wave of her hand. “Get her out of my sight.” The shackle around Ann disappeared. The cop grabbed her by the arms and started pulling her towards the door. Makoto looked back down at Akira. “Now then, Kurusu-Kun, it’s time to discuss your position in my court. You’ll have to start at the bottom, of course. For now, you’ll make an excellent footstool. But I’m certain you’ll find your way up to manservant in no time! Doesn’t that sound delightful?”

“I WON’T LET THAT HAPPEN, YOU BITCH!” Ann broke free of the cop’s grip and started running towards Makoto. Suddenly, she fell to her knees on her own, grabbing her head, eyes glowing yellow. The cop ran over and grabbed her shoulders again.

“That’s what I like to hear.”

The world around Ann went dim and her head began to hurt. She looked around for the source of the sultry voice she’d just heard, her breath ragged, but didn’t see anybody new. The cop started to drag Ann away, but Makoto halted him again.

“What’s this?” Makoto took her foot off Akira’s head and started to approach Ann, an amused look on her face. “Are you having a psychotic episode, Takamaki-Chan?”

“That boy’s fate keeps growing worse” the voice said. “He has no allies but you. You want to save him, don’t you?”

“Yes…” Ann hissed through her teeth.

“You don’t want to let her twist him. Not like she did the other boy. You don’t want to keep letting her rule through fear. You want to stand and fight, don’t you?”

“I do…”

“Then do it! Call upon the passionate flame that burns within you! I am thou, thou art I… Do you accept this contract?”

“I do…” Ann’s struggling stopped. She still appeared to be in pain, but became composed. A smile formed on her face. “Carmen…”

Blue flames appeared over Ann’s head, forming into a red mask resembling some kind of cat. The cop took its hands off her shoulders and stepped back in surprise. She looked at Makoto, who had halted her approach at the sudden transformation.

“I won’t just let her do whatever she wants anymore!”

“That’s right. It’s time to knock her off her throne. You can’t just sit around and wait for somebody else to do it. Still, if you need some aid, then I’ll gladly lend you my strength!”

Ann grabbed the ear of the mask on her face and tore it off, a burst of blood shooting out of her face. A blue pillar of flame shot up around her, vaporizing the cop standing right behind her instantly. When it disappeared, Ann was wearing a skintight red catsuit with too many zippers on it, with dark-red thigh-high boots on, pink gloves, and a dark-red tail protruding from the rear. Most spectacular, however, was the giant woman that had appeared behind Ann. She had pink skin, curly black ribbons of hair that formed twin tails similar to Ann’s, an elaborate flamenco dress that almost seemed to be made out of roses, and two little (relative to her) bizarre men with
heart-shaped heads on leashes at her beck and call.

“What are you waiting for!?” Makoto shouted at the two remaining police in the room. “Take her down!”

Akira watched in awe as a whip appeared in Ann’s hand and she swung it, wrapping it around the ankle of one cop and pulling. The cop tripped into the other, both sprawled on the ground. An old-fashioned machine gun with a drum magazine appeared in her other hand and she opened fire on the downed officers, riddling them both with bullets. With them down, Ann ran over to Akira, Carmen vanishing and the mask reappearing on her face.

“Are you ok!?”

“What’s going on!?” Akira focused on Ann’s eyes through the small holes the mask provided. “Do you know more about this place than you were telling me? Are you some kind of witch or something!? Is Shujin secretly some kind of weird school for magic!?”

“What?” Ann started pulling on the chain connecting Akira to the floor, trying to break it. “No! I have no idea what’s going on here!”

“Well,” Makoto said, “that makes three of us, doesn’t it?”

Akira and Ann looked up to see Makoto sitting on her throne again. Despite everything, she still had that smug look on her face.

“I really don’t know how you’re doing this, Takamaki. It’s certainly fascinating, though.” Makoto crossed one of her legs over the other and opened a little compartment in the armrest of her throne. “Still, it hardly matters. You won’t be leaving here alive.”

“You just don’t know when to quit, do you!?” Ann stopped pulling on Akira’s chain and headed for the stairs, whip at the ready. “I already beat your goons! Now I’m gonna come up there and kick your ass all the way down those stairs!”

“Please, my police officers are just tools. They’re expendable.” Makoto reached into the hidden compartment and pulled out a black bell. “You haven’t even seen a portion of the true powers at my command.”

Makoto rang the bell, which despite its tiny size sounded like a mighty church bell that could be heard from afar. Just as Ann was about to climb the stairs before her, the stairway began to sink into the floor, one step at a time. Behind it was a large open passageway filled with darkness, and a loud growl could be heard. Heavy thumps followed, one after the other, and the ground began to shake. Ann backed away from the entrance slowly.

The growling grew loud, and from the darkness came the giant snarling face of Ryuji Sakamoto, his teeth sharp as knives, some slobber dripping from his mouth. He started barking, and the face was attached to the head of a massive black dog. Ryuji’s giant dog body stood up straight as it emerged from the passageway it came from, towering over Ann. It was gigantic, easily twice as large as Carmen had been.

“Oh Ryuji-Kun~” Makoto sang. “It’s dinner time.”

Chapter End Notes
Wow. This was a LOT darker while I was writing it. I'm talking some vivid descriptions of torturous acts that I probably would've had to bump this fic up to an M rating over. And I'm not saying it's impossible that that stuff will appear further down the line, but for now, I'm really glad I toned it back.
A Delinquent Reborn

Chapter Summary

Akira decides to stop feeling sorry for himself and do something.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Akira did not like Ryuji Sakamoto. In fact, he was kind of afraid of him. This is a normal reaction to have when your first impression of somebody is them dragging you up to a rooftop and punching you in the stomach so hard that you literally lose your lunch. Unfortunately, logic also dictates that if you find a particular human scary, you will find a giant monster dog with that human’s face barking and slobbering like mad terrifying beyond all belief. This was the case as Akira, still chained to the floor of Makoto Nijima’s throne room, remained completely still and silent, his eyes trained on the nightmare immediately before him.

His new friend, Ann Takamaki, dressed up like some kind of comic book character, freshly gifted with weapons and superpowers. Before her, the giant Ryuji dog, ready to bite her in half. And looking down from above in a throne, a power-mad teenage sadist who wanted to make Akira into her slave; Makoto Nijima, the student council president of Akira’s new school.

And this was only his second day in Tokyo.

“Go ahead, Ryuji-Kun.” Makoto leaned forward in her throne, a mad grin on her face. “Sic her.”

Ryuji hunched over, slowly approaching Ann, a low thunderous growl leaving his mouth.

“Ryuji, stop!” Ann had just previously been destroying freakish inhuman police with her amazing new abilities, but this was different. This was an actual for-real monster. “I don’t know how she’s turned you into this… whatever you are… but you’re better than this! I know you are! I mean, you’ve done some bad stuff, but you’d never kill anybody!”

“Maybe your Ryuji-Kun wouldn’t,” Makoto said, “but mine is a loyal pet who obeys his mistress’s commands to the letter. Kill her, boy!”

Ryuji lunged forward headfirst, snapping his jaws at Ann. She cartwheeled to the side, just barely avoiding the creature’s teeth.

“Ryuji, don’t make me do this!” Ann held up her tommy gun and took aim. She wasn’t very accurate with the weapon, but then again, she was very close to a very large target, so that wouldn’t really be a problem.

Ryuji took a step forward and Ann pulled the trigger.

CLICK.

“Huh!? Out of ammo!?” Ann threw down the gun and put a hand on her mask. “Guess we gotta do this the hard way.”
Ann ripped off her mask and Carmen appeared again. Ann held out her hand, which caught flame.

“AGI!”

Carmen shot a fireball, hitting Ryuji square in the face. He halted his approach for a moment, but seemed largely unfazed, charging at Ann again. What ensued was madness like Akira had never seen. Ryuji kept pouncing at Ann, trying to catch her with his teeth or swiping at her with his paws. Ann was, in turn, doing somersaults, cartwheels, and flipping around in the air, deftly dodging the man-beast’s wild attacks. Every now and then she’d lash out with her whip, and despite his massive size, Ryuji was also surprisingly quick to dodge, though sometimes Ann would land a hit. That said, if the whip was hurting Ryuji at all, he didn’t show it.

Once in a while if Ann got some breathing room, she’d summon Carmen and shoot Ryuji with another fireball, the only thing that really seemed to affect him. Unfortunately, every time Ann did that, she seemed a little more winded, and her movements were starting to slow down a bit. No doubt, Ann’s performance in this fight was the most incredible thing Akira had ever seen a human being do. Her agility and finesse easily outclassed that of any Olympic athlete. But Ann had her limits, and if the great monstrosity before her had any, it clearly wasn’t pushing them yet.

Ryuji started to hit Ann with his paw strikes, hurling her through the air. She got up whenever it happened and kept fighting, but with every hit she took, she slowed down even more. At one point, she was a little too slow to jump out of the way of one of Ryuji’s bites, and the tail of Ann’s catsuit was caught between his teeth. He raised up his head and opened his mouth, tossing Ann up into the air and waiting expectantly for her to fall into his maw, tongue sticking out. Ann just barely managed to strike Ryuji’s tongue with her whip on the way down, causing him to jump back in pain, and she made a three point landing on the ground, but it took a lot out of her. While Ryuji was recovering from the unexpected blow to one of his softer parts, Ann summoned Carmen again and surrounded herself with a green light, which seemed to restore some of her stamina. Still, she was looking pretty out of it.

The fight went on, and Akira just watched silently. He understood what was on the line here. If Ann lost, she’d die, painfully eaten alive by this terrifying creature with the face of somebody she used to consider a friend. And assuming the monster didn’t devour Akira too before its mistress called it to heel, Akira would wind up in indentured servitude to Makoto Niijima, likely trapped forever in whatever the hell this city was. Yesterday Akira’s biggest concern had been going to jail. He genuinely did not believe his situation could get any worse, but here he was. More and more, it seemed like Ann was going to lose. But she had surprised Akira so much today, so part of him couldn’t help but hold out hope that she’d defeat the monster before her somehow.

That hope was quickly dashed.

Ryuji pounced at Ann. She tried jumping backwards, but tripped and fell on her rear. Ryuji’s paw landed on her, pinning down her entire body below her neck. Ann was unable to move, even her arms trapped under the massive dog’s foot, unable to tear off her mask and call Carmen to her aid once more.

“Excellent!” Makoto rose from her throne and took a few steps forward to get a better view of Ann. “Now, Ryuji-Kun! End that tramp’s pathetic existence!”

Akira finally snapped out of his stupor. He was terrified of Ryuji. He was even more terrified of Makoto. But the most terrifying prospect of all was watching Ann die in front of him. Ann, who had already suffered near-total ostracism because she was pretty and the wrong person noticed. Ann, who was the first person to treat him as a human being since his conviction. Ann, who just then was fighting to save Akira, summoning forth a kind of strength he had never seen before. For
the first time since the chain bound him to the floor, Akira struggled against his bonds. He had to get free of this chain, these cuffs. He had to help Ann. He didn’t know what he could do, but damn it, he had to try! He couldn’t just abandon her! It wasn’t in his nature!

“That’s right!”

The world began to grow dim and Akira’s head started throbbing. A deep and delightfully wicked voice started speaking to him from within.

“And here I was worried you had forgotten! Or worse, that the lesson you had taken away from that night was to throw people under the bus, just like that woman had done to you! But we really don’t have any time to waste, do we?”

“No” Akira said.

“Then you know what you have to do.”

“Yes.”

“I'll keep things short and sweet: I am thou, thou art I. We have made this pact. Now go and fly to new heights on the wings of rebellion!”

Akira screamed and rose to his feet, his chains and handcuffs breaking. The noise distracted Ryuji from Ann for a moment and drew Makoto’s attention as well.

“This again!?” For the first time since meeting her, Makoto directed one of her hateful stares directly at Akira. “It can’t be!”

“It is!” A white masquerade mask with black mascara-like detailing around the eyeholes appeared on Akira’s face. “Come forth, pillager of twilight…” Akira ripped the mask off violently, blood flying everywhere. He ignored the pain, high on the fact that he could actually DO something now. “ARSENE!”

There was an explosion of blue flames, just like with Ann, and a figure appeared behind Akira. It was a tall demonic creature, seemingly more suit than man. Long slender legs in red pants met a torso with long spindly arms covered in a black vest, puffy white shirt, and red coat. Where the coat would have coattails, two pairs of red and black feathered wings spread out, like a parody of an angel’s. Chains dangled from the creature, and the only part of it not seemingly made of clothing were two black-clawed hands protruding from its sleeves and a black head with a fiery face like a jack-o-lantern’s seated underneath a black top hat.

Akira himself had gotten new duds as well. An all-black outfit of some kind of padded shirt, a trench coat, pants, and pointy shoes. The only splash of color aside from the white of his mask were some red gloves.

Akira looked towards the back wall of the throne room and held out his hand, a dark aura surrounding it.

“EIHA!”

Arsene shot forth a shadowy blast from his being, putting a massive hole in the wall. The glowing lights of the city rose up from below, giving it the image of a heavenly portal. Akira turned to Ryuji and pointed.

“Forward!” Arsene picked up Akira in his claws and dashed towards the monster, using his wings
to clear the distance of the throne room quickly. Arsene tossed Akira forward, and a knife and pistol appeared in the boy’s hands. Akira stabbed the knife into the top of the paw pinning Ann to the ground, and Ryuji reared upwards and howled in pain. The man-dog looked down at Akira and opened its mouth to bark, but Akira raised up his pistol and fired five bullets directly into the roof of Ryuji’s mouth, causing him to rear back and whimper. Akira helped Ann to her feet, letting her lean on him for support.

“Are you ok, Ann?” Akira’s mask still hadn’t returned, and for the first time ever, Ann got a completely unobscured look at his face. It was totally different from before. All day long, Akira had seemed meek, helpless, kind of dorky. Now without the glasses, all of his facial features seemed sharper. He had an entirely new demeanor about him too. He was dashing, mischievous, a little dangerous, and seemed ready to take on anything.

“Yeah.” Ann looked at Ryuji, who was retching, spitting bullets out of his mouth. “But do you really think you can take that thing?”

“Oh, absolutely not! We’re getting out of here!” Akira looked up at Arsene. “Let’s go!”

Arsene picked up Akira and Ann and flew through the hole in the wall. They glided over the city skyline, putting distance between them and the great tower. From behind them, there was a massive glow, and Akira and Ann turned their heads back to see the great eyeball-like top of the tower shine a spotlight as they moved further and further away from Queen Nijima. The spotlight moved around, searching for them, but Arsene weaved gracefully through the air, dodging the ray that would draw the entire city’s attention to them. For the first time since entering this supposed “utopia”, Akira and Ann felt at peace. They had discovered newfound strength, escaped an untenable situation, and although they hated this city, the view from up here was still something to behold. Compared to the oppressive air of the throne room, the wind against their faces in the open sky was quite pleasant. They looked down at the ground, seeing all the little people going to and fro about their business.

And then the people got oh-so-slightly less little. And quicker and quicker, the ground was getting closer.

“Akira…” Ann looked at her friend with worry. “I think we’re falling!”

“Arsene, pull up!” Akira yelled.

“I cannot” Arsene replied. “I am not meant to soar while carrying passengers like this!”

Akira and Ann screamed as they fell faster and faster. Arsene flapped his wings desperately, but it only got them a couple feet higher at most, and each flap was producing diminishing returns.

On the street below, a police wagon was driving away from where Akira and Ann had previously witnessed a darkened street before heading into the throne room, and was now turning in the direction of the Queen’s tower. It would never reach its destination, as Arsene turned in the air and slammed back-first into the van, causing it to tilt onto its side. Arsene vanished into thin air and Akira and Ann tumbled onto the road, stopping in the middle of the street behind the overturned van.

Akira groaned as he lay on the ground. His entire body was in pain, most of all his face. He had the misfortune to land of the previously-scraped side of his head.

“Ann, can you move?”
“I think so…” Ann groaned as she rolled from her front onto her back. “But I really don’t want to.”

“Yeah, but we probably should.”

“I think we’ve got a minute, right?”

“Fine” Akira said. “But only one minute.”

“You there!” The passenger side door of the van opened upwards, and a police officer climbed out of front of the van, walking on top of its side. “What do you think you two are doing!?”

“Shit” Ann said.

“Yup.” Akira grunted as he sat up, hiding his knife behind his back. “Minute’s over.”

“Who are you two!?” The cop hopped down from the truck, standing right before the double doors in the back. “Identify yourselves!”

Before Akira or Ann could say anything, the top (or right, as it ordinarily would be) door of the paddy wagon flew open and hit the cop in the back, causing it to fall over. A black shoe attached to a white-clad leg was sticking out of the doorway, and was quickly joined by another. Climbing feet-first out of the truck was an ostentatiously-dressed young man. He looked like some bizarre combination of a superhero and an aristocrat. He had a closed white coat with golden buttons and ties all along the front, as well as red cuffs at the end of the arms, a red and gold belt around his waist, gold-colored and tasseled shoulder pads, and a split red cape hanging from his neck. He had a red mask on his face similar to Akira’s, except it was wider and had a massive, beak-like protrusion sticking out from over his nose. The boy had short brown hair and appeared to be about Akira and Ann’s age. His white-gloved hands were cuffed together behind his back.

Akira and Ann slowly stood up and observed the boy with curiosity. The cop in front of him started to get up, but the boy stepped on its back and squatted down. He fumbled around its waist for a moment before finding a key attached to a belt loop. He plucked the key from the officer and deftly unlocked his own handcuffs behind his back. He calmly rubbed his wrist and then materialized a sword with a blade made of blue light. He stabbed the sword into the back of the cop’s head, causing it to vanish. The boy put his sword away, looked at Akira and Ann, and smiled.

“Hello there” he said in a gentle voice. “Thank you for the rescue.”

“So… You’re not with the police”? Akira asked.

“Oh, goodness no.” The boy started doing some arm stretches. “I fought off quite a few of them, but eventually was overwhelmed by their superior numbers. It’s a good thing you two came along when you did, otherwise I would have been locked away or worse.”

“Well,” Ann said, “we were running away ourselves. Our rescuing you was kind of an accident.”

“Yes, I imagined as much.” The boy laughed. “Still, even if it was merely chance, I am grateful to the both of you.”

“Who are you?” Akira asked.

“You may call me ‘Karasu’” the boy said.

“That’s your name?” Ann asked.
“At least as long as we are in this city, yes.” Karasu tilted his head. “And might I ask who you are?”

“My name’s Ann.”

“And I’m Akira.”

“Ann-San and Akira-San. Well, again, thank you.” Karasu bowed to them theatrically, one arm over his chest, the other held out to the side. “Now then, the three of us should really be- Wait…” Karasu stared at Akira. “‘Akira’? As in ‘Akira Kurusu’?”

“Have we met?” Akira asked.

“You finally made it!” Karasu ran over to Akira excitedly, putting his hands on his shoulders. “And you’ve awoken to your Persona and everything! Your outfit is interesting too. All black, but with a touch of red… We have quite the yin and yang aesthetic between the two of us, don’t we?”

“Um…” Akira stared at Karasu, at a loss for words.

“And you’ve already found another Persona user! How marvelous!” Karasu turned his head to Ann, his mask’s beak a clear indicator of who he focused on. “And here I was beginning to think Igor was playing a cruel joke on me.”

“Igor!” Akira’s eyes widened. “He’s real!?”

“What do you mean?” Karasu looked at Akira with confusion. “Of course he’s real! What did you think?”

“I thought it was just a dream.”

Darkness all around, or maybe that was just because Akira’s eyes were closed. Either way, he had an uneasy feeling. The attic of the cafe was far from comfortable, but the air had changed. It was colder. The dusty smell was gone. And Akira could hear voices echoing in close quarters, bouncing off harsh surfaces.

“Master, I don’t get why we’re doing this” said an energetic young girl’s voice.

“Indeed, the game is long over” said a calmer girl’s voice. “What purpose does this boy serve?”

“My reasons are many, my dears” said a high-pitched, older man’s voice. Akira would’ve described it as “grandfatherly”, but for some reason “impish” seemed a more fitting adjective. “Chief among them being that I hate to see such a promising player go to waste.”

Akira opened his eyes slowly. His vision hadn’t quite woken up with his hearing yet, but everything seemed a little blue. Although blurry, he could make out what he thought were stone walls. He tilted his head up and saw what looked like bars, as well as a couple short figures in blue.

“What you mean is that you’re bored and hoping the kid will provide some entertainment” the first girl’s voice said.

“Yes, just like how you are keeping us in this divided form” the second girl added.

“Nonsense.” The man’s voice stopped speaking, and Akira could hear a prolonged sipping sound. “It’s simply more efficient this way. You both have all your original memories, and two sets of hands is more useful than one.”
Akira sat up, his vision becoming clear. He was indeed in a prison cell, even in a striped white and black uniform. There was an iron ball chained to his leg. Beyond the bars of the cell was a room with blue banners with a big yellow V draped about. There was a large desk in the center of the room, and sitting at it was a strange old man. He wore a black suit with white gloves, had a long nose, bushy eyebrows, and crazed, bloodshot eyes. One of his hands was wrapped around a small golden wine cup of some sort. Standing before him were two little girls, both dressed in prison guard uniforms. Akira couldn’t see their faces, but one had her blonde hair done up in twin buns, the other’s pulled back in a braided ponytail.

“You expect us to believe you’re not just doing whatever you want while you’re drinking out of THAT!?” the bun girl shouted.

“It simply tastes better than a wine glass” the old man said.

“If you say so, Master” the ponytail girl said. There was a slight hint of sarcasm to her tone.

“Lavenza was never this insolent” the old man replied.

“You decided you didn’t want Lavenza” the ponytail girl replied plainly. Somehow, her lack of tone conveyed more attitude than if she had yelled.

“Be that as it may, I am still your-“ The old man’s freaky eyes focused on Akira. “Ah… Our guest is awake.”

“Huh!?“ The bun girl turned around. Akira could see an eyepatch over her right eye and a baton of some sort in her hand. She ran over to Akira’s cell. The ponytail girl calmly followed her, an eyepatch over her left eye, carrying a clipboard instead of a weapon.

“Where am I?” Akira asked. “I was in the cafe before, and I know I can’t have violated my probation yet…” He got up and approached the bars of his cell. “Is this some dream?”

“SILENCE, INMATE!” The bun girl slammed her baton on the bars, sparks flying from it. “You will speak when spoken to, and not before!”

“So… I can speak now?”

“What!? No!”

“But you just spoke to me” Akira said.

“He’s right, Caroline” the ponytail girl said. “You did speak to him.”

“Come on, Justine!” Caroline whined to her other half. “We have to show a united front for the prisoner!”

“Settle down, girls” the old man said. He grinned at Akira. “I imagine you have many questions, Mr. Kurusu. To answer both, welcome to the Velvet Room. This place exists between dream and reality, mind and matter.” The old man took another sip from his cup. “My name is Igor.”

“Um, hello, Igor.” Akira looked around the cell in confusion. “So, this IS a dream?”

“Try not to think about that for a moment” Igor said.

“I feel like it’s kind of important. Because if I’m in jail-“

“DO NOT TALK BACK TO THE MASTER, INMATE!” Caroline slammed her baton against the
prison bars again. This time, there was a small explosion of sparks, and a section of the bars broke off and flew towards Akira. He managed to just barely dodge them, pressing himself against the stone wall of his cell.

“You’re not supposed to break the Velvet Room, Caroline” Justine said sternly.

“I didn’t mean to!” Caroline looked at her baton in awe. “I didn’t think this thing was that strong…”

“Now THAT is truly unexpected…” Igor rose from his desk and walked over to Akira’s cell, Caroline and Justine removing themselves from his path. He looked closely at the broken section of the prison bars and ran his gloved finger over them. The bars shimmered and his fingertip sunk slightly into them, as if they were a mirage. He removed his hand and looked directly into Akira’s eyes, raising one caterpillar-like eyebrow. “Do you consider yourself a prisoner, Mr. Kurusu? When you’re not in this room, that is.”

“I mean… kind of?” Akira stood in thought for a moment. “I mean, I’m not ACTUALLY in jail yet, you know? I could go there, but I could also not. I’m going to be in Tokyo for the next year, but it doesn’t have to be a bad experience, right?”

“Fascinating.” Igor chuckled. Akira wasn’t sure if he should be scared or not. Igor had a very mercurial feel to him, but he didn’t seem at all hostile or dangerous. Maybe he was one of those people who was just naturally creepy. Igor turned around and made a slow return to his desk, looking back at Akira. “Well, Mr. Kurusu, we shall speak again. For now, I believe it’s time for you to awaken. You shall be a most interesting guest indeed…”

Akira wanted to say something in response, but he suddenly felt lightheaded. And then everything went dark for real.

“So, the Velvet Room, those little girls, that’s all real too?”

“It is” Karasu said. “But we can discuss that later. For now, I think it’s best for us all to make our escape from this city.”

“What is this place anyway?” Ann asked.

“I am sure that you have many questions, and I would be more than happy to answer them. But not until we return to the real world.”

“The real world?”

“That is one such question that will have to wait.” Karasu started running towards the city’s entrance, which was about five blocks away. “Come on! Let’s go!”

Not wanting to stick around, Ann and Akira decided to follow the strange boy’s lead. As they followed the short, flapping cape, they started whispering to each other.

“This guy knows you” Ann said. “Are you sure you don’t know him?”

“Pretty sure” Akira said.

“What was that ‘Igor’ thing you were talking about then?”

“I’ll tell you once we’re out of here.”
“Fine. But you know what’s weird?” Ann focused her gaze on Karasu’s hair. “I can’t help but feel like I’ve seen him somewhere before.”

“Does he go to our school, you think?”

“No. I’d probably remember who he was if I did.” Ann wiped some sweat from her brow. “This is really bugging—"

The ground started shaking. Akira and Ann heard a repeated thudding coming from behind them. It was getting louder, and fast.

“Please tell me that’s not what I think it is” Akira said.

Akira and Ann heard barking.

“I don’t think I can do that, Akira.”

“SHIT!”

Akira and Ann picked up their speed, running past Karasu. He noticed their panicked expressions.

“Hey!” Karasu called out. “What has gotten you two so worked—"

Karasu heard barking coming from behind him. He looked over his shoulder quickly and saw the Ryuji dog barreling down the street, gaining on them.

“Oh dear.” Karasu pushed himself to run faster, catching up to his two new companions. The archway was still three blocks away.

“I think that arch is too big for him to fit through!” Akira yelled.

“Do you truly believe that will stop that thing from pursuing us?” Karasu asked.

“If I know him, he’s been strictly trained by his mistress not to damage her property” Ann said. “We just have to get through there and we’re in the clear!”

The trio pushed their legs to the limit. They were two blocks away, but it wasn’t enough. Ryuji was closing in on them.

“Can’t you do something to slow him down?” Akira asked Ann.

“Me!? Carmen’s exhausted after that long fight we had!” She pointed at Akira accusingly. “Why don’t you and Mr. Top Hat do something!?"

“Arsene’s wiped out from that crash!” Akira looked to Karasu. “What about you? Any bright ideas?”

“Bright ideas… Hm…” Karasu chuckled and got a dopey smile on his face. “Yes, I believe I have a VERY bright idea indeed!” He grabbed his mask and tore it off. “COME, ROBIN HOOD!”

Akira was familiar with the story of Robin Hood. He was a jolly thief clad in green with a feathered cap. The thing that appeared above Karasu looked nothing like him. It was like some hero from a TV show. A towering muscled figure in silver armor with gold trim all over, as well as red and blue highlights in key places. Over its pectorals were the letters “RH” emblazoned like a superhero’s logo, though the R was backwards. Long wings extended from the hero’s helmet, kind of like something from a mecha anime. And it carried an oversized golden bow that looked like it
was covered in feathers.

Karasu pointed his arm back towards Ryuji. His hand glowed, emitting pure light.

“KOUGA!”

Robin Hood drew his bow, an arrow of pure light manifesting on the drawstring. He fired it at Ryuji, striking their giant pursuer right in the eye. Ryuji yowled in pain and lost balance, crashing into a building and falling over. Karasu, Akira, and Ann kept running.

They were half a block away. Ryuji was already getting up and running after them again. Just as he was about to reach them, they dashed past the archway, and sure enough, the beast ceased giving chase. As they ran across the street, he just barked at them angrily.

The three made it back into the alleyway Akira and Ann had been in before discovering the city. Karasu pulled out his phone and fiddled with the screen. The world distorted a bit, and the next thing they knew, Akira and Ann were back in their regular clothes and completely exhausted.

Akira collapsed on the spot, this time shielding his face from the ground. All in all, the fall could have been worse.

And then Ann fell down on top of him, all her weight pressing down on his back. All the air left Akira’s lungs.

“Sorry” Ann grumbled. She pushed down on Akira, managing to force herself to flop off of him and onto the ground next to him. A black-gloved hand reached down to her.

“Let me help you” Karasu said. Ann took his hand and slowly stood up. Akira rolled onto his back and took a deep breath, slowly managing to force himself into a sitting position. He leaned on a nearby wall for support. The next thing he knew, Ann was shrieking.

“OH MY GOD!” She was looking directly into Karasu’s face. “You're him! From TV!”

“Who?” Akira looked up at Karasu. He was dressed in a tan coat, black pants, and black shoes. If he was on TV, it wasn’t on a show Akira had ever seen before.

“Oh come on, didn’t you bother to learn anything about Tokyo before coming here!?“ Ann pointed to Karasu’s face with both hands. “He’s the Detective Prince!”

“The what?”

“Allow me to introduce myself.” Karasu looked down at Akira with a friendly grin. “My name is Goro Akechi.”

Chapter End Notes

So yeah, some of the little twists in the last chapter weren't exactly supposed to be a surprise, but I am bummed that pretty much everyone saw them coming. That said, I'd like to think I got you guys this time.

I mean hey, if I can make my favorite characters bad guys and the character I have the hardest time writing one of the stars, why not make the character I hate the most into a
good guy? This is a journey.

Edit: In the original posting of this, I mixed up "Kouga" with "Diarama". That has been fixed.
Chapter Summary

Akechi explains just what the hell is going on.

Despite both of them being totally exhausted, Ann had enough energy to tell Akira all about Goro Akechi. Apparently, he was some kind of prodigy detective wunderkind who had a knack for solving crimes even the police had trouble figuring out. For his part, Akechi was more than happy to let Ann sing his praises for him. That said, the longer she gushed about his accomplishments, the more red-faced he got. By the time Ann was recapping how Akechi was voted the #1 teen heartthrob in Tokyo, the boy detective had his face buried in his hands.

“You’re awfully bashful for a celebrity, huh?” Akira asked.

“I’m accustomed to having TV makeup covering my face when I get praised like this” Akechi said, his voice slightly muffled by his hands. He took a deep breath and exhaled, uncovering his face, which had started to return to his normal color. “I was hardly prepared for such an enthusiastic recounting of my career.”

“Oh my gosh. I’m sorry.” Ann started to blush herself. “I’ve just never met an actual celebrity before, so I got really excited.”

“It’s quite alright. Do not take the reddening of my face to mean I was not flattered.” Akechi sat on the ground across from Akira. Ann followed suit, sitting next to Akira. Akechi cleared his throat, his tone getting serious. “Now, I promised you answers to questions. I am certain you have many, so let’s begin, shall we?”

“Alright.” Akira nodded. “Let’s start with the big one: What the hell was that city!? Because I don’t think we were in Tokyo anymore!”

“You are correct. We were in the Metaverse.”

“Oh!” Ann raised her hand. “I just thought of something!” She looked at Akechi blankly, as if waiting for something.

“This is a conversation, Ann” Akira said. “You don’t have to wait for permission to participate.”

“Right. Well…” Ann scratched her forehead. “Akira, wasn’t that weird app on your phone a ‘Metaverse’ something?”

“Ah, you mean the Metaverse Navigator” Akechi said.

“Yeah. It just appeared on my phone, and kept downloading no matter how many times I deleted it” Akira said. “What’s up with that?”

“Igor put it there” Akechi said.

“What’s this ‘Igor’ you guys keep talking about?” Ann asked.
“I’m not really clear on that myself.” Akira shook his head at Ann then turned to Akechi. “Just who is he?”

“Perhaps that would be best explained later” Akechi said. “I’d prefer to cover some simpler topics first, starting with the Metaverse.”

“Alright” Akira crossed his arms. “Go ahead.”

“The Metaverse is an alternate world created from human cognition” Akechi said.

“Cognition?” Ann was staring at Akechi like he’d sprouted a second head. “What’s that?”

“It means the way you view the world” Akira said.

“That’s correct.” Akechi smiled at Akira. “If it helps, Ann-San, think of it as a magical world where reality is changed depending on how people see it.”

“How does that work?” Ann picked up a pebble lying on the ground and held it up. “Like, if I wanted this rock to be made of gold, it would be?”

“No, it would only appear to be gold in the Metaverse if you perceived the pebble as already having great value.” Akechi analyzed Ann’s face, but found no trace of understanding. “Hm… Perhaps another example is needed. Are you familiar with Destinyland?”

“The amusement park based on all those American cartoon movies?” Akira asked.

“The very same” Akechi said. “Destinyland’s appeal lies in creating an environment where you believe that dreams can come true. The castle and all the magical creatures are made of plaster and foam, but when people go there, it feels real to them.”

“You’ve got that right” Ann said. “I’ve been there a few times. Even though all the mascot characters are totally fake, you just ignore that and convince yourself that they’re the actual characters from the movies walking around in the real world!”

“Exactly! But no matter how hard you believe, when you go to Destinyland, it still isn’t real. It’s all an illusion to get you to spend money.” Akechi spread out his hands in front of his face for effect. “But if you were to visit Destinyland in the Metaverse, it WOULD be a real kingdom of magic and living, breathing cartoon characters, because that’s how people perceive it in reality.”

“That sounds amazing!”

“So people see Shujin Academy as some kind of crazy glowing city?” Akira asked.

“Not exactly” Akechi answered. “You see, the Metaverse doesn’t exist on a one-to-one scale with our world. Certain real-world locations may become areas five times as large in the Metaverse, while other locations may not be in the Metaverse at all.”

“What makes the difference?”

“Most spots in the Metaverse aren’t made from everybody’s collective cognition. They’re made from the cognition of one person who has a particularly strong view of that place. Such a spot is called a ‘Palace’, usually because a person believes themselves to be the ruler of that location. But for a Palace to form, it takes more than a sense of ownership, otherwise everybody who has their own home or business would have one.” Akechi’s smiled disappeared. “For somebody to have a Palace, they must have distorted desires.”
“’Distorted’?” Ann looked towards Akira.

“Don’t ask me, I’m lost too.” Akira looked back at Akechi. “What exactly constitutes ‘distortion’?”

“Their true heart’s desire must have become twisted somehow” Akechi responded. “The thing they want most becomes corrupted through greed or pain or any other number of things. Either way, the end result is the same: The person no longer has a healthy view of themselves and the world around them, and so a new place sprouts in the Metaverse where they reign supreme and everything reflects that unhealthy worldview. In the case of Shujin Academy, that Palace belongs to… Well…” Akechi clammed up, sadness in his eyes.

“Makoto Niijima” Ann said. “She’s become such a tyrant at the school that everyone calls her its queen. I guess she’s started to believe it too.”

“Yes.” Akechi nodded sadly.

“So every day after school, Shujin’s student council president travels to the Metaverse, to an imaginary utopia where she’s an all-powerful queen and everything operates to her perfect design.” Akira leaned forward, putting his head in his hands. “I don’t get it, though. Why? What does she get out of that besides an ego trip?”

“And how did she turn Ryuji into a giant dog?” Ann asked. “And why were a bunch of other students there? They can’t all be in on it, can they?”

“Maybe those monster police are kidnapping them?” Akira’s head started to hurt. “But that doesn’t make sense either. Because they must still be going to the school, and anybody with half a brain would run screaming for the hills if they had to go to that place every afternoon.”

“Slow down!” Akechi gave the speculating teens an uneasy grin. “You two have it all wrong! Makoto-San doesn’t even know about the city!”

“How can she not know about it!? She rules it!” Ann started pulling on her pigtails in frustration.

“The Makoto Niijima you two met in that world isn’t the Makoto Niijima you go to school with. It’s her Shadow.”

Akira and Ann stared at Akechi expectantly. By now it had been firmly established that if he brought up a new term, they probably weren’t familiar with it.

“Right. Everybody has a Shadow. It’s the part of you that represents your deepest desires, the reasons for everything you do. A Shadow isn’t necessarily evil, but when that desire is distorted enough, like it is with Makoto-San, it can be so powerful that it creates its own pocket of the Metaverse that it rules.”

“So it’s like… her subconscious?” Akira asked.

“That’s an excellent way of thinking of it. Makoto-San’s behavior is a reflection of the desires her Shadow represents. The more she gains from acting on those distorted desires in the real world, the more powerful her Shadow and Palace get. Of course, since those things come from her subconscious, Makoto-San is unaware of them. And her Shadow is willing to take far more extreme measures than the real Makoto-San would be to get what she wants.”

“So Shadow Makoto is so powerful that she can turn people into giant dogs!?” Ann stared at Akechi in amazement.
“Not exactly. None of the people in that city were real. Except for us, of course. The first thing you need to understand is that there are three kinds of Shadows.” Akechi held up one finger. “The first are the ones like Makoto-San’s, which are manifestations of a person’s subconscious.” Akechi held up a second finger. “The second kind are Personas, those giant beings that aid us in battle.”

“Huh…” Akira looked at Ann with an embarrassed grin on his face. “You know, looking back, it’s kind of weird that we didn’t ask about those first, isn’t it?”

“I guess,” Ann said, “but in a way, I kinda felt like I didn’t need to. Like I’ve known Carmen my whole life or something. What about you?”

“Yeah…” Akira said. “It’s like… Arsene’s always been there. I just didn’t realize it until now.”

“Well, technically, I suppose a Persona isn’t actually a Shadow” Akechi said. “But they’re very similar. A Shadow is what happens when the deepest, darkest part of a person goes unchecked and changes their behavior. A Persona is made of those same dark desires and feelings, but is what happens when a person confronts them instead, drawing power from and controlling them. It’s the difference between mastering your darkness and letting it master you. Because of this, anybody who has a Persona like we do can’t have a Shadow or Palace.”

“Well, that’s good to know” Akira said. “Even if it’s not real, I’d hate to think there’s some version of me that’s anything like… her.” Akira touched the scraped-up side of his face. It still stung.

“So what’s the last kind of Shadow?” Ann asked.

“The last kind are those strange police officers you saw in Makoto-San’s Palace” Akechi said. “Originally, they don’t take the form of police, and they don’t work for a Palace’s owner. They’re beings made of stray thoughts and emotions from the collective human consciousness. It’s easiest to think of them as Personas that don’t belong to any particular person. These beings get drawn to Palaces and corrupted by the influence of their ruler, being twisted into the Shadows you saw patrolling the city.”

“I’m still not sure I get it” Ann said.

“Well, the important thing to know is that they’re different from the other people you saw in the city. Those are not the real students of Shujin Academy, but beings born from Makoto-San’s cognition. Remember how I was talking about the cartoon characters in Destinyland?”

“Yeah…”

“Well, think of the students you saw like that. They’re how Makoto-San sees the students of Shujin Academy: Subjects that she rules over. Of course, this means that some cognitive beings can be vastly different from their real-world counterparts.”

“Like the school principal as Nijima’s secretary” Akira said. “Or Sakamoto as that giant dog monster.”

“Exactly” Akechi said.

“Wait…” Ann started to get angry. “Are you telling me that all she sees Ryuji as is a dog that follows her commands!!?”

“I don’t know this ‘Ryuji’ personally, but that sounds accurate” Akechi replied.

“THAT’S HORRIBLE!!”
“I don’t know,” Akira said, “seems pretty accurate to me.”

“Don’t say that!” Ann punched Akira on the arm. “You didn’t know Ryuji before Nijjima-Senpai got to him! I mean, sure, he’s changed a lot, but…” Ann sulked and looked at the ground as Akira rubbed his arm. “He still believes in the things he’s doing, even if they’re bad. I’ve seen the way Ryuji gets when he’s around Nijjima-Senpai. He looks up to her so much. If he knew that she didn’t even think of him as a person…”

“What if I told you there was a way to change that?” Akechi asked.

“Huh?” Ann looked up at Akechi.

“What if I told you I had a way to not only change how Makoto-San saw your friend, but end her reign of terror at the school and get rid of that city in the Metaverse forever?”

“I’d say start talking” Akira said.

“I would love to” Akechi said, “but it’s getting rather late, and we are sitting in alleyway. If you’d like, I could meet you back here tomorrow and show you what I’m talking about in the Metaverse.”

“You want us to go back!?” Akira slowly stood up, his body fighting him all the way off the ground. “Are you insane!?”

“I was in that city for a reason” Akechi said. “I want to cleanse Makoto-San of her inner demons.”

“Would that really stop her from hurting people?” Ann asked.

“It would” Akechi said.

“Then I’ll do it.” Ann looked up at Akira. “What about you, Akira?”

“I need some time to think about it” Akira said.

“What are you talking about?” Ann started to rise slowly to meet Akira’s eye level. “We could help a lot of people by doing this!”

“We could also get killed” Akira said. “That place is dangerous. There’s the police, that Sakamoto hellhound, and Nijjima herself. This could very well be a suicide mission. Ann.”

“But we have Personas now! We can fight back against all that stuff!”

“The police, sure.” Akira pointed at Akechi. “MAYBE the dog with his help. But you didn’t feel how hard that Shadow Nijjima hits. If I weren’t chained to the floor when she smacked me, I would’ve been pulp on the wall. And I don’t think she was even trying.”

“Oh come on, it can’t be that bad!”

“Actually, it can” Akechi said. “The Shadow a Palace belongs to is usually the strongest being in their own world. They look human, but if they need to, they can turn into a very powerful monster. It can be rather overwhelming.”

“There you go” Akira said. “She’s already got it out for me in this world. I don’t need her actually trying to kill me in another one!”

“So you’re just gonna let her keep doing whatever she wants to whoever she wants!?” Ann turned
her back to Akira. “I can’t believe you!”

“I’m not saying that! Just let me think about it overnight, ok!” Akira took a deep breath and exhaled. “I have had a very trying day and I need some time to process it. I feel like I’m going to go crazy if I don’t take a step back from it all.”

“I would say that’s fair,” Akechi replied, “wouldn’t you, Ann-San?”

“Yeah…” Ann sighed and looked at Akira apologetically. “I mean, this isn’t how I thought my day would go either, but if all this happened on my first day of school, I’d be pretty freaked out too.”

“Thanks for understanding, Ann.” Akira looked up at the sky. The sun was almost completely down. “I should get back to the cafe. If I’m too late, Sakura-San will kill me. Hell, once he sees this, he might just do it anyway.” Akira pointed to his cheek, which was starting to scab over.

“Should you decide to join us, please return to this spot when classes let out tomorrow” Akechi said.

“Alright.” Akira walked out of the alley, heading for the subway station. “Later.”

Akira managed to find a seat on the train back. He really didn’t want to go back to that crazy other world. He was wondering just how he’d be able to break the news to Ann though.

“There is surely a way to tell the girl where she will accept your decision,” Arsene’s voice said in his head, “but there is no way to tell her in which she’ll be happy with it.”

Ok… Arsene was in Akira’s head. And talking to him. That was unexpected. But he couldn’t exactly talk back without looking like a crazy person on the train.

“I am a part of you” Arsene said. “Your thoughts are clear to me. If you prefer not to appear the fool, simply think what you wish to say to me.”

“Oh, thank God” Akira thought.

“I prefer to think of myself as God’s opposite.”

“Great. So now I’m possessed by the devil. That’ll go over well with the parole board.”

“I have a greater appreciation for glib than most, but not when it is used to distract from matters of import.” A hallucination of Arsene appeared before Akira, sitting in the seat across from him. “Why do you wish to run? Did not we agree that it was time for you to fight back?”

“I agreed to save Ann. I couldn’t abandon her when she was fighting to save me.” Akira stared wearily into Arsene’s burning eyes. “But this is different. We wouldn’t just be trying to get away, we’d be bringing the fight to monsters. It’s just too much.”

“She is doing so to help others. Is that not a noble enough calling for you?”

“It’s a power-mad student council president. I mean, sure, she sent her goon after me, but it could be much worse. She can only be a problem for people for another year anyway. After that, it’s off to college, and all of this goes away.”

“One such as she will only grow bolder with the passage of time. For now she administers beatings through her proxy, but if the Sakamoto boy is as loyal to the madwoman as your friend Ann has claimed, he could perhaps be persuaded to kill at her command.”
“You don’t really think that would happen, do you?”

“I cannot say for certain. When it comes to matters of the real world, I only know what you know. But I am privy to the ways of the darkness that lurks in people. And if left unchecked, Makoto Niijima’s Shadow will only grow more powerful, and that will make her real-world counterpart far more dangerous.”

“But it probably won’t come to that, right?”

Arsene stared silently at Akira. Akira shook his head.

“This is such a headache. What am I supposed to do, Arsene?”

“Get off the train.” Arsene pointed over his shoulder to the “Yongen Jaya” sign outside the window. “This is your stop.”

Akira hesitated as he reached the front door of Leblanc. It wasn’t THAT late, but the sun was already down, and he could see his guardian watching the news, his body language indicating anger and impatience. Akira really couldn’t get a read on Sojiro Sakura. The bald, bearded barista was a grump unlike anybody else he’d ever met, and seemed to have a really cynical view of the world in general. When Akira told him that he was framed for trying to help a woman who was being sexually assaulted, the older man just told him that what he got was his fault for not keeping his nose out of other peoples’ business. But the funny thing was, he didn’t accuse Akira of lying. Everybody else he’d told about that except Ann thought he was just making up an excuse to save himself from the law, but Sojiro never questioned Akira’s story, just admonished him for his actions. And even if Akira was living in an attic, he DID take Akira in, though he wouldn’t say why. He even fed Akira breakfast, which the boy hadn’t been expecting. And sure, that breakfast was curry, which was kind of a weird choice, but it was also the best curry Akira had ever had in his life, if not one of the best things he’d ever eaten period. But at the same time, Sojiro had made it abundantly clear that if he thought Akira was too much trouble, he’d kick his ass to the street and let the prison system deal with housing him. And he seemed like the kind of guy who probably had a low bar for what he considered “troublesome”.

Well, Akira couldn’t just lurk in the alley all night. It was time to face the music.

Sojiro turned around when he heard the ringing of the bell over the cafe door. As expected, he looked pissed.

“It’s about time you got back! I was just about ready to close the shop and let you sleep on the street for-” Sojiro’s eyes narrowed and he stared at Akira’s cheek. “What the hell is that!?”

Akira didn’t say anything. Sojiro came out from behind the counter and stormed over to Akira, getting a close look at his scabs.

“For crying out loud… You punk! Did you get in a fight!? Your first day of school and you’re already getting into trouble!?”

“No” Akira said meekly.

“Uh-huh.” Sojiro crossed his arms and tapped his foot impatiently. “So what happened, then? Are you gonna tell me a worksheet came to life and attacked you? That that’s all paper cuts?”

Akira tried not to smile. It occurred to him that what Sojiro described would’ve been less strange that what he’d actually been through today. He decided to keep things simple.
“I was attacked.”

“What, by a mugger?” Sojiro seemed to lighten up a bit, but he was still annoyed. “Great. Do I have to buy you a new rail pass?”

“No, they didn’t take anything” Akira said.

“Is that so?” Sojiro’s annoyance was gradually being replaced with suspicion. “So you’re telling me that you DIDN’T get in a fight, but you WERE attacked, but the guy didn’t want anything? Why would he attack you then?”

“Because my record got leaked at school.” Akira decided to go with a partial version of the truth. He figured he could tell Sojiro things that actually happened without mentioning the stuff about parallel worlds and a monster living inside of him. “Before I even got there everybody knew that I was convicted for assault, and the next thing I know, some guy’s punching me in the gut and telling me not to try anything funny at the school. Then later in the day, I get out of classes and before I know it, someone else hits me and my face is getting dragged against the ground.”

“Crap…” Sojiro groaned and sat down at the bar. “How the hell did it get out?”

“I don’t know.” So Akira was going to lie a little. For a second he had considered telling Sojiro the truth, but if the old man complained to the school about it, nothing would get done, and the news would get back to Makoto Niijima. And then she’d want to know how Akira found out that she was the one who leaked his record, which would only make things worse for him. Akira still wasn’t sure if he wanted to do this crazy stuff Akechi was talking about in the Metaverse, but when it came to the real world, he figured suffering in silence would be the best strategy for now. “If there’s nothing else, Sakura-San, I think I’d like to turn in early.”

“You sure? You don’t want any dinner or anything”

“No thanks. I’m just really tired.”

“Well, if that’s what you want, kid.”

“I do.” Akira headed for the stairs. “G’night, Boss.”

“‘Boss’, huh?” Sojiro wasn’t sure if he liked that or not. As he heard Akira walk up the stairs, he turned around. “Hey, kid.”

“Yeah?” Akira stopped walking.

“About what happened to you today, I’m…” Sojiro got up and walked to the cafe door, flipping the sign to 'Closed' and turning off the lights. ‘Just be careful, ok? I can sweep it under the rug this time, but if this keeps happening, I won’t be able to protect you when your parole officer wants an update.”

“Got it.”

Sojiro heard Akira pass into the attic. He stepped outside and locked the cafe door.

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Akira’s eyes opened in the middle of the night. A bright fluorescent light hung over his head, and his body felt restricted. He tried moving around, but found he was strapped down to the spot he was in. His arms were also bound behind his back. It took a moment, but by the time his vision adjusted to the bright light, Akira realized he was in a straitjacket. He turned his head as much as
he could and saw he was in a room with padded walls. It all would’ve been stark white, although there was a familiar hint of blue to everything.

“Hello?!” Akira shouted. “What’s going on!? Where am I!?”

Akira heard a sliding sound and tilted his head up. There was a padded door on the other side of the room, and a little hatch opened. One yellow eye peeked through.

“The patient is awake!” Caroline’s voice shouted from the other side of the door.

“Then let us attend to him” Justine’s voice answered.

The door opened and the twin wardens walked in, although now they weren’t dressed like prison guards anymore. Caroline was dressed in a blue shirt and pants with a black belt around her waist. Her hair was still up in buns, but her hat was gone, and instead of carrying a baton, she was pushing a standing gurney into the room. Justine still had her clipboard, but was now dressed in a blue nurse’s outfit. Justine walked over to Akira's bed and looked down at him.

“How are we feeling today, Akira?”

“Confused” Akira said. “Am I in the Velvet Room?”

“Of course you are” Justine answered.

“Then what’s with the change of scenery? I thought this place was supposed to be a jail” Akira said.

“The Velvet Room changes depending on the mental state of its current guest” Justine said.

“Yeah, and since you went from being all ‘oh no I’m trapped forever’ to ‘I’m indecisive and crazy’, it changed too!” Caroline added.

“What? I’m not crazy!” Akira yelled.

“Historically, the mentally ill do not register anything as being wrong with them” Justine replied. “They feel that the world is wrong instead. Would you consider this an accurate summation of your thoughts?”

“I mean, yeah” Akira said. “The world IS wrong. There’s a parallel dimension where the school is an evil city.”

“See? He sounds like a complete kook!” Caroline unstrapped Akira from his bed and pulled him to his feet. Considering she was half his height, the girl was surprisingly strong. She shoved him in the gurney, which strapped around him instantly, keeping him restrained in a standing position.

“Ok, for real!? Are you two just screwing with me or what!?”

“He seems disturbed” Justine said.

“Don’t worry, he’s harmless” Caroline said. “But just to be safe…” Caroline detached an iron mask from the back of the gurney and slapped it on Akira’s face. It had holes for him to breathe in through his mouth and nose.

“You’re taking this joke way too far!” Akira complained.

“Please try and remain calm, Akira.” Justine walked out of the room, Caroline pushing Akira
behind her. They wheeled Akira down a hallway, quickly arriving at a door that read 'Dr. Igor' on the window. “The doctor will see you now.”
The office of “Doctor” Igor was rather luxurious. There was wall-to-wall blue carpeting, a plush black therapy couch, a glass table in the center of the room, tall bookshelves full of thick volumes (some of which were actual psychological journals, most of which were about creatures of legend for some reason), and even an extensively-stocked liquor cabinet with a set of assorted drinking glasses and a familiar golden cup sitting on top of it. One wall of the room had a window allowing a view of the night sky outside, with a moonlit forest visible in the distance across a grassy plain. The desk Akira had previously seen Igor sitting behind was off to the side of the room, and Igor himself was now lounging in a fancy black armchair with his legs propped up on a matching black ottoman. He was also wearing a lab coat over his normal suit, greeting Akira with his perpetual grin as he was wheeled into the room.

“Ah, the patient has arrived.” Igor looked to Caroline and Justine. “Orderly, nurse, please give us some privacy.”

Caroline and Justine nodded and left the room.

“Wait!” Akira yelled as they left. “Are you just going to leave me strapped to this thing!?”

“Relax, Mr. Kurusu.” Igor snapped his fingers. The iron mask fell off Akira’s face. The straps holding him to the gurney came undone. And finally, even his straitjacket fell off of him, giving him complete freedom of movement for the first time since he stepped into the Velvet Room. Igor gestured to the therapy couch. “Please, make yourself comfortable.”

“Was it really necessary to have me all strapped up like that?” Akira sat down on the couch. “It probably would’ve been faster if I could just walk here without those little girls wheeling me around.”

“Come now, Mr. Kurusu. Surely you must have some appreciation for theatrics.”

“I just don’t get any of this” Akira said. “The costumes, the changing scenery, the air of mystique, is this all some game to you or something?”

“Not anymore.” Igor’s eyes quickly darted to the golden cup in the room, then back to Akira.

“See? Like, I don’t get what that means, but I know it clearly means SOMETHING.” Akira groaned. “With everything that happens to me, I just have more and more questions. What IS this place? Why am I here? Who is Goro Akechi and why does he know so much about me? He mentioned you put the Metaverse Navigator on my phone, but why did you do that? Why am I going to parallel worlds and weird dream places?” Akira leaned back on the couch. “Are you God? Is there some kind of great destiny in store for me? Did YOU arrange for me to be framed as part of some master plan? Or have I just gone completely mad? Did the trauma from getting falsely arrested cause me to snap, and now I’m in a real insane asylum and I’ve just convinced myself I’m in some magical fantasy dream asylum to cope? What is any of this and why is it happening to
“I see the couch is doing its job.” Igor chuckled. “Yes, this space’s transformation into a therapist’s office was most fortuitous indeed. And far preferable to that dingy prison. I must confess, after the last few guests I’ve had, I’ve grown accustomed to a certain degree of luxury.”

“Well great, at least one of us is having a good time” Akira said sarcastically.

“To answer your questions, Mr. Kurusu…” Igor took his feet off the ottoman, assuming his familiar hunched over position. “I must tell you a story. A story of human apathy, a false god, a bet for the fate of humanity, and a troubled young man who defied all expectations.”

“Ok, I'm listening.”

“You see, Mr. Kurusu, the Cognitive World — or Metaverse, as you have heard it called — is a very complex thing. Much like humanity from which it is created, it is an endless sprawling mess of contradictions and mystery. It is impossible for anybody to grasp it in its entirety, even me. And every few years, something comes along that poses a grave threat to the world. Most recently, it was a self-important cognitive upstart calling himself ‘Yaldabaoth’.”

“What did this ‘Yaldabu’-… Yaldabow’-…” Akira shook his head. “What was his deal?”

“Have you ever felt tired of life’s hardships, Mr. Kurusu? Wished that you could shirk all responsibility for your actions, and that everything would somehow work itself out on its own? Have you ever felt the desire to have a good life without having to toil for it?”

“Are you kidding?” Akria sat up. “Of course I have. Have you SEEN my life lately? Everything just got bad all of a sudden. I would love for there to be a quick and easy fix for it.”

“You are not alone in that feeling. Many humans wish for it from time to time. But one of the most remarkable things about the Cognitive World is how a particularly strong desire can manifest as something incredibly powerful.”

“Like distorted desires and a Palace?”

“Just so.” Igor seemed pleased with Akira. It was hard to tell, since slightly-menacing amusement was his default state of being, but Akira had a feeling Igor was glad he was retaining information regarding the Metaverse. “In the case of Yaldabaoth, humanity’s collective desire to give up control and not be responsible for its own fate gave birth to a godlike being who was more than happy to lift that burden from their shoulders. Of course, his purpose was hardly an altruistic one.”

“Yeah, that sounds kind of messy. Giving one guy control of everybody’s fate seems like a bad idea. What’s that old saying? ‘Absolute power corrupts absolutely?’”

“I assure you, Yaldabaoth was corrupt from the moment he came into being. He wanted to rule over all of humanity. He believed it to be his right by existence, but as he existed in the Cognitive World, he could only do so much. For Yaldabaoth to fully take control of the world, he would need time to accumulate power. Power enough to merge reality and the Cognitive World, creating a single plane of existence where he had absolute dominion over all.”

“And how was he going to do that?”

“By challenging me to a game.”

“Please tell me the fate of humanity didn’t rely on checkers or something.”
“Nothing so frivolous, I assure you.” Igor chuckled. “Yaldabaoth and I had two fundamentally conflicting views of humanity’s true nature. Yaldabaoth was created from human weakness, and believed people to have no value. He wanted to lead them to ruin and rule over all creation.”

“And you?” Akira looked Igor dead in the eyes. “What do you stand for, Igor?”

“I believe in the goodness of humans, in their right to freedom, and the power of the strength of their will to change their own fates and that of others. I believe that most humans, given the right opportunity, are capable of greatness. And so we made a wager. We would each find one human with great potential and give them access to the Metaverse. Yaldabaoth would pick somebody he believed to be evil, and I would pick somebody who I believed to be good. And then we would see whose champion had the greatest influence, and whether they would ultimately hurt or harm humanity. Of course, were our chosen players to face in battle, the victor would have been the winner of the bet.”

“And your champion won?”

“No. My champion had yet to even begin playing. Yaldabaoth just chose poorly. You see, Mr. Kurusu, the champion Yaldabaoth chose to be the herald of humanity’s destruction was none other than the boy you met in the Metaverse today: Goro Akechi.”

“Akechi?” Akira stood up. “Wait, are you telling me he’s evil!? I’ve got to warn Ann-“

“Settle down, Mr. Kurusu.” Igor shook his head. “I am telling you the exact opposite. Goro Akechi certainly had the potential to be evil, as all people do. I will not tell you the exact details, as it is not my place, but the boy has had a very difficult life, one full of loss and hardship. He has been wronged by enemies unknown to him, and Yaldabaoth offered him the power to gain revenge on them. All Mr. Akechi had to do was abandon humanity to its own ruin.”

“And I take it he didn’t.” Akira sat back down.

“Indeed. Yaldabaoth lost our game the second he began playing. He gave Mr. Akechi a dark power to corrupt men and destroy all of his enemies, and the boy nearly succumbed to it. But his desire for justice was slightly greater than his desire for revenge, and he knew there was nothing right about damming all to get revenge on a small few. Mr. Akechi turned on Yaldabaoth, and tried to use the new power gifted to him to destroy the false god.”

“‘Tried’? You mean he failed? Is Yaldabaoth still out there somewhere?”

“Oh, hardly. Yaldabaoth is in this very room.”

“Where?” Akira looked around. “The only people here are you and me. And I’m pretty sure I’m not some God, so that leaves-“

“I am not Yaldabaoth, Mr. Kurusu. Though if I were him, I would certainly find strategic value in locking me away and assuming my identity. That said, Yaldabaoth is not a person. He’s a trophy.” Igor pointed to the gold cup on top of the liquor cabinet.

“Yaldabaoth is… a wine cup?”

“A grail. The Holy Grail, to be precise.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“No, I expect it wouldn’t. Not at this time anyway. Mr. Akechi will explain the concept of
“Treasures to you should you choose to join him tomorrow, but for now, let’s just say that Yaldabaoth existed in two states of being at once. The first was as a god that would have ruled over humanity. The second was as a treasured object that humanity desired. With so many people wishing to be absolved of responsibility, Yaldabaoth came into existence as an item of great value. In this case, a legendary treasure. And when the god was destroyed, the item of value remained.”

“So Akechi killed Yaldabaoth and turned him into a cup?”

“No. Mr. Akechi’s attempt to destroy Yaldabaoth was valiant, but ultimately fruitless. He simply lacked the power. The one who slew Yaldabaoth was none other than myself.”

“You’re strong enough to kill a god?”

“Not I, no. In the past, I had a master of my own from whom I inherited control of the Velvet Room. I have not seen him in years.” Igor’s grin seemed like it was about to fade for a second, but it never did. Akira was beginning to wonder if his face was just stuck like that. “Perhaps he would have had such power, but I do not. However, I do possess a fair bit of strength, certainly enough to slay a weakened false god. Mr. Akechi’s attack on Yaldabaoth diminished his power. Yaldabaoth realized that if his chosen pawn would not even attempt to lead humanity to its ruin, that he would lose the game instantly. To prevent this, he appeared in the Velvet Room and attempted to destroy me and Lavenza.”

“Who’s Lavenza?” Akira asked.

“You know her as Caroline and Justine. When Yaldabaoth attacked, he split her into two separate beings. He expended all of his strength in the process, and I was able to kill him, leaving only the treasure he represented behind.” Igor chuckled once again. “Of course, I found that Caroline and Justine were far more interesting as two beings instead of one, so I left them that way.”

“You’re keeping them separate? Isn’t that kind of… evil?”

“They have expressed an interest in being reunited, but I believe they actually enjoy being separate entities. Caroline and Justine do not behave as if they were merely two halves of one being. They have proven themselves to be distinct entities with their own thoughts, feelings, and full ranges of emotions.” Igor titled his head upwards in thought. “Of course, I have also restored to them all of Lavenza’s knowledge and memories. And if, in time, they still wish to return to their original state, I will not force them to remain separate.” Igor looked back down to Akira, the crazed look in his eyes softening slightly. “I simply wish to see if they can come to embrace their current mode of existence. I am not a monster, Mr. Kurusu.”

“Well, that’s good to know.” Akira yawned. “So what does that whole story have to do with me?”

“I must confess that I am a bit disappointed with the way the game between Yaldabaoth and I turned out. Yaldabaoth’s player essentially forfeited the game before I could even put my chosen avatar in play.”

“I’m going to take a swing in the dark here and say I’m the guy you chose” Akira said.

“You are very sharp, Mr. Kurusu. I have found that, for some reason, the nation of Japan has many people with outstanding potential when introduced to the Cognitive World. Particularly in small towns like yours. Of course, when the game ended prematurely, there was no need to induct you into it. I was content to let you go about your life without interruption, never knowing of the great responsibility that was almost thrust onto your shoulders.”
“So what changed your mind?”

“Your arrest.” Igor rose from his chair and walked over to the liquor cabinet, opening a decanter filled with white wine and pouring it into the cup that was once Yaldabaoth. “What are the odds that of all people, the boy I had scouted out would fall victim to this country’s systemic corruption? And that as a result, he would be sent to serve his unjust sentence right in the area where my old foe’s betrayer was actively trying to make the world a better place?” Igor took a sip of the wine, his rigid shoulders seeming to relax a bit.

“So what? You saw my life going terribly and thought ‘Hey, I’ll throw him to actual monsters!’”

“What I have given you is a chance to seize some modicum of control over your life, Mr. Kurusu.” Igor sat down in his chair, putting his feet up, the cup in one hand. “Every day, innumerable humans are subjected to misery as a result of another human’s distorted desires. You are but one of them. Those with access to the Metaverse and who are capable of using Personas are in the unique position to do something about it.” Igor put his cup down on the glass table in front of him. “I will not force you to do anything you do not wish to. The game has long been over. There is no great evil to defeat. But there are small evils that still plague the world every day, and I have given you the tools to fight them if you so desire. The choice is yours.”

“So if I don’t want to do anything, I don’t have to?”

“That is correct. If you are content living your life in the mundanity of probation, you may do so. But know this: You are special among others with abilities like yours.”

“What does that mean?”

“The time for our session has run out, I’m afraid. If you want to know more, I suggest you take up Mr. Akechi on his offer.” Igor looked to the door, where Caroline and Justine were re-entering the room. “For now, it is time for you to wake up, Mr. Kurusu.”

Akira reflected on his conversations with Arsene and Igor on his way to school the next day. Igor was right. Akira’s arrest and conviction were completely unjust, the result of somebody powerful enforcing their twisted will on him. And things like that were happening all the time. If he were given the opportunity to make sure that the guy who had him arrested couldn’t do it to anybody else, he’d take it in a heartbeat. Was the situation with Makoto Niijima so different? Sure, she was just having her goon beat up people, but that was still completely twisted. And if she really did have control over the school’s principal, who knows what else she might be getting up to that Ann and the other students didn’t know about?

Lost in thought, Akira wasn’t exactly paying attention to his surroundings as he walked through the Shibuya train station. So it came as a surprise to him when he bumped into something soft and heard a yelp in front of him.

A girl in a Shujin Academy uniform was hunched over in front him, trying to maintain her balance. Akira reached out and grabbed her wrist to stop her from falling.

“Whoa! I’ve got you!”

The girl started to turn around and Akira let go of her hand, bowing to her.

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t looking where I was going and nearly knocked you over. It was a complete accident.”
Akira slowly rose and saw the face of Makoto Nijima staring back at him. A chill ran up his spine.

“Yes, well, everybody tends to be a little absent-minded sometimes” she said coldly. Makoto honed in on the scabs on Akira’s cheek with her deep red eyes. Akira found her just as unnerving as he did her Shadow. “Although it seems in your case, you may just be clumsy. Do you often fall on your face?”

“What, this?” Akira rubbed his cheek nervously, taking care not to pick at the scabs. “It’s just, you know, a thing that kind of happened.”

“If you say so.” Makoto was unconvinced and made no point of hiding it. “Still, I would try to be more careful were I in your position. With your history, I’m sure any injuries you display will come with a flurry of wild speculation, Kurusu-Kun.”

“I mean, that’s- Well…” Akira was trying to think of a response that wouldn’t piss Makoto off, but then something else crossed his mind. If she didn’t know about her Palace, then as far as she was concerned, this was Akira’s first time seeing her. He had to maintain that illusion, or she’d get even more suspicious of him. “Wait, how do you know my name?”

“Ignoring the fact that the whole school is talking about you…” A self-satisfied smile appeared on Makoto’s face. It took all of Akira’s willpower not to show any anger. “I make it a point to know who every student is. I could hardly serve as an effective student council president if I didn’t.”

“Student council president?” Akira hoped his acting was convincing. “So that would make you…” He scratched his head, murmuring something about trying to remember the name. “‘Makoto Nijima’, right?”

“I am gratified that you have heard of me, Kurusu-Kun.”

“Well, I heard a story about you getting rid of an abusive gym teacher” Akira said. He gave Makoto the most genuine-looking smile he could muster. “That’s very impressive.”

“Those stories are so exaggerated. I simply made Principal Kobayakawa aware of the problem and he took the appropriate action.” Makoto’s eyes narrowed and Akira suddenly felt like he had a gun pointed to his head. There was something about her stare that was just completely overwhelming. “That said, I do my part to ensure that troublemakers don’t have their way at Shujin Academy. I hope you keep that in mind for the duration of your probation, Kurusu-Kun.”

“I promise you I have no intention of getting in any trouble, Nijima-Senpai.”

“Well, I hope that’s the truth.”

“It is. Although it may be kind of hard what with my record being leaked and all. It feels like I have a target painted on my back.” Akira let out a large groan and slumped over. “I don’t know how it happened, but now any chance I had of a normal student life has gone out the window.”

“I see. That must be disheartening.” Makoto looked over her shoulder as she heard the train come into the station. “Let us continue this discussion on the way to school.”

Makoto boarded the train, Akira following her with no small amount of trepidation. There were a few other Shujin students on board, and Akira noticed they were giving the two of them a wide berth. Makoto and Akira found a single available seat, and Akira gestured for her to take it.

“Oh no.” Makoto shook her head. “I insist that you take the seat, Kurusu-Kun.”
“Are you sure?”

“I’m quite comfortable standing. And I believe with your clumsiness streak, it would be better for you to sit down.”

“Ok…” As Akira lowered himself into the seat, Makoto came to stand directly in front of him, essentially trapping him. It became quickly apparent why she wanted him to sit. This way, she could look down on him. It was an uncomfortably familiar perspective.

“Would you permit me to ask you a question about your record, Kurusu-Kun?”

Akira had a feeling that Makoto wasn’t going to take no for an answer.

“Um… Ok.”

“Why did you commit assault?”

“Oh, wow.” Nobody had actually asked Akira that before. They just learned about his guilty verdict and started treating him like garbage. “Why do you want to know?”

“To be perfectly candid, last night I decided to take a look at the information about your case that had been posted online, and I found something very strange about it.” The smug/intimidating combo Makoto had been displaying faded away, and her face started displaying genuine curiosity, like she was trying to solve a puzzle. To Akira’s surprise, when Makoto Niijima wasn’t trying to convey an aura of superiority, she was actually pretty easy on the eyes. “From the information I’ve seen posted online, you were only convicted of assault, and there was no mention of you trying to steal anything from the victim or being on any sort of narcotics or intoxicants. And although the victim’s name was not disclosed, I am aware that you assaulted a full-grown man and not another teenager, so it wasn’t a standard case of bullying.”

“Ok…” Akira was confused. Was Makoto Niijima saying she thought he was innocent? He wasn’t sure how he felt about that.

“I must also confess that I took a look at your official school file” Makoto said. “And I found no record of violence of disciplinary action of any sort in your past. To my surprise, your grades are actually more than fair. Certainly good enough to justify you attending Shujin Academy if we disregard your record.”

“I… Um… Thank you?”

“I do not know you as a person or what your life was like before coming to Tokyo, but if your records are at all indicative of your true nature, I believe that this assault was unusual behavior on your part, and that you may have some unresolved emotional issues in desperate need of addressing.”

“So you think I should see a therapist?” Ignoring who the advice was coming from, Akira wondered if that was maybe an actually good idea. Then again, it’d be kind of hard to do considering all the supernatural stuff that was happening to him, and there’d be no point to the therapy if he couldn’t be completely honest with his doctor.

“No, but I do believe that the conditions of your probation are rather lax concerning your situation.” A devious spark appeared in Makoto’s eyes, and the mood in the air once again became very unpleasant for Akira.

“What does that mean?” Akira asked nervously.
“Put simply, Kurusu-Kun, I do not believe a year of good behavior can truly prove that you have been rehabilitated. You seemed to have excellent behavior up until you committed assault, so keeping it together may not be too difficult for you to fake. After all…” Makoto plucked Akira’s glasses off his face and put them on, glaring at him through them. “I know that you’re already putting on an act as it is.”

“Give those back!” Akira reached up to grab his glasses but Makoto caught his wrist. Her reflexes were surprisingly quick, and while she wasn’t inhumanly strong like her shadow was, her grip was unexpectedly powerful and notably not gentle. Akira’s wrist very quickly began to hurt.

“I do not appreciate it when people try to pull the wool over my eyes, Kurusu-Kun.” Makoto squeezed his wrist harder for emphasis, then let go. As Akira rubbed it, she leaned forward and grabbed Akira by the chin, wrenching his head to the side so she could get a close look the damaged part of his face. For Akira, this triggered some very uncomfortable flashbacks of Shadow Makoto. “I know you did not mar this handsome face of yours with a random act of clumsiness.” Makoto noticed a bruise on Akira’s temple from when her Shadow stood on his head and jabbed it with her finger, causing Akira to hiss in pain. “It would seem you did not take Ryuji-Kun’s warning to heart, and that is a problem I simply cannot ignore.”

“So, what now, Niijima-Senpai?” Akira spoke as Makoto continued her hold on his face. “Are you going to get me expelled and sent to jail?”

“Just the opposite.” Makoto smiled and put Akira’s glasses back on his face, then let go of his chin. “I’m going to be your savior, Kurusu-Kun.”

“I don’t follow.”

“I like to think of Shujin Academy as a utopia. A bright, beautiful place where all of our students can lay the groundwork for their futures. But maintaining the standards of excellence that make it a utopia is very difficult work, something I have trouble doing even as the leader of the student council.” Makoto stood tall, putting one hand on her hip and looking down on Akira in a way that made him feel smaller than ever before. “I do a lot of extra work outside of regular student council duties, and I need help doing it. I believe you are a perfect candidate to be my new assistant.”

“How do you figure that?”

“Your grades are good, so you must be intelligent. You seem to be in good physical condition, which would be useful for all sorts of small tasks I need to get done. And I think some hard work beyond your regular student duties would be excellent for your rehabilitation.” Makoto tucked a loose lock of hair beneath her red headband. “Plus, I believe that being seen aiding me would improve your social standing at the school. It would get other students to stop talking about you and even cause the teachers to be less harsh in how they treat you.”

“What would I be doing, exactly?”

“Oh, all sorts of odds and ends. Helping me with clerical work, some physical labor when getting school events ready, perhaps acting as a messenger sometimes. Really, there are so many miscellaneous things I need taken care of, so in essence you’d just be doing whatever I told you to.”

“Well, I, uh, appreciate the offer and all…” Akira forced the world’s least-convincing smile. “But that sounds like a bigger commitment than I’m ready to take on right now.”

“Are you certain?” Makoto pouted. It was about as real as Akira’s smile. “I really think you should
consider it, Kurusu-Kun. It would be very good for your rehabilitation.”

“With all due respect, Nijijima-Senpai, as intelligent as I’m sure you are, I’m not certain you’re qualified to tell me what’s good for my rehabilitation.” Akira gave Makoto the tiniest of scowls.

“I see.” Makoto’s eyes quickly darted upwards as the train slowed down, the familiar scenery of the Aoyama subway platform pulling into view. She looked back down at Akira, another haughty smile on her face. “Well, I’m going to leave my offer open for a bit, Kurusu-Kun. I realize it’s a lot to dump on somebody first thing in the morning, so I’ll give you some time to process it. Until lunch, perhaps.” Makoto gave Akira another terrifying glare, one not at all obscured or hidden behind any sort of pretense. Her voice got very low. “In the meantime, I would strongly reconsider my position if I were you.

The subway doors opened and Makoto coolly left the train. Akira let a few other students follow in her path before getting up and departing the car himself. He had a feeling that things were about to get a whole lot worse.
Chapter Summary

Shiho begins to think Akira and Ann are up to something. Akechi recalls the events of his awakening.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Akira didn’t get a chance to talk to Ann before classes started. The two of them just shared an awkward look. Akira could tell that Ann wanted to know if she’d be seeing him after school. He still hadn’t decided, but he knew he couldn’t avoid the decision forever. When lunch period came, Ann grabbed Akira and pulled him out of the classroom, leading him through the halls and down the stairs. Akira just barely managed to grab his bag before being led on a grand tour by the arm.

“Whoa! Ann!” Akira was trying to keep up so his arm wouldn’t be torn off while Ann was storming through the school halls. “Slow down! Where are we going!?”

“The courtyard!” Ann replied. “It’s time for us to have that talk!”

“Look, if this is about the city thing-“

“Not that talk! Just come on!”

Ann led Akira outside to a small table. Shiho was already sitting there waiting for them. Ann finally let go of Akira’s arm.

“You were SUPPOSED to have lunch with us yesterday” Ann said. “Now you have to make up for it!”

“Don’t be so hard on him, Ann.” Shiho looked up at Akira and smiled, already digging into a homemade bento. “We know that you didn’t abandon us on purpose, Akira-Kun.”

“Glad to hear it.” Akira sat down at the table next to Shiho, Ann following suit. “So you’re still willing to associate with me now that I’m a known delinquent?”

“I’m already friends with one person who has a lot of false things said about them.” Shiho gave Ann a quick glance.

“But you know I was actually convicted, right?” Akira reached into his bag and pulled out a container of plain white rice.

“Yeah, you really seem like a hardboiled crook” Shiho said sarcastically, eyeing Akira’s lunch. “I may not know what really happened, but you just don’t seem like the violent criminal type.”

“Thank you for saying so, Shiho-San. It means a lot to me.”

“Well, you rumor-magnets need somebody looking out for you.” Shiho turned to Ann and frowned. “I mean, just look at your lunches.”
“Huh?” Ann looked at Shiho curiously, eating flan for lunch and absolutely nothing else. “What does that mean?”

“In my defense,” Akira said, “I have no money.”

“You live in a restaurant, don’t you?” Shiho pointed to Akira’s rice. “You must have access to plenty of ingredients you can make your own meals with.”

“I’m pretty sure if I tried to use the kitchen Boss would throw me into the curry pot” Akira said. “Though he actually seemed like he felt a little guilty or something when I asked him if I could bring some rice into school. Maybe in a month or something he’ll offer to make me some real food or something.”

“And if that doesn’t happen, Shiho can just break into your place and make something herself!” Ann said.

“That was one time!” Shiho said, her face turning red.

“Wait, what!?” Akira gawked at Shiho. “You broke into Ann’s house!?”

“That’s not what happened!” Shiho huffed and turned to Akira. “Ann gave me a spare key in case she ever loses hers. And I just wanted her to know what it was like to have real food that wasn’t all sugar, so-“

“So she snuck into my house early one morning while I was still asleep and started making lunch!” Ann started laughing. “And she was trying so hard to be quiet too, like I’d just come downstairs later and think Santa Claus had left it for me or something!”

“I was trying to be stealthy so as not to wake you.”

“Just because you watch a lot of spy movies doesn’t make you one.”

“Spy movies?” Akira cocked his eyebrow. “I didn’t think a star athlete would be into that kind of thing.”


Akira snickered and took a bite of his rice. Shiho had a point. He needed to eat real meals.

“I should probably get a job or something” he said. “But I don’t know if anyone will hire me with my record.”

“There’s lots of part-time jobs in Shibuya” Ann said. “They’ll hire pretty much anybody.”

“I believe the flower shop is hiring right now” Shiho added.

“Flowers, huh?” Akira scratched his head. “That sounds like the least likely job to hire-“

“THERE YOU ARE!”

Akira froze up, dropping his chopsticks. He and the girls slowly looked up to see Ryuji barreling towards their table. Ann’s face twisted into anger immediately. Shiho maintained her composure. Ryuji sat down at the table, directly across from Akira.

“Do you mind!?” Ann scowled at Ryuji. “We’re having a private conversation here!”
“Relax, I’ll only be here for a minute.” Ryuji looked at Akira. “Miss Prez wants to know your answer.”

“Answer to what!?” Ann looked at Akira. “What’s he talking about!?”

“This ain’t any of your business, Ann!” Ryuji slammed his fist on the table.

“You can tell Nijiiama-Senpai that my answer hasn’t changed.” Akira glared at Ryuji. ”There. You got what you came for. You can leave now.”

“You sure about that?” Ryuji’s eyes narrowed. “You really want me to go back to Miss Prez and tell her you said ‘no’? You don’t wanna take a minute and reconsider?”

“My answer is final” Akira said.

Akira and Ryuji stared at each other for a moment, waiting to see if the other would try something. Finally, Ryuji sighed and stood up from the table.

“What was THAT about!?”

“I ran into Makoto Nijiiama on my way to school today” Akira said. “She wants me to be her assistant.”

“That’s odd” Shiho said. “She already runs the student council. What would she need an assistant for?”

“Nothing good, I’m sure. That’s why I turned her down.”

“Well it’s a good thing you did” Ann said. “I don’t want her messing with your head like she did to Ryuji.”

“Yeah, well, I just hope that’s it. I get the feeling she’s not the kind of person who takes rejection well.”

“From what I’ve heard, she is not.” Shiho looked at Akira with worry. “I would like to believe that like you and Ann, the rumors surrounding Nijiiama-Senpai aren’t true, but I know better.”

“Yeah, if only there were SOME WAY to stop her from doing whatever she wants” Ann said. She gave Akira a sly smile.

“Well, I’m sure if there were, it would probably require a lot of planning” Akira said. “If Nijiiama-Senpai really has such ironclad control over what happens around here, it would probably be very risky to make a move against her.”

“Yeah, but sometimes you have to do something tough to make changes that matter, don’t you?” Ann gave Akira an annoyed look.

“Of course, I don’t disagree with you,” Akira said, “but I think drastic actions ought to be heavily considered before you make any kind of commitment to them.”

“But sometimes you just have to go for it!” Ann stood up, yelling at Akira. “Especially if it means making life better for other people! And something really bad could happen if you waste time
“Hey, I’m all for helping people!” Akira stood up, locking eyes with Ann. “And I think everybody should be open to exploring solutions to problems like these, but not before actually knowing what the solution is!”

“Well then it sounds like finding out about it might help people make up their minds!”

“Of course it will! It’s only reasonable to at least listen first, and then make a decision!”

Ann smiled at Akira. Akira reached down to the ground and grabbed his bag.

“Um…” Shiho stared at the two awkwardly. “Am I missing something here?”

“Just an argument we got into yesterday” Akira said. He pulled out his phone and checked the time. “It, like lunch, is over now.”

Shiho tried to follow up but Akira dashed off. When she tried asking Ann about what just unfolded in front of her, Ann hemmed and hawed for a moment before clamming up and following in Akira’s path.

The final class of the day ended and Ann turned around in her seat.

“So just to be sure, you ARE coming, right?”

“I want to know more before agreeing to anything” Akira said. “I’m coming, but only to ask questions. I’m not promising to join this crazy mission.”

“Come on!” Ann rose from her desk and grabbed her stuff. “What possible reason could you have for not wanting to fix the school!??”

“Because we don’t know if it will actually work.” Akira grabbed his bag and stood up calmly, speaking in a low voice. “Karasu hasn’t actually told us anything. We can’t just trust him blindly.”

“What are you talking about? He’s Gor-“ Akira held a hand up to Ann’s face.

“Don’t say his real name. We don’t want to draw any undue attention.”

“Fine. But he’s famous for helping people!”

“And I want to trust him, but we don’t know for sure if we can. We don’t even know what he actually wants us to do. He could be tricking us.”

“I don’t think he would” Ann said. She and Akira headed for the classroom door.

“And I don’t know if he wouldn’t.” Akira thought back to the conversation he’d had with Igor. One detail of the strange old man’s story stuck out to him. If all this Yaldabaoth stuff was real, then this false god who wanted to control all of humanity seemed to think that Akechi would be the perfect evil pawn. And just because Akechi refused to help him didn’t mean he was being altruistic. If humanity went down, Akechi would probably go down with them, and Akira was sure that the boy knew that. “He’s asking us to do something very dangerous and has given us no details so far. It’s not just my skin I’m worried about. If I didn’t know for sure that this guy was on the up-and-up and you went off with him and got yourself killed, I’d never forgive myself.”

“I still think you’re wrong about him, but I guess it’s better than running in blind.” Ann grinned at
Akira. “I’m just glad that I don’t have to be the wet blanket here.”

“You don’t have to say it like that” Akira grumbled. “I know how to have fun.”

“Oh yeah?” Ann and Akira left the room and headed towards the stairs. “What do you--”

“What are you two up to?”

As they got near the stairway, Shiho appeared from another part of the hallway, looking very cross.

“Nothing” Akira said casually.

“Yeah, we’re not doing anything” Ann said, her words incredibly stilted. “We’re just, you know, two friends hanging out after class. We’re gonna go… uh… shopping!”

“Really?” Shiho crossed her arms and looked at Akira. “I thought you had no money, Akira-Kun.”

“I don’t” Akira said. “But I figured if I tagged along I’d be able to check out any places that might be hiring and get more familiar with the city. Better than wandering around on my own, right?”

“I see.” Shiho smiled at the two. “Well if you’d like some help, I could come along. I don’t have volleyball practice today.”

“YOU CAN’T!” Ann yelled. “It has to be just the two of us!”

“And why’s that?” Shiho narrowed in on the beads of sweat starting to form on Ann’s forehead. “What are you two hiding from me?”

“Ok, you caught us.” Akira threw his hands up in the air, wracking his brain for an excuse. He got some inspiration when he remembered some of the chatter around the school. “Ann wanted to prepare some kind of big surprise for you for the upcoming volleyball rally.” Akira lowered his hands. “She hasn’t told me what yet, but she insisted on having my help, and it’s not like I have anything else I need to do.”

“A surprise?” Shiho had to hand it to Akira. He was a decent liar. In any other instance, she might have believed him. Unfortunately, his partner in this little improv was the worst liar in the world. She turned to the jumpy blonde in front of her. “And just what IS this surprise you’re planning, Ann?”

“Um…” Ann was practically shaking now. “Food! No, wait! Clothes! NO! BOTH!”

“Mmmh.” Shiho started fiddling with her hair tie, scanning Ann and Akira. “You two aren’t going on a date, are you?”

Ann threw her weight into Akira, knocking him on his back. While Shiho was distracted, she bolted down the hall towards the other stairway.

“SORRY, AKIRA! I’LL SEE YOU AT THE PLACE!”

“ANN!” Shiho kneeled down and held out her hand to Akira, yelling at the disappearing blonde pigtails in the distance. “THIS IS GOING WAY TOO FAR TO KEEP A SECRET!” Shiho pulled Akira into a sitting position and grabbed his shoulders, helping him to his feet. “Are you alright, Akira-Kun?”

“I’m fine.” Akira groaned and rubbed his lower back. “I only hit the hard floor.”
“Another fall, Kurusu-Kun?”

Akira and Shiho turned around to see Makoto Nijima emerging from the stairway, a displeased look on her face.

“Perhaps you should start wearing protective gear.” Makoto’s eyes darted to Shiho. “He isn’t bothering you, is he, Suzui-Chan? I would hate for our star athlete’s performance to suffer because of harassment.”

“Not at all, Nijima-Senpai.” Shiho put her hand on Akira’s back. “Kurusu-Kun has been a perfect gentleman in all of our interactions. I think we’re becoming fast friends.”

“Is that so?” Makoto put on a condescending smile. “It seems you’re always taking in strays, Suzui-Chan. I truly admire that kind heart of yours. I just hope it doesn’t lead to you getting hurt.”

“I’m pretty tough” Shiho said. “Anyone tries anything funny, and I’ll just spike them in the face.” Shiho jumped up and mocked spiking a volleyball to prove her point.

“I’d imagine so. I look forward to seeing that famous arm of yours in the volleyball rally later this week. And I suppose it can only be good for Kurusu-Kun’s rehabilitation if he is associating with such upstanding members of our student body as yourself. Still…” Makoto turned to Akira and frowned. “I’m very disappointed by your decision in regards to my offer, Kurusu-Kun. That said, I blame myself. I feel that perhaps I did a poor job of detailing just what a beneficial arrangement being my assistant could be for you. If you’re free right now, I’d appreciate it if you could join me in the student council meeting room so I could give you a better understanding of the situation.”

“I am thankful for your looking out for me, Nijima-Senpai, but I’m afraid my answer will not change” Akira said.

“You say that, but it is a decision made based on incomplete information. Please give me just five minutes of your time to once again make my case.” Makoto’s eyes focused directly on Akira’s, and he felt like somebody had just stepped over his grave. “I insist.”

“I’m afraid I must insist otherwise.” Akira’s words wavered. His throat was incredibly dry all of a sudden. “You see, I have a previous commitment I really must be attending to now.”

“Oh? And what would that be?”

“I promised to help Ann with her studies. In fact, I’m supposed to be meeting with her outside the school right now.” Akira tried to head down the stairs, but realized Makoto was blocking them. “So, if you would please excuse me, I really need to get going.”

“Very well.” Makoto stepped aside.

“Thank you, Nijima-Senpai. Have a good afternoon.” Akira headed down the stairs.

“Until we meet again, Kurusu-Kun.” Akira could feel Makoto’s stare drilling into the back of his head as he made his descent. Makoto turned to Shiho and nodded her head, then headed up the stairs to the third floor. Once she was gone, Shiho went down the stairs, following Akira.

Shiho tailed Akira, making sure to keep her distance so he wouldn't notice her. When he left the school's front door, she stood by the entrance and waited to see which direction he'd go in. She saw him run across the street to meet Ann, who was waiting outside an alleyway. When the two disappeared around a corner, Shiho dashed over to the alleyway’s entrance and crept along the wall. Soon enough, she could hear voices.
“I’m pleased to see the both of you” an unknown boy’s voice said.

“Well, what did you expect?” Shiho heard Ann say.

“Oh, I was certain you would come, Ann-San. But I must admit, I was afraid that Akira-Kun would be a no-show.”

“Wait, so Ann is ‘San’ but I’m ‘Kun’?” Akira’s voice asked. “What’s up with that?”

Shiho poked her head around the corner to see what was going on. She had to cover her mouth when she saw who her friends were meeting with, immediately withdrawing her head.

“That’s Goro Akechi!” Shiho thought. “What are Ann and Akira-Kun doing with him!? Are they part of some police investigation? I thought Akira-Kun didn’t seem like a delinquent… Is he secretly an undercover operative or something!? But why is Ann here!? Is she his contact on the inside!? No, that wouldn’t work. She’s a terrible liar… Unless that’s part of her act! How long has she been at this!?"

“I suppose, to appropriate a term from the yakuza, I think of us as sworn brothers, Akira-Kun.” Goro spread out his arms as if he was about to hug Akira. “Two wildcards chosen to fight each other to the death, instead finding themselves together on the side of justice! Our partnership has been forged by destiny itself!”

“Slow down, great detective.” Akira took a step back from Akechi. “I haven’t actually agreed to join your mission yet. I have questions.”

“You do?” Akechi lowered his arms and looked a little sad. “I thought that Igor would explain everything to you.”

“Who is this ‘Igor’ you guys keep mentioning?” Ann asked.

“As far as I can tell”, Akira said, “he’s some kind of god or demon or something. He talks to me when I go to sleep and is responsible for putting the Metaverse Navigator on my phone.”

Ann stared at Akira, jaw dropped. In all the conversations they’d had, he seemed like such a nice, normal person.

“I know it sounds ludicrous, Ann-San,” Akechi said, “but I know him as well. He is an otherworldly being.”

“Yeah. He chose me to be some part of some game” Akira said. “And he also told me that you were chosen by some evil god.”

“Is that what this is about?” Akechi laughed. “My brief association with Yaldabaoth was three years ago. Ultimately, I did not side with him.”

“But he chose you for a reason” Akira said. “And if you want me to trust you, you’ll have to tell me what it was.”

“You certainly do not beat around the bush, Akira-Kun.” Akechi started rocking back and forth, deep in thought. After a moment, he stopped rocking, and looked at Akira somberly. “Very well, but not here.” Akechi pulled out his phone and activated the Metaverse Navigator.

On the other side of the wall, Shiho got a huge headache, falling to her knees. The world seemed to change colors, and for a moment she believed she was having a stroke. Eventually, it passed,
though she still felt weak. She closed her eyes and leaned back against the wall, trying to maintain her focus on the conversation happening just a few feet away from her.


“Yes, well, this is somewhat difficult to discuss.” Akechi looked down at the ground, the long nose of his mask exaggerating all of his head movements. “The story of my life is not a happy one.”

Mother was gone. Dead. Everyone around him looked down on him. The bastard child. The disgrace who wasn’t meant to be born. The nothing spawn of a weak tramp who couldn’t even bother to keep on living. Akechi Goro had nothing left in the world. He was alone. The foster family he’d been saddled with treated him like a burden. They gave him just enough to keep him alive and sent him to school, but that was it. Akechi was hungry. So hungry. And tired. And angry. This world was unjust. It was nothing like the cartoons he loved when he was little. There was no great hero out there. No savior whose presence could silence a crying child. The miserable were left to fall into deeper despair, and the powerful used them as stepping stones to gain what they wanted, and they always wanted more. No matter how much money they had, or power, or control, they just longed to rise to new heights, to amass as much as they could in their name, a tower of excess reaching the heavens just to prove that they were there. The normal people lived in the shadows of these towers. This world was sick and diseased. As Akechi closed his eyes and lay down on the pile of old blankets that he called a “bed”, he had one wish:

“I want them all to burn.”

“Such goals are not beyond your reach.”

Akechi opened his eyes and found himself in a bizarre place. It was a large chamber, the walls made of prison cells, all glowing red. Akechi himself was not in a prison cell, and most of them seemed to be empty, though the few that were full had bizarrely happy occupants, all standing around smiling without a care in the world. Akechi was in the center of the chamber, on a floor with strange carvings, and before him stood a large mysterious black object chained to the floor. It had statues of hands flanking it, and intricate patterns of sculpted metal layered all over its surface. It had a few glowing stones of red and green in some places, and mysterious tubes which dangled from the ceiling sticking into its top, although Akechi noticed that only a few of them seemed to have some glowing red substance running through them.

What Akechi could not see was the source of the deep voice which had spoken to him.

“Who’s there!?” Akechi scanned the prisoners. Surely one of them must have been talking to him. “Where am I!? Which one of you brought me here!?”

“The prisoners have no power here. Do not turn to them for answers.”

The voice was deep and menacing. It echoed in Akechi’s head. It didn’t seem to be coming from anywhere, and yet he felt as if the source were very close.

“Who’s talking to me, damn it!? Show yourself!”

“You need but look in front of you.”

Akechi stared at the black object in the center of the room. It towered over him, at least three times his height. Somehow, and he couldn’t explain why, it felt alive.
“This… thing? You’re what’s speaking to me?” Akechi took a few careful steps towards the thing. “What are you?”

“I am humanity’s greatest wishes made manifest. A being who will take all burdens off of humanity’s shoulders and lead them to the slaughter like the sheep they are. To the prisoners here, I am the Holy Grail. But you may call me Yaldabaoth, the God of Control.”

“So you’re God, huh?” Akechi spat on the ground before him. “Are you here to explain why you’ve made my life so terrible?”

“I am not the creator responsible for your woes, child. But I will rise to take his place. And you will be my acolyte that ensures my ascension.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“You will help me bring this world to ruin. And in return, I will give you the power to destroy your father.”

“My father!?” Just saying the word made Akechi’s throat feel like it was burning. “Do you know who he is!? Tell me!”

“I will reveal his identity to you should you prove a capable servant.”

“I’ll do anything!” Akechi screamed. “Just tell me what to do!”

“There are two worlds. There is the world you live in, where those lucky enough to be born into power accumulate more power and step on all born less fortunate. A world where the strength of one’s will or character is all but immaterial in the face of acquired power. And then there is a world of thought made manifest, the world we stand in now. In this world, character and will ARE power. And I can teach you to summon yours.”

“I don’t understand. What good will power do if I’m stuck in a different world?”

“All of your enemies are present in both worlds, though their true human forms in your world are unaware of it. I will give you the power to drive them mad and slay them in this world, and it will cause the same to happen to them in your world. They will die alone and confused, suffering as their mind corrodes from within, not knowing why all of their vaunted accumulated power could not protect them from their agonizing fate.”

“Oh, yes!” Akechi started laughing madly. “I want that! Give it to me! I’ll destroy them all! Every single one!”

“There is a condition to this boon I would grant you.”

“Name it!”

“There is another being like me, not of the human world. A doddering old fool who is fascinated by humanity and believes in it. As you are my champion, he will pick one of his own. And the day will come when you two will do battle. And you must win that battle so I may rise to my true potential. I will become god of a new world, and you will be my mightiest angel of darkness.”

“So I just have to kill some punk? That’s it?”

“It will not be that simple. The old man’s champion will have allies. He will fight in the name of human potential. And so I am giving you a head start. You will draw your power not from others,
but from the greatest force available to all men: Hatred, twisted and black. The suffering you have felt will be the flame that burns within you, and with the power I give you, all that sparked it shall burn.”

“Well what are you waiting for!? Give it to me!”

“Very well.”

A ball of black flame emerged from the Holy Grail, striking into Akechi’s heart like an arrow. He fell to his knees, his head and chest throbbing, screaming in pain. A new voice appeared in his head, so warped and twisted it was almost completely incomprehensible.

“KILL! KILL THEM ALL! MAKE THEM ALL SUFFER! BREAK THEIR MINDS AND SOULS!” The image of a strange figure appeared in Akechi’s head. It was tall and thin, covered in black and white stripes. It had two long horns protruding from its head and several tails of long, braided hair that dangled all the way down to gold-covered cloven feet. The being had a red glow surrounding it and wielded a large red sword. “BLACKEN THEIR HEARTS, THEN MAKE THEM BURST! MAKE THEM LEAK BILE AND SHOW THE WORLD THEIR TRUE NATURE! WE CAN MAKE THEM PAY! WILL YOU DO IT!?!”

“Of course!” Akechi screamed.

“THEN SAY MY NAME AND DRAG THE WORLD INTO HELL! I AM THOU! THOU ART I!”

“LOKI!”

A black mask appeared over Akechi’s entire head, obscured in a shadowy aura. He laughed manically as he slowly tore it off, all the skin on his head breaking, blood leaking everywhere. Oh, he was in pain. Greater pain than he’d ever felt before. But it was glorious. It was like he was tearing away his old weakness.

Akechi removed the mask and his entire body became covered in a striped outfit, the same dark aura as the mask’s surrounding him. Loki stood above him, his power made manifest, ready to exact revenge on all who ever wronged him.

“Excellent.” Yaldabaoth laughed. It was a deep, ugly thing that made the whole chamber shake.

“With this…” Akechi turned around to look up at Loki. “I can do anything! I can finally have justice!”

“Can you, though?”

Another voice appeared in Akechi’s head. This one also deep, but calming. Self-assured. Heroic. It was the voice of a hero. Akechi got the faint image of a tall silver champion.

“This false god does not offer justice” the voice said. “It offers more pain, more suffering. You would not destroy that which you hate. You would replace it and become a far worse evil instead.”

“What are you talking about!? ” Akechi thought. Somehow, he felt it would be a bad idea to speak openly to this being before the Holy Grail.

“Madness and rage are a disease. You have been infected by those you wish to destroy. This
striped devil that stands above you is not your true self. It is your sickness given form.”

“What’s your point!?”

“You need not give up on justice. This is the opportunity you have long awaited. Another world. A great power within you. The ability to bring about change. You do not need to be a villain. You can be a hero.”

“A hero…” When he was little, Akechi wanted that more than anything. To be like one of the cool heroes he saw on television. To stop evil in its tracks and fight for justice. But he had abandoned those dreams long ago. Those kinds of people just didn’t exist in the world. There were no superpowers. Evil used money and the law to protect itself, and nobody could do anything about it.

But in this world, this new world of thought, things were different. Power did exist here. Evil could be weeded at the root. Here, Akechi could fight injustices that a thousand people combined couldn’t in the real world. Here, he could be everything he ever dreamed of. He used to be something else. Before the pain. Before his mother’s death. Before he realized how cruel the world could be. He used to think he could fill it with light. And maybe now, that wasn’t out of reach after all.

Loki whispered indecipherable gibberish in Akechi’s head. Twisted babbling conveying madness and pain. It was powerful and tempting, but wasn’t the mark of a great hero the ability to overcome temptation? He would tame this madness. He would draw on its strength, but he would not allow it to overcome him.

“Hear me, Holy Grail…” The shadowy aura around Akechi disappeared and his outfit changed. Where once it was madness and darkness, now it was white and resplendent. “I have decided that I reject you!”

“WHAT!?” The Holy Grail raged and the chamber shook once more.

“I will not lead the world to ruin! With the power you have foolishly granted me, I will save it instead! I will be better than those that have hurt me!” A glowing sword appeared in Akechi’s hand. He pointed it at the Holy Grail. “I will save the world!”

“YOU INSOLENT LITTLE-“

“BRAVE BLADE!”

With jittering movements, Loki charged at the Holy Grail, slashing at it with his sword. The Holy Grail screamed in pain, as did the prisoners surrounding them.

“You will pay for that, you wretch!” An arrow of light appeared in the air and struck Akechi, knocking him to the ground. The pain was unlike anything he’d felt. It wasn’t searing or cutting or crushing or shocking. It simply was. Like reality decided Akechi was to hurt and his body complied. Loki vanished and a red mask appeared over his face. Akechi found himself unable to move.

“My plans are infallible!” the Grail screamed. “My desires absolute! What I wish shall be done! I will not allow some childish tirade to cause me to lose-“ The Grail quit speaking for a moment. “NO!”

Akechi craned his neck upwards just enough to see a winged shadow rise from the Grail. The air in the room changed, as if a mighty presence was gone. The Grail still stood, and although he was so
tired, Akechi slowly crawled towards it, sword in hand. It took him a moment, and the prisoners were screaming at him to stop the whole time, but when the red tubes feeding into the top of the grail started to glow, they exploded instead. Akechi reached the base of the grail and stuck his sword in it.

The prisoners screamed even louder and the whole chamber began to rumble. The grail in front of him glowed and shattered, leaving behind a simple golden cup small enough for Akechi to pick up in his hand. One by one, the shouting prisoners vanished in rapid succession, and the bars of the prison cells faded away. The walls began to crumble, and the floor beneath Akechi cracked. He reached up to his red mask and used his last remaining strength to pull it off.

“Robin Hood.”

The silver champion in his head appeared above Akechi, looking down on him. Akechi held up the cup like a trophy.

“I guess this is the shortest superhero career ever, huh?”

“It is a good thing you have done” Robin Hood replied. “It is far better to shine gloriously for one moment than live a long and bitter life in shadow.”

“Heh... Maybe.” The floor split open beneath Akechi, creating a chasm for him to fall into. “I guess, in the end, I was worth something after all. That's nice.”

Falling. Darkness. Endless movement.

And then, rest. No impact, just a cessation of movement, like it had never happened.

And a gentle rumbling beneath his body. The feel of carpet on his skin. And the sounds of a moving vehicle.

Akechi opened his eyes and everything was blue. The cup was still in his hand, and as he stood up, he took in his surroundings. He appeared to be in a very large limousine. He didn’t know for sure, having never actually been in one, but it seemed similar to TV. There were plush, couch-like benches all about, as well as a bar full of wines and empty glasses. Before him was a table, which a peculiar old man with a long nose sat behind. Lying on the couch next to him were two sleeping little girls, each with only one eye.

“Well,” the old man said, “you are not the guest I was expecting. I haven’t even had time to redecorate yet.”

“After that, Igor took the cup, and promised to help guide me to use my powers for good.” Akechi’s smile finally returned to his face, which had been solemn for most of his tale. “He downloaded the MetaNav onto my stepfather’s phone and instructed me to steal it. In using it, I discovered that my new foster parents were guilty of a string of convenience store robberies, and was able to expose them to the police. I struck up a friendship with a prosecutor in the Special Investigations Unit, and she was able to convince a boarding school to give me a scholarship and provide me with a new place to live, so long as I continued to offer my assistance to law enforcement.”

"That's a really crazy story" Ann said. "But after everything you guys have shown me, it doesn't sound impossible."

Shiho stepped away from the wall she was hiding behind. This story was completely unbelievable.
Akira and Ann were associating with some teenage celebrity lunatic. She didn’t know why Akira was talking about this Igor like he was real or something. Was this some kind of cult? She had to get away. She had to tell somebody about this. Akira Kurusu had seemed like such a nice boy, but he was indoctrinating Ann into some bizarre religion or something. She turned around, running out of the alley. She had to get back to the school, find a teacher or something. Just get to safety across the street before these crazy boys realized she was there and-

Wait, where was the school?

“Where did this city come from!?”

Chapter End Notes

Missed an update yesterday. Hoping to keep up daily chapters now. Also hoping to be back on my schedule of posting in the morning.
Akechi reveals just what's important to him, while Akira questions his own priorities. Shiho is taken away on a flight of fancy.

This was a dream. It had to be. Shiho was not looking at some kind of glowing sci-fi utopia. Shiho was not standing under a red and blue sky. Shiho’s friends were not in some kind of cult led by a teenage crime-fighter. None of it could be real. None of it made sense. The only way any of this worked out was if it was all in Shiho’s head, and she was asleep.

Well, that was a relief.

Still, Shiho’s dreams weren’t usually this clear. By this point she would either be reliving the same obstacle five times in a row or have transformed into an entirely different person with it feeling totally natural. But she had only walked out of the alley once, she hadn’t gone from being Shiho Suzui to Doraemon, and she was aware of and in control of her actions like she would be if she was awake. Maybe this was one of those “lucid dreams” she’d heard so much about. The kind where people can control what they do, like being in the Matrix. And if she could anything…

Shiho did some quick quad stretches. Maybe it was silly to try and prep your body in a dream, but it just felt like the right thing to do. She got a big grin on her face, running across the street towards a city gate of some kind. As she passed under the archway reading “Shujin City”, she took a leap off the ground, her feet passing through the air. She felt the wind against her face as her body rose…

And then she landed after getting a couple feet off the ground, just like always.

Shiho pouted at the realization that she could not fly. Isn’t that how lucid dreams are supposed to work? You can do anything and control anything? She heard people trained themselves to lucid dream. Did she need to focus more or something?

This rumination was interrupted by a black explosion of shadow appearing before Shiho. She shrieked and stepped back as the shadow took the form of some kind of nightmare police officer standing over her.

“Hold it right there!” The cop yelled. “Shujin City is under a state of alert for- Oh!” The cop bowed in apology. “Shiho Suzui! I didn’t realize it was you!”

“You know who I am?” Shiho asked. The officer laughed.

“That’s Suzui-Chan! Talented AND humble! Truly the number one athlete in Shujin City both on and off the court!”

Oh, so this was one of THOSE dreams. The ones where Shiho was a big volleyball star. She liked these dreams.

“Say…” The cop rubbed its… Well, not chin. Part of its mask where a chin would be. “Aren’t you supposed to be playing a big game at the stadium soon!? You’re going to be late if you’re all the
way over here!"

“Oh no!” Shiho decided to play along. This was a bit of a twist on this kind of dream, so she wanted to see where it was going. “I was so preoccupied with my pre-game warmup that I lost track of time!”

“Don’t worry, Suzui-Chan! I’ll fix this!” The officer took a radio out of their pocket and started speaking into it. “This is Gate requesting a vehicle for VIP transport!”

Shiho smiled at “VIP”. In the distance, she could see a police car approaching. This was going to be a fun dream.

“So, what’s the plan?” Akira asked.

“Does this mean you trust me?” Akechi asked Akira.

“For now.” Akira leaned against a wall, crossing his arms. “Your story matches with Igor’s, and I’m pretty sure I can trust him.”

“What’s with this?” Ann mimicked Akira’s pose, leaning against the same wall and smirking at him. “You trying to be cool or something?”

“I’m just trying to get comfortable” Akira said.

“Is the hard wall really so accommodating?” Akechi stood by Akira’s other side and leaned back against the wall, also crossing his arms. “Hm... It DOES provide a fair amount of support this way, doesn’t it?”

Sandwiched between the mocking smirk of Ann and the far-too-earnest grin of Akechi, Akira began to feel ridiculous. He desperately wanted to leave this wall, but felt like he’d somehow be losing some kind of competition if he was the first to do so.

“Look, you said you had a way to make Makoto Niijima stop being terrible. So how do we do that?”

“Ah, yes.” Akechi left the wall and stood in front of Ann and Akira. “Well, as I explained before, Makoto-San’s Palace is a reflection of how she sees the world. That means changes in reality can cause this place to change as well. For example, if the school were to burn down, the city would likely burn down as well.”

“I hope you’re not suggesting we burn down the school” Akira said. “Even if I thought that were a good idea, I’d still be the prime suspect for the crime.”

“I am not suggesting we start a fire, Akira-Kun.” Akechi shook his head. “It is merely an example of the relation between the real world and the cognitive world. However, that relationship is a two way street. We can use Makoto-San’s Palace to change her behavior in the real world.”

“So, like, if we burned down the city here, Niijima-Senpai would burn down the school?” Ann asked.

“I would appreciate it if you two could focus on something other than theoretical arson.” Akechi sighed. “This world is built on Makoto-San’s distorted desires. That means that an object representing those desires exists in this world, and makes up its core. Such an object is called a ‘Treasure’. If we steal Makoto-San’s Treasure, we will essentially be removing her twisted desires
from her heart. And without the drive for all of her bad behaviors, she will cease to be the tyrant that she has become.”

“Back up a bit.” Akira pushed himself off the wall, standing up straight. “You’re saying we can surgically remove the evil from somebody?”

“Well, it is larceny, not surgery. But yes.”

“That’s amazing!” Ann pushed off the wall as well. “That’s like, total reform you’re talking about! Have you done this before!?”

“Many times” Akechi said.

“So what’s the catch?” Akira asked. “Because there’s no way it’s as easy as you’re making it sound.”

“You are right. To begin with, it is very dangerous and difficult. A person’s Treasure is usually in the most heavily fortified area in their palace.”

“You think that’s the throne room we were in before?” Ann asked.

“Probably” Akira said. “And as far as I know, there’s only one way up there: An elevator in the middle of a police station. And I really doubt they’re just going to let us go up there after the commotion Ann and I caused.”

“Yes, well, securing an infiltration route is just one of the challenges we face” Akechi said. “The far larger one is pulling off the required heist without killing Makoto-San.”

“WHAT!?” Ann yelled.

“Son of a- I knew there was a catch!” Akira shook his head. “Don’t get me wrong. I don’t particularly like Niijima-Senpai. In fact, she kind of scares me. But there’s no way in hell I’m doing anything that could kill her!”

“Me neither!” Ann stamped her foot. “Why didn’t you warn us about that before!?”

“Please, calm down!” Akechi threw his arms forward, waving them back and forth. “I have no intention of allowing such a fate to befall Makoto-San! But there are a few things we need to be considerate of during the heist, chief among which is that we will have to fight Makoto-San’s Shadow.”

“You’re not helping your case here” Akira said.

“Please, just listen without further interruption.” Akechi cleared his throat. “Taking somebody’s desires, distorted or otherwise, leaves a drastic effect on their state of mind. They become remorseful for their more wicked actions, but they can also lose all drive, including that for self-preservation. If we simply take the Treasure, Makoto-San will stop taking care of herself and possibly waste away. In order to prevent that, her Shadow must be made to see reason before we take the Treasure.”

“This is getting more impossible by the second” Akira said.

“Seriously.” Ann slumped over. “Niijima-Senpai totally thinks she’s above everybody else.”

“Yes, well, that’s why we have to defeat her first” Akechi said. “Once she’s knocked off her
“Throne, she’ll no longer have such a high opinion of herself, and will be willing to listen to reason.”

“Defeat her Shadow?” Akira asked.

“Yes” Akechi said.

“In a fight?”

“Just so.”

“Makoto Nijima’s Shadow.”

“Yes.”

“The one with the super strength.”

“Well, I wouldn’t know from experience, but it’s not uncommon for a person’s Shadow to have-“

“The one that controls that giant monster with Sakamoto’s face that we can’t fight.”

“I understand your concerns, Kurusu-Kun, but-“

“And the army of Shadow Police.”

“You are making it sound like a much more arduous task than it actually is, Akira-Kun.”

“So you’re saying this is easy?”

“Oh, goodness no!” Akechi rubbed the back of his head. “If we are not careful we will most certainly fall victim to a terrible fate.”

“Great.” Akira reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. “I’m out. I can leave with the app, right?”

“Akira, no!” Ann grabbed Akira’s phone. “You’re not seriously bailing on this, are you!? I thought we were past this!”

“Come on, Ann! Just THINK for a minute!” Akira reached for his phone but Ann held it away from him. “We’re going up against an army, a monster, and a supervillain! Every second we’re in this world we could die! Even the guy who’s supposed to be an expert on this says so!”

“But it’s for a good cause!”

“IT’S HIGH SCHOOL!” Akira started pacing around in a circle. “Yeah, it sucks that the school is in this position! It sucks that Makoto Nijima can just do whatever the fuck she wants through some wacky manipulation of the principal or whatever! It sucks that she has your old pal Sakamoto bullying people she doesn’t like! But it’s not the end of the world! It’s not a life or death situation! She’s only going to be in high school for another year. How much damage can she actually DO in that time!” Akira stopped pacing and clutched his fist. “The reward here is not at all proportionate to the risk. It’s just not a cause worth dying for. And even if we pull it off, there’s a chance Nijima-Senpai could die, and I won’t have that on my conscience. I won’t become a REAL criminal.” Akira held his hand out to Ann. “Give me my phone.”

“No way!” Ann held Akira’s phone to her chest. “I’m not letting you back out on this! We agreed that-“
“Give him his phone, Ann-San” Akechi said sadly.

“But he-“

“If Akira-Ku-er Akira-San doesn’t want to risk his life, we cannot force him to. You cannot conscript somebody into fighting for justice.”

Ann stared at Akechi for a moment, who looked down at the ground sadly. She looked at Akira, who was still holding out his hand, a stern look on his face. She frowned and gave Akira his phone back.

“I still think you’re making a mistake” Ann said.

“The feeling is mutual.” Akira tapped his phone screen and vanished into thin air.

“Let’s go, Ann-San.” Akechi walked out of the alleyway.

Ann followed Akechi, they started across the street, but right before they would pass through the archway, Akechi made a hard left.

“Where are you going?” Ann asked.

“We cannot enter through the front door” Akechi replied. “They’ll see us coming. We must sneak in.”

“How? Are we gonna climb the walls or something?” Ann’s face lit up. “Did you bring a grappling hook!”?

“Nothing so glamorous, I’m afraid.” Akechi stopped about twenty feet away from the gate and pointed to a manhole cover in the middle of the road.

“The sewer!? Gross!”

“It is much nicer than you would think, actually.” Akechi took a couple steps back from the manhole cover and tore off his mask, causing Robin Hood to appear. He pointed to the manhole cover with a glowing hand. “KOUGA!”

Robin Hood shot a light arrow into the street right next to the sewer entrance. It exploded, destroying a small piece of the street and launching the manhole cover into the air. It flipped around like a coin and came down hard into the street, landing vertically on its side and embedding itself in the asphalt with a loud CRUNCH.

“This is supposed to be sneaky!?” Ann grabbed Akechi’s shoulder and forcefully turned him around, shaking him. “You’re gonna attract every cop in the city!”

“It doesn’t matter” Akechi said, pushing Ann’s arms away from him. His mask reappeared and Robin Hood vanished. “None of them pay attention to anything going on outside of the city. But the sewers still run underneath it. This is the perfect entrance point.”

Akechi jumped into the sewers. Ann whined, shut her eyes, pinched her nose closed, and jumped in after him. There was a loud splash as she landed in the water beneath her, which was deep enough to go up to her knees. Ann slowly opened her eyes, ready to freak out, but to her surprise, the water she was standing in was pristine, and the infrastructure of the sewer looked like it was just built.

“Is this really a sewer?” Ann asked.
“It is Makoto-San’s cognitive sewer.” Akechi was standing on a concrete ledge outside the water. He knelt down and held his hand out to Ann. “Since she perceives Shujin as a utopia, it produces no filth.”

“Does that mean nobody who lives in this city goes to the bathroom?” Ann grabbed Akechi’s hand.

“I prefer not to dwell on such questions.” Akechi grunted as he pulled Ann up to the ledge. He pointed in the direction opposite of the hole they dropped down from. “We must reach the tower in the center of the city. I am certain that if we find a point where multiple tunnels converge, that we will be on the right track.” Akechi started walking along the ledge.

“I don’t get it.” Ann started following Akechi. “If nobody… Uh… ‘Produces waste’, why do they have sewers at all?”

“I cannot say for sure.” Akechi chuckled. “Knowing Makoto-San, it is likely because it is simply proper for a city to have a sewer system as part of its infrastructure. I imagine we would similarly find a fully-staffed hospital with bored doctors and nurses since nobody here ever actually gets sick. Makoto-San likes to be prepared that way.”

“You sound like you know Niijima-Senpai pretty well” Ann said.

“Well, she and I are not particularly close, but I have known her for a few years now. Her older sister, Sae-San, is my mentor.”

“You know Prosecutor Niijima!”

“Oh yes, quite well. She is the person in the SIU who sponsored my scholarship to my boarding school. I truly admire her…” Akechi kept walking forward, but looked over his shoulder at Ann. “Can I confess something to you, Ann-San?”

“Ok.”

“I am a fraud as a detective.”

“What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I say. I do not actually solve crimes. I cheat using the Metaverse.”

“How does that work?”

“Well, usually I get wind of a suspect in an ongoing investigation. Then I’m able to see if they have a Shadow in the Metaverse. I defeat their Shadow in combat and get them to confess how they did their crimes to me, and then I work backwards to build a case that looks like I found the answer and used proper investigative techniques.”

“I don’t even know what to say to that.” Ann picked up pace so she could walk side-by-side with Akechi. “Do you feel bad about it?”

“Not particularly. I see it as saving time and police resources. Plus, once I’ve tamed somebody’s Shadow, it means they’re ready to surrender themselves and confess to the police when they go to arrest the criminal, which avoids a violent confrontation.”

“But you’ve gotten a lot of fame for your cases, haven’t you?”

“Yes, well, I have mixed feelings on it. To be truthful, I do enjoy the attention. I received mostly
negative attention for the greater part of my life, so having the adulation of the masses is a welcome change of pace. And I DO bring a genuine end to criminal activities, even if through slightly deceitful means.” The corners of Akechi’s mouth lowered along with his voice. “Still, I do feel a bit guilty for tricking everyone into believing I am some manner of boy genius. I am certainly not as intelligent as everyone believes.”

“You seem pretty smart to me” Ann said.

“Thank you, Ann-San. I would like to think I am of above-average intelligence, but the fact remains that my purported ‘genius’ is all smoke and mirrors. Sae-San is the real deal.” Akechi’s mood suddenly brightened. “She is an actual genius. She’s intelligent, has the ability to read people well, she can find the connections where others are unable to, and she always cares about seeing to it that justice is carried out to the fullest extent.”

“Huh…” Ann looked at her feet as she thought. “I guess even though she’s in the news a lot, I always just saw her as another government official or something. But the way you talk about her, she kinda sounds like a hero.”

“She is!” Akechi was beaming. “She even looks like one, don’t you think? With how tall she is and that silver hair of hers, she is truly the most incredible woman I’ve ever met.”

“Wait a second…” Ann leaned towards Akechi, a big grin on her face. “Do you have a crush on her?”

“What!?” The little bit of Akechi’s cheeks that were visible started turning a shade of red to match his mask. “That’s just- I don’t- She is my mentor! The person I look up to most in the world! Do you realize how inappropriate that would be?”

“I’m not hearing a no-oooo~” Ann sung.

“It hardly matters.” Akechi’s mood became dour again. “Ignoring the age difference, Sae-San is a very serious person. She does not exactly have a concept of work-life balance, and so she dedicates very little energy to anything one would consider a personal life. I don’t believe she has even noticed the changes in her own sister’s temperament.”

“What changes?”

“Makoto-San has always been a very proper person, but she has only been a cold person in the past year. I discovered her Palace completely by accident.”

Akechi and Sae walked down the hallway of Sae’s apartment complex. Akechi was poring through a folder with some street camera photos of a fat suit-clad man with a mean-looking face who had a woman far too attractive for him hanging on his arm.

“Do you think he’s yakuza?” Akechi asked.

“I doubt it” Sae said. “Kaneshiro has goons of his own, but considering how well-kept his secrets are, I believe that he has a very small circle of associates. It’s possible that he and his gang cooperate with a smaller yakuza faction, but he doesn’t appear to be a member himself.”

“I see…” Akechi took out his phone and opened the MetaNav app, activating the search function. He slipped it back into his pocket. “And this Junya Kaneshiro… He primarily operates in Shibuya, yes?”
“I don’t want you getting involved in this.” Sae gave Akechi her signature Nijima glare. “I’m letting you look at these materials strictly as a learning experience. Petty offenses and white-collar crime are fine, but you’re too young to be going after gangsters.”

“Oh, of course, Sae-San.” Akechi gave Sae a nervous grin. “I wouldn’t dream of going after such a dangerous individual on my own.”

“Mmhm.” Sae doubled down on her glare, clearly not believing Akechi.

“So…” Akechi looked back at the file. “How do you think he views his criminal empire?”

“You’re asking that again?” Sae shook her head and stopped in front of the door to her apartment, pulling out her keys. “I will never understand your obsession with trying to get into criminals’ heads.”

“I think that if perhaps we had an understanding of his mentality, it would allow us to find a hole in his veil of secrecy.”

“There’s no ‘we’.” Sae unlocked the door to her apartment. “I told you, you’re not involved in this case.”

“Oh, of course, but still…” Akechi walked through the door as Sae opened it for him. “Do you think he views Shibuya as his own personal nightclub? Or perhaps a playground of some sort?”

“I wouldn’t know, and I have no desire to.”

“Sister?”

Sae closed the door and saw Makoto getting up from the kitchen table, where she had been doing homework. She looked at Sae with curiosity.

“You’re home quite early. And you’ve brought Akechi-Kun with you?”

“Good evening, Makoto-San.” Akechi waved at Makoto. She didn’t respond to him.

“Akechi-Kun was complaining that the fluorescent lights of the police station were starting to give him a headache.” Sae looked down at Akechi and rolled her eyes. “Personally, I think he just wanted to go somewhere with more comfortable seating, but we don’t NEED to be at the station to review this information, so I decided to humor him.”

“And you decided to bring your work back here?” Makoto asked.

“I spend so little time at home, I was starting to forget what it looked like” Sae joked dryly.

“I hope my presence is not an intrusion” Akechi said.

“Of course not” Makoto said. “Why would it be?”

“I don’t know” Akechi answered. “I merely hoped that it was not.”

“I’ll be back in a couple minutes” Sae said. She headed for the hallway on the other side of the living room. “So long as I’m out of the office for the day, I’m going to change out of this suit.”

Akechi stared awkwardly at Makoto as Sae left the room. Makoto stared back at him with a neutral expression. What it meant, Akechi had no idea. She was so hard to read these days. It wasn’t as if the two had ever been friendly or anything, but Makoto used to be so pleasant. She’d make small
talk with Akechi and ask him about the work he was doing with Sae, and was generally affable. But for the past year she’d been so distant and robotic, and he couldn’t figure out why.

Still, maybe this was a good opportunity to connect with her. After all, in Akechi’s wildest dreams, Makoto was his future sister-in-law. And just because Sae had no interest in love now didn’t mean that maybe she wouldn’t in the future. Maybe even someday when seven years wasn’t much of an age gap.

“So,” Akechi asked with a smile, “what’s new in your life, Makoto-San?”

“It is a very busy time for me” Makoto said flatly.

“Ah yes. You are only one year away from entering college, are you not? I imagine you are deciding between many universities.”

“I am mostly preoccupied with the affairs of my current school. The tasks of a student council president are many.”

“You’re the president now? Congratulations!” Akechi gave Makoto a few short claps.

“Thank you, Akechi-Kun.” Makoto gave a short nod. It was the closest thing to emotion he’d gotten out of her so far. “It is hard work, but I have never shied away from such things. As leader of the student body, the task of upholding the school’s standards of excellence falls on my shoulders.”

“Well, I’m certain that with Makoto Nijima running things, Shujin Academy must seem like a veritable utopia!” Akechi threw out his arms to the side with a little flourish. He felt his phone buzz in his pocket and heard a muffled voice.

“Yes, I’d like to think so.” Makoto finally cracked a smile. It was a very small one, but Akechi was still counting it as a victory.

“Pardon me for a moment.” Akechi took his phone out of his pocket. “I am waiting to hear from a contact on a case. This message could be very important.”

“Of course.” Makoto sat back down and returned her attention to her homework. Akechi walked into another part of the room and looked at his screen, and his heart started racing.

METAVERSE NAVIGATOR

SUBJECT: MAKOTO NIJJIMA

LOCATION: SHUJIN ACADEMY

COGNITION: UTOPIA

“It is a most unusual case” Akechi said. “In a way, Akira-San was right. In the grand scheme of things, even from a law enforcement perspective, Makoto-San’s untoward activities at Shujin Academy are rather insignificant. If it could be proven that she were orchestrating the beating of her fellow students, I doubt that the penalty would be severe.”

“But…” Ann asked.

“I have dealt with the Shadows of many people who have committed small crimes and other petty acts. I will not go into the full details, but while they are all found in the Metaverse, they are much
weaker and do not have their own Palaces.” Akechi and Ann came to an area where a bunch of paths in the sewer converged. They headed down the center tunnel. “By all rights, Makoto-San’s ‘crimes’, as they were, should not have caused her to sprout an entire Palace.”

“So what does that mean?”

“It means that Makoto-San has the potential to become a far more twisted person.” Akechi’s face changed from sad to grim. “I do not know what made her the way she is now, but I fear that her departure from Shujin Academy will not change the distorted desires that lie at her core. If Makoto-San still has those desires when she enters the adult world, she could take actions that seriously hurt people.”

“Oh wow…” Ann shivered. “I knew Niijima-Senpai was scary, but I never even thought of anything like that. She could become like, a criminal mastermind or something!”

“I won’t let it come to that” Akechi said. “It would destroy Sae-San if her sister became a criminal. I’m going to make sure that it never happens.”

Akechi and Ann silently continued down the tunnels, heading for what they believed to be the center of the city. After about ten minutes, the ground started to shake.

“What’s going on!?” Ann asked.

“I don’t know.” Akechi pointed to a ladder attached to the wall in the distance. “But perhaps it is time for us to go above ground.”

The two began running towards the ladder. As they did, the shaking grew harder, and they could hear a sound of continuous crashing growing louder and louder. Ann and Akechi looked behind them to see the tunnels flooding, a massive wall of water barreling towards them. They ran as fast as they could, and it grew closer and closer, approaching them even faster than the Ryuji dog had the day before. Ann reached the ladder first and started climbing it, Akechi ascending right beneath her. They got halfway up the ladder before the water hit them, trying to tear them away and carry them off to who-knows where. Ann managed to keep her grip, slowly grabbing one rung after the other, eventually pulling her head above the flood trying to take her away.

Akechi wasn’t so lucky. He began to run out of breath, still submerged beneath the raging flood, and lost his grip on the ladder, blacking out for a second. He bobbed to the surface as the water began to carry him away, but Ann lashed out with her whip and snagged it around his ankle. It took all Ann had to hold onto the ladder and Akechi with the water still trying to pull her away, but Akechi came to and began pulling on the whip, drawing himself closer to Ann and the ladder. He reached out and grabbed a rung, and the two continued their ascent.

After another moment, the water stopped trying to carry the two away. Instead, the water level started to rise, filling the entire chamber. Akechi allowed himself to tread water, floating away from the ladder a bit.

“Ann-San, clear away from the ladder!”

Ann nodded and kicked away, fluttering to stay afloat. Akechi pulled out a golden pistol and aimed it at a manhole cover above them. He fired it six times, lasers shooting out that cut through half of the manhole cover. The unmelted portion caved in, falling into the hole it was meant to seal off and plummeting into the water. Ann and Akechi both grabbed onto the ladder again and resumed climbing. Ann snaked out of the manhole first, sprawling out onto the street, exhausted. Akechi followed suit. The two took a moment to catch their breath, and then they sat up and looked
They were surrounded by Police Shadows as far as the eye could see.

Shiho stood in the largest locker room she’d ever seen. The police had escorted her to a massive stadium, where posters advertising a volleyball match with her face were plastered everywhere. Nobody else was in the locker room. All of the lockers had names, each of them belonging to a member of Shujin’s Girls Volleyball team. Shiho found the locker with her name on it and opened it, but it was empty.

Well, that was no big deal. This was a dream, after all. Shiho could easily play without her uniform. It’s not like it mattered. She found an exit that led to a large tunnel, with the rest of the girls’ volleyball team standing at the other end, silhouetted before the volleyball court. The girls ran out onto the field, the stadium cheering for them. Shiho started running down the tunnel to catch up.

“AND NOW, THE MOMENT YOU’VE ALL BEEN WAITING FOR…” An excited voice came out over the stadium’s speakers. “LOOK UP IN THE SKY!”

Shiho reached the end of the tunnel and looked up to see a red blimp flying above.

“PRESENTING EVERYONE’S FAVORITE PLAYER… THE STAR ATHLETE OF SHUJIN…”

Something dropped from the blimp, crashing into the ground. A massive cloud of dust rose from the volleyball court, and the entire ground shook violently. Shiho lost her balance and fell on her rear. She looked up, coughing through the dust. As it started to settle, she could see a large figure standing tall on the center of the court.

“SHIHO SUZUI!”

Shiho looked out to see herself on the court. Or rather, some bizarre supercharged version of itself. This Shiho Suzui had her face and signature hairstyle, but was a full meter taller and had pronounced muscles all over her. She wasn’t huge and bulky like a bodybuilder. Her muscles were large, but still proportional to her frame overall. She looked like an amazon of some sort.

Shiho slowly rose to her feet, rubbing her backside. It was sore from the fall and-

Wait a second…

Dreams aren’t supposed to hurt.

Akira was nearing the train station. He hoped to just go back to LeBlanc and have a quiet afternoon. Things did not go to plan. Arsene was hovering in front of him, floating backwards, his arms crossed as he flapped his wings.

“Honestly, what was the point of awakening to me if you’re not even going to bother fighting?”

“Shut up” Akira said. “You just don’t get it.”

“Of course I get it. I am you. The workings of your mind are not a mystery to me.”

“Then you know how I feel, so there’s no point to this conversation.”

“And you know how I feel. Because there is no divide between the two of us. Because my feelings
are your feelings. So why not act on them? Why are you being such a coward?"

“It’s not that simple!” Akira shouted. “The dangers in that place are just-”

“Come on, give it back!”

Akira’s protests were interrupted by a high-pitched whine. He looked across the street to see Ryuji Sakamoto holding some portable game console over his head. In front of him was a very short boy — a first year by Akira’s estimate — jumping up and down reaching for it.

“What makes you think you deserve it?” Ryuji asked.

“Because it’s mine! I saved up my money and paid for it!” The first year kept jumping. “It’s my property!”

“You lost the right to this thing the second you started misusing it!” Ryuji shoved the boy with his free hand, knocking him over. “Games ain’t allowed in school, and you were playin’ with it in effin’ class!”

“Just give it back!” The boy rose to his knees and clasped his hands together, bowing his head. “Please, Sakamoto-Senpai! It’s all I have!”

“Dude, do you know how pathetic that is!?” Ryuji spit on the ground. “If playin’ games in class were just about you wastin’ the great opportunities the school offers you, I’d prolly just let you off with a warnin’. But when you’re breakin’ the rules, it distracts the other students around you! Be a man! Accept responsibility for your bullshit!”

“I will! I promise I won’t do it again! Just give it back!”

“See, I don’t believe you! You’re in high school but you’re still actin’ like a little kid!” Ryuji looked up at the game device. “I think I oughta smash this thing on the ground to teach you a lesson about consequences!”

“NO!”

“Well, it’s either the game or your face! Because I ain’t lettin’ ya disrespect our school without gettin’ some kinda punishment! So which is it gonna be?”

Akira turned and took a step towards the street. Arsene swerved in front of him.

“Surely you cannot be serious.”

“What are you talking about? I’ve got to help that kid!”

“So NOW you want to help people?” Arsene looked over his shoulder. “THIS is the great cause you will stand and fight for? A child’s toy? You would damn the whole school to a year’s worth of tyranny, but a single boy’s suffering drives you to heroism?”

“I can actually do something about this! I can stand up to Sakamoto!”

“No you cannot! That boy is far stronger than you and far more experienced in a fight! You will only get yourself injured, possibly incarcerated, and that boy will lose his property anyway!”

Arsene put his hands on Akira’s shoulders. He wasn’t making physical contact, of course, but the effect came through all the same. “But you DO have power in the Metaverse. You can affect real change there. We can go back to Nijima’s Palace and bring an end to her oppressive rule
forever!"

“Yeah. OR we could get killed in the process.”

“That isn’t stopping Ann.”

Akira stared into Arsene’s eyes for a moment. Whatever was happening with Ryuji and the first year was completely out of his mind. He had left Ann behind. With Akechi, sure, but those two were putting themselves in danger. And he’d abandoned them for his own self-preservation. The entire reason he’d awoken to Arsene in the first place was to not abandon a friend in need, and now he was doing just that. Yeah, if he went into Makoto’s Palace, there was a chance he might die. But if he didn’t, there was a greater chance Ann might die. And he wasn’t going to let that happen.

Akira turned around and started running back to the alley by the school.

“Finally come to your senses?” Arsene asked.

“Nope” Akira said. “Pretty sure I’ve gone completely goddamn insane.”

Arsene cackled at that. Akira knew Arsene was part of himself, but that didn’t make his laughter not unsettling.

“Well, so long as the end result’s the same.”
Deathmatch

Chapter Summary

Akira mounts a rescue mission. Shiho realizes that she isn't dreaming.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

That strange outfit reappeared on Akira’s body as he entered the Metaverse.

“What is up with these clothes?” Akira asked out loud.

“Not unlike myself,” Arsene said inside Akira’s head, “this raiment is a manifestation of who you truly are.”

“So what, I’m some kind of knife-toting serial killer?” Akira looked at the red gloves on his hands. “These things look like they were designed so nobody will notice if you get blood on them.”

“Nothing so crass. If anything, we are a dashing rogue.”

“Let’s dash, then.”

Akira ran out of the alley, headed for the city’s front gate. He stopped in the middle of the street, remembering how a cop appeared on him and Ann the second they set foot into the city last time. He looked around for any kind of alternative entrance into the city, soon spotting a hole in the street with a manhole cover sticking out of the ground.

“Real subtle, guys.”

Akira coolly strode over to the hole, crouching down and looking into it. He could see water directly running beneath it, but concrete walkways a little to the side. He took off his mask.

“Help me out here.”

Arsene appeared and wordlessly flapped his wings, floating over the sewer hole. Akira jumped up and grabbed onto his ankles, and the wily devil slowly lowered his long legs into the hole. Suspended above the water, Akira started swinging his weight back and forth. Arsene accommodated, moving his legs side to side, but his range of motion was restricted trying to keep his waist-high wings from being dragged into the ground. After a few swings, Akira let go, falling diagonally to the walkway. He somersaulted as he hit the ground, just barely stopping himself from crashing into the sewer wall, but at least he was on a dry floor.

Arsene twirled in the air, his wings wrapping around him. He made a quick corkscrew motion through the sewer hole and spread his wings again, floating down to hover right over Akira. He gave his flesh and blood other half one pointy thumb up.

“You have a natural affinity for this work” Arsene said, his voice audible to Akira’s ears this time.

“It’s all your bad influence” Akira said cockily.
“Oh, but aren’t those the best kind?”

“Debatable.” Akira put his hands in his coat pockets. “By the way, we should probably take care of that thing.”

“Of course.”

Arsene and Akira were speaking to each other out loud, but they still had their mental connection. Everything Akira could see, Arsene could see, and vice versa. So when Arsene’s unchanging face spotted a tiny figure spying on them in a hole in the wall above Akira, Akira instantly became aware of it. Arsene lashed out with his clawed hand, grabbing the diminutive spy. Squirming in Arsene’s hand was a captured rat with dark blue fur. Like the Sakamoto dog, this one had a human face, with short dark blue hair on top of it, but also rat-like buck teeth. Akira was pretty sure he’d seen this person somewhere before, but didn’t know where.

“Let me go!” the rat screamed. His voice was unnaturally high pitched, but Akira had the feeling that whoever his real world equivalent was, he had a naturally whiny voice. Arsene kept the rat in his talon-like clutch and held it in front of Akira’s face.

“So you can talk” Akira said.

“Of course I can!” The rat squirmed in Arsene’s hand. “Now let me go! Please! I promise I won’t report you like those other two!”

“‘Other two’?”

“Y-yeah! There were a couple suspicious people lurking around down here, so I reported them to the Queen and they were arrested!” The rat gave Akira a nervous smile. “But if you let me go, I promise to keep quiet!”

“I don’t think so.” Akira pulled out his gun and held it to the rat’s face. “You’re going to talk. NOW.”

“No! Please!” The rat started blubbering.

“That is hardly an efficient interrogation technique” Arsene said.

“What are you talking about?” Akira looked up at Arsene’s face.

“If you’re going to make a threat, you’d best be prepared to follow through on it. And if you do that with a gun, then you lose your source of information.”

“So…” Akira put away his gun and pulled out his knife, the tip of it right in front of one of the rat’s eyes. “Like this?”

“Ah yes, far better. An injured or disfigured victim can still speak.”

The rat squealed in terror at Arsene’s comment.

“You heard the man” Akira said. He glared at the rat. “Tell me where the other intruders are.”

“They’re being kept in the dungeon of the Queen’s tower! B-but they won’t be there for long!”

“What does that mean!?” Akira pressed the blade of his knife against one of the rat’s human ears. Not enough to break the skin, but enough for the rat to feel the razor’s edge. “Is she going to execute them!?”
“Y-Yes! In public! At the stadium!”

Akira held open his hand and Arsene let go of the rat. Akira grabbed the pitiful creature out of the air, his fingers wrapping around its tail. Arsene vanished and Akira’s mask reappeared on his face. He held the upside-down dangling rodent in front of his face.

“You’re going to show me to this stadium. Got it?”

“Got it! You’re the b-boss!”

The rat guided Akira through the sewer tunnels, telling him which turns to make. Every once in a while Akira would press the knife against the rat to make sure he wasn’t lying. Honestly, Akira had no real way of intuiting if the disgusting little creature was being truthful or not, but it helped him regain a feeling of control. He couldn’t help but wonder if this was his fault. According to the rat, once he reported intruders in the sewers, Queen Nijima had ordered for the tunnels to be flooded and had massive squadrons of police surrounding nearby manholes. Akira couldn’t help but feel like if he hadn’t abandoned Ann and Akechi, this wouldn’t have happened. Maybe he and Arsene would’ve noticed the rat and caught it before it could report them all. Or maybe he could’ve helped them fight back against the surrounding police. Of course, it’s also possible that none of that would’ve happened and Akira would’ve been on the chopping block as well. Still, there was no point to kicking himself now. He was going to save his friends. Well, his friend and Akechi. After about fifteen minutes, Akira began to hear other voices.

“We’re almost there” the rat said.

Akira peeked around the corner and saw two police standing guard by a hole in the wall, talking to each other.

“I can’t believe we’re missin’ the volleyball game for this” the first cop said.

“Nothing can be done about it” its partner replied. “Queen’s orders.”

“I know, I know.” The first cop sighed. “But it’s really the halftime show I wanna see. Suzui-Chan’s gonna crush those prisoners.”

“Cheer up. If we catch that third intruder, we’ll get VIP seats for sure!”

“If the third intruder even shows up.” The first cop shook his head. “There’s been no reports from the gate or the rat. He mighta just turned tail and left his buddies to die.”

Akira’s grip on the rat’s tail tightened. He didn’t want to hear any more of this. The rat whispered angrily.

“Hey! I held up my end of the deal! Now let me go like you promised!”

“Gladly.”

Akira rounded the corner and lobbed the rat at the closer cop. He screamed as the rat caught onto his face and stumbled around, falling into the water below, getting carried away by the current.

“There you are!” The remaining cop yelled. “Oh, I’m gonna get a big promotion when I bring ya in to the Queen!”

“Don’t even bother.” Akira ripped off his mask, summoning Arsene again. “You’re outnumbered!”
“That’s a neat trick, sonny.” The cop grabbed its own mask. “Let me show you mine.”

The cop ripped off its mask and tossed it aside. It exploded into a bunch of shadows, and reformed into something completely inhuman. It took the form of a large black horse with glowing red eyes, a white mane, and two green ram-like horns sticking out of the top of its head.

The beast charged at Akira. There wasn’t a lot of room to move on the narrow walkways of the sewers, so he rushed at it and jumped right before making contact. He did a flip in the air, the corner of one of the creature’s horns tearing at his pant leg, but Akira himself came out unharmed. Akira raised his hand, a shadowy aura surrounding it, ready to blast the thing with Arsene’s Eiha, but the dirty two-horned beast was already turned around and making another run at Akira.

Thinking quickly, Akira stuck his knife into the ground and grabbed on tight, jumping off the edge of the walkway, Arsene vanishing in the process. His feet found purchase against the concrete wall of the sewer’s canal, while the very ends of his coattails dipped into the water itself. With Akira out of its path, the beast once again missed. Using all his strength, Akira pulled himself back up to the walkway, slashing at the monster’s hindquarters with his knife as he climbed up.

“YEOWCH!” The monster turned around as Akira jumped back, its nostrils flaring. “Yer gonna pay for that!”

The monster charged again, but with the damage to its hind leg, it had a slight limp. In that moment, Akira saw an opening. He ran forward, his body low, and slashed at the horse-thing’s chest. It reared back on its’ hind legs, and Akira slashed it two more times. Then he flipped back and pulled out his gun, shooting the thing right between the eyes. The creature went down, but to Akira’s surprise, it wasn’t dead quite yet. But it was breathing heavily, so Akira slowly approached it, his gun trained on the monster’s head.

“Now wait just a second, sonny!” The monster looked up at Akira with fear on its face. “Whaddya think yer doin’!?”

“Ending this” Akira said.

“Wait, damn it!” The monster laughed. “Yer pretty tough for such a skinny punk. How’d ya get so good in a fight?”

“I don’t have time for this.” Akira began to squeeze the trigger, but stopped when the thing in front of him laughed again.

“Straight to the point, huh? You kinda remind me of me in my youth!”

“You had a youth?” Akira took his finger off the trigger.

“Yeah! Or, well, a past of some kind…” The monster jumped to its feet and gasped. “Hold on… I remember now! I ain’t no Shadow from this place! I used to be livin’ in that there sea of the human soul!”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m comin’ with ya, boy!” The monster began to glow. “From now on, call me Bicorn. No need fer honorifics, sonny.”

Before Akira could respond, the Bicorn broke down into light and reformed into the shape of a mask identical to the one Akira was wearing. The mask flew into Akira’s face, and he felt a change within him. Like something bestial had just become one with his very soul.
“Arsene…” Akira placed his hand on his chest. “What the hell just happened!?"

“It seems I have acquired a roommate” Arsene replied. “You can now call the Bicorn to aid you like you can myself.”

“Does that mean I can talk to him too?”

“I don’t see why you would wish to. He doesn’t have anything interesting to say.” Arsene sighed. “If you were looking for inside information about the Queen’s operations, I’m afraid all memories of his time as her minion vanished the moment he recalled his true identity.”

“Alright then.” Akira looked to the hole in the wall the Shadows had been guarding. “Guess it’s back to the rescue mission.”

Akira climbed into the hole. It was pretty big, but he still had to crouch. It was also dark. Eventually he got to a point where he wasn’t walking on concrete, but in a large metal tube. It seemed he’d upgraded from being in a sewer system to being in some kind of plumbing system. After a minute, he saw a light shining down from above in the distance. He slowly made his way towards it, finding a grate in the ceiling. He stood under it and looked up, waiting for a moment. He couldn’t hear or see anybody above him, so he decided this would be a good entry point.

Akira took off his mask, summoning Bicorn. He used the beast as a stepping stool, standing on its back so he could reach the grate above him. He grabbed it with his fingers and pushed up, removing it from its setting and pushing it to the side. He climbed up through the open hole and his mask reappeared, his living height booster returning to inside of him.

Akira wound up inside a gym’s shower room. He very slowly moved across the tile floor, still not hearing any signs of other people nearby. He saw the exit to the showers and moved against the wall, peeking around the doorway. The locker room seemed to be empty as well. Akira eased up a bit and casually strolled through the locker room, looking around. He spotted two doors opposite each other, seemingly the only ways out of the room. He walked to the closest one and opened it a crack, peering outside. From what he could see, there was a hallway with a few police patrolling it. He decided to try his luck with the other door instead.

Akira opened the other door and was greeted with the sound of a cheering crowd. It looked like a tunnel leading directly into what Akira imagined was the main arena of the stadium. Silhouetted at the end of the tunnel, not actually in the stadium, was the figure of a teenage girl, probably about Akira’s age. Her most distinguishing feature was a familiar-looking ponytail. She seemed to be looking away from Akira.

“Is that… Shiho-San?” Akira asked.

“It is likely an imitation, just like Sakamoto and whoever that rat was meant to represent” Arsene answered.

“Right, right.” Akira’s eyes widened. “Wait… didn’t Bicorn mention something about Shiho crushing prisoners before?”

“Yes, I believe he did.”

Akira pulled out his knife and began to slowly creep towards the girl in the distance.

Shiho watched stunned as the more muscular version of her dominated the volleyball court. This game had been a total slaughter so far, and it wasn’t even halfway over yet. It seemed that the team that represented the Shujin Girls basically had one strategy: Set up the ball for Shiho Suzui. Then
that amazonian copycat would spike it into the ground with inhuman force, sending any opponent standing near the spot where it was landing flying. The odd fool who tried to dive and block the ball from hitting the ground would get his hands crushed, and then the ball would roll over to the ground anyway. It was insane. The first set of the match had been won handily 25-0, and with this set at 23-0, it looked like it was going to be an easy repeat.

Still, Shiho had something on her mind beyond the insane game taking place before her. Everything about this place felt real. The air on her skin, the wall she was leaning against to keep from falling, and that fall earlier. Maybe that’s just what lucid dreams were like? Shiho wanted to believe that. She had to believe that. Because the alternative…

These thoughts were interrupted by pain in Shiho’s scalp when her ponytail was suddenly yanked back. She screamed, but it’s not like anybody could hear her over the noise of the stadium. The next thing she knew, she had a cold, thin piece of metal against her throat.

“Where is Ann!?”

There was something familiar about the voice behind her, but Shiho couldn’t quite place it. She was kind of distracted by the imminent threat to her life.

“Ann!? What are you talking about!?”

“DON’T LIE TO ME! WHERE ARE YOU KEEPING HER!?”

Shiho was turned around and pushed against the wall, confronted with a familiar face in unfamiliar garb: Akira Kurusu, dressed up like a video game character or something.

“Akira-Kun!? What are you doing!? And what are you wearing!?"

“Tell me where you’re keeping the prisoners or so help me I’ll-“

Akira was cut off when the ground shook again.

“AND SUZUI SCORES AGAIN!” The announcer yelled over the speakers. “ONE MORE POINT AND THAT’S THE SET!”

“What the…” Akira looked out to the court to see Big Shiho playing volleyball. All the anger left his face as he looked back to the Shiho he had pinned against the wall. “Shiho-San? Are you the REAL Shiho-San!?"

“Of course I am!”

“Oh no. Oh, this is bad…” Akira let go of Shiho and backed off, putting his knife away. “What are you doing here!?"

“Watching myself play volleyball” Shiho said. “I thought this was a dream, but… This is real, isn’t it?"

“I really wish it wasn’t, but it is” Akira said.

“Akira-Kun, what’s going on here? What is this place? Why are you dressed up and carrying weapons? And why were you and Ann with Goro Akechi?”

“Ok, um…” Akira started pacing around in a circle, mumbling to himself. He stopped after a moment and looked Shiho in the eyes. “Short version: This is an alternate world created from the
evil part of Makoto Nijima’s brain. Magic and superpowers are real here, and Nijima-Senpai is an all-powerful evil queen. If we can beat her in a fight, she’ll stop being evil and controlling the school. But also there’s a good chance we might die trying to beat her, and now Ann and Akechi have been captured by her army and are going to be publicly executed soon and it might be my fault because I was being a coward earlier and left them behind so now it’s up to me to save them but also WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING HERE!?”

“I thought you and Ann were acting suspicious, so I followed you two! Then I saw you talking to Akechi and there was this weird sound that made my head hurt and there was this glowing city so I thought it was a dream!” Shiho put her hands on her head and started shaking it. “But now you’re saying it’s not a dream and did you say that Ann’s going to be EXECUTED!?”

“Yes. Here in this stadium. I don’t know how or when it’s gonna happen, but I’ve got to be ready to spring into action.”

“Ok, this is a lot to take in…” Shiho took a deep breath. She exhaled through her mouth and looked at Akira with calm determination. “What should I do?”

“Hide! Run! Get out of here! This place is dangerous!”

“But I have to help Ann!”

“Do you have a magic monster living inside of you that you can call into battle?”

“Uh… Not that I know of?”

“Then leave this to the- Well, not professionals…” Akira turned towards the court. “Just let me handle this.”

The ground shook again, Big Shiho once again spiking the ball onto the other side of the court, sending the whole enemy team flying.

“And that’s 25!” the announcer yelled. “This concludes the second set!”

The ground started to shake again, but this time there was no impact. Akira and Shiho looked out to the court to see the ground opening up, the two halves of the court moving away from each other like sliding doors on the ground.

“And now, ladies and gentlemen, we have a very special halftime show!”

“Shit!” Akira pulled out his gun and looked at Shiho. “That’s probably Ann and Akechi. Shiho-San, you need to get out of here.”

“What are you going to do?” Shiho asked.

“Go out there, save them, and try not to get killed.”

“Akira-Kun, let me-“

“No!” Akira pointed down the tunnel. “You need to go. There’s an open grate in the locker room’s shower that will lead you into the sewers of this city. From there, you can get back to the street.” Akira unlocked his phone, handed it to Shiho, and pointed to the MetaNav app’s icon. “Once you’re there, go back to the alley and activate this app. It will take you back to the real world.”
“What about you!? How will you get back!?”

“If I save Ann and Akechi, I’ll be able to come back with them, and you can give me my phone back at school tomorrow. And if not…” Akira’s legs were shaking and he turned his back to Shiho, facing the court just outside the tunnel. “Don’t worry about me. Just go.”

The hole in the ground where the volleyball court had been was replaced with a stage rising out of the ground. There were two large X-shaped frames, and tied to them by each individual limb were Ann and Akechi, their bodies spread out. They were squirming against the ropes holding them, but it was no use. A platform lowered from the blimp floating above the stadium, and standing on it was Shadow Makoto, looking out at the ground with her usual smirk. All of the cheering stopped and everybody in the stands stood up from their seats and bowed to her.

“Hello, my loyal subjects!” Makoto held no microphone, and yet her voice resonated through the whole stadium. “I hope you have been enjoying the game so far!”

“YES, MY QUEEN!” a thousand voices cried in unison.

“I am glad to hear it. To commemorate this fine display of Shujin’s superiority, I have arranged a special halftime celebration for you all!” Makoto looked down at the bound Ann and Akechi.

“These two troublemakers were found sneaking around in the sewers, plotting against me. They were, of course, no match for my information network, and were quickly apprehended.” Makoto looked around the crowd. “Now, can anybody tell me what the penalty for conspiring against the Queen is?”

“DEATH!”

“That’s correct!” Makoto held out her hand and a large sack fell from the blimp above, which she caught. “And since these two don’t seem to appreciate just what a marvelous place Shujin is…” Makoto looked at Big Shiho. “I thought it would only be fitting that one of Shujin’s model citizens should execute their punishment.” Makoto tossed the sack to her world’s Shiho. “Suzui-Chan, if you would?”

“Yes, My Queen.” Big Shiho opened the sack and pulled out a volleyball. She focused on Ann, her face showing the tiniest hint of sadness. Then it was replaced with the same determined look she’d displayed during the volleyball game so far, and she tossed the ball high up into the air. She gave an inhuman jump, rising at least thirty feet, reaching upwards. And then she brought her hand down towards the volleyball.

BANG.

Right before Big Shiho hit the ball, it popped.

“What on-“ Makoto turned to the source of the loud noise. She saw Akira coming out of the tunnel, his mask off, riding on Bicorn, his gun pointed at Big Shiho. “Ah, Kurusu-Kun! I was worried you weren’t going to make it!” Makoto pointed to Akira. “Suzui-Chan, I want that one alive. But feel free to break him a little.”

Big Shiho nodded and pulled another volleyball out of the sack, taking aim at Akira. She threw it up and jumped into the air.

“You know what to do?” Akira asked.

“Of course I do, sonny!” Bicorn answered. “This ain’t my first rodeo!”
Big Shiho hit the volleyball. Bicorn jumped up and to the side as it came at him, avoiding both the ball and the shockwave it created in the ground. He kept charging forward, and Akira fired a couple rounds, but they just seemed to bounce off the cognition’s skin.

“How is she immune to bullets!?” Akira yelled.

“Different beings have different strengths and weaknesses in this world” Arsene answered inside Akira’s head. “I am a being of darkness, and so suffer less damage when it is turned against me. I imagine this false Shiho, whose entire province is a sport where she deflects a flying object, has an invulnerability to such things.”

“Then we’re just going to have to get in close” Akira said. “Go, Bicorn!”

“Whaddya think I’m doin’, whippersnapper!?” the horned stallion replied.

Big Shiho launched more volleyballs in rapid succession, the bag she was given seemingly holding an unlimited supply. It took a lot of fancy footwork, but in that big open field between the edge of the volleyball court and the entrance to the locker rooms, Bicorn had a lot of room to move. Soon enough, he and Akira were within ramming distance.

“LUNGE!” Akira shouted.

Bicorn charged into Big Shiho with his horns. She got knocked back a bit, but didn’t fall. It was like ramming into a brick wall, and Akira actually felt a little sore from the recoil. Akira dismounted the beast and it vanished back into him. He pulled out his knife and faced the buff cognitive version of his friend before him.

Up close, this Shiho was very intimidating. She was easily a full meter taller than Akira and looked like she could snap him like a twig. Even with the enhanced strength he was experiencing in this world ever since he unlocked Arsene, Akira was pretty sure her raw physical power easily outclassed his. He was going to have to rely on his speed and reflexes to-

Akira was hit in the face with a palm the size of his head. Big Shiho spiked him like a volleyball and he shot down into the ground so hard that he actually bounced a little when he made contact with the grass below him. He slowly got up and saw that she was on him again, and he managed to roll out the way, just barely avoiding another strike from her massive hand. This Shiho wasn’t some lumbering brute, she was an athlete unlike any other, an Übermensch in peak physical condition who had incredible strength, speed, and reflexes.

Planning wasn’t going to be much use here. There was simply no time. Akira started moving purely on instinct, dodging constant swipes, punches, kicks, and even headbutts from the monster girl before him. Every now and then he saw an opportunity to strike out with his knife. It seemed to hurt her, but not much. If Akira wanted to win this battle, he was going to have to give her a death of a thousand cuts.

Overall, Akira got in about seven. And then he wasn’t quite fast enough, and his opponent landed a brutal uppercut that made his vision go blurry. Akira wasn’t sure how high he flew up in the air, but he came crashing down on the stage where Ann and Akechi were being propped up.

“Hey guys…” Akira was lying on his back, hurting all over. His sight started to return to normal.

“Akira!” Ann seemed unconcerned with her own state of being. “Are you ok!?”

“Oh, you know.” Akira tried to sit up. It was not happening. “It only hurts when I exist.”
“Akira-Kun!” Akechi was ecstatic. “I knew you couldn’t stay away!”

“Of course not.” Akira once again tried sitting up. This time there was some success. Slow, painful success. “I was the one who left you guys behind. You wouldn’t be captured if it weren’t for me.”

“We were caught in a huge flood!” Ann said. “There’s nothing you could’ve done!”

“I caught the guy who reported you two earlier” Akira said. “If I’d been there, maybe I could’ve stopped the flood from happening.”

“Oh. Well…” Ann shook her head. “That doesn’t matter right now! Get us down!”

“Yeah…” Akira slowly rose to his feet, knife at the ready. He reached out towards the ropes constraining Ann’s left leg, ready to cut her loose. Then Akira felt something grab his own left leg, and he was dragged back off the edge of the stage.

Dangling upside-down, Akira found himself face-to-face with Big Shiho.

So, this was what the rat felt like.

He tried jabbing his knife into one of her eyes, but before the blade found its mark she swung his body down, slamming him back onto the raised stage in front of her. Akira groaned in pain as his leg was seized again, the musclewoman ready to bash him as much as needed until he was unable to move anymore.

“LET HIM GO!”

Big Shiho felt fists pounding against her back. It didn’t do any damage, but it was annoying. She let go of Akira’s leg and turned around, and the ineffective assault continued on her abs. She looked down to see another Shiho Suzui, this one smaller and weaker than her.

“Who is that?” Akechi asked.

“SHIHO!?” Ann started struggling against her bonds harder. “What are you doing here!?”

“Who are you?” The taller Shiho asked.

“I’m the one who should be asking that!” Shiho stomped her foot angrily. “Just what do you think you’re doing to my friends!?”

“My, but the surprises just keep coming, don’t they?” The blimp-suspended platform Makoto was standing on lowered, until she was very close to the ground, looking down on both Shihos. “You’re the Shiho-San of that other world, correct?”

“Niijima-Senpai, what’s going on here!?” Shiho pointed at the execution platform with one hand and the larger version of herself with the other. “Why are you ordering this gigantic copy of me to kill people!?”

“Just as impertinent as Takamaki-Chan…” Makoto clicked her tongue and shook her head sadly.

“Should I execute this intruder as well, My Queen?” Big Shiho asked.

“DON’T YOU HURT HER!” Ann yelled.

“Oh, don’t worry about that, Takamaki-Chan. Getting rid of Suzui-Chan would benefit nobody.” Makoto sat on the edge of the platform, her legs dangling down. “Shiho Suzui is the pride and joy
of Shujin Academy, after myself, of course. While our girls’ volleyball team would still perform very well without her, we would not have the top team in all of the city if we were to lose her. I shall see to it personally that she returns to her own world. For now, restrain her, but make sure to be gentle about it.”

Shiho tried to run, but her doppelgänger was on her in an instant. She was scooped up by Big Shiho’s left arm, finding herself pinned against her counterpart’s chest. Big Shiho casually held the real Shiho against her like a child would a stuffed animal, not registering the real girl’s weight at all. Shiho’s arms and legs were free, and she tried hitting and kicking, but none of it was any use. Especially without the leverage of a proper blow, her strikes had no effect on the she-goliath that had stolen her face. Big Shiho climbed onto the execution stage.

“I think it’s just about time to finish this halftime show” Makoto said. “Suzui-Chan, is Kurusu-Kun still breathing?”

Big Shiho stuck her foot under Akira’s stomach and lifted him like one might a shirt on the floor they were too lazy to pick up. She let him fall off of her foot, and he grunted as he hit the ground.

“Excellent. He won’t be much of a plaything if he’s dead.”

“’Plaything’?” Shiho looked at Akira, then up at Makoto. “What are you going to do to him!?”

“Oh, don’t worry. He’ll be getting off easy.” Makoto pointed at Ann and Akechi. “At least if you compare his fate to those two, that is. Let’s end this, Suzui-Chan.”

“Which one would you like me to destroy first, My Queen?” Big Shiho asked.


“Yes, My Queen.”

“Then let’s tear that band-aid off first, shall we?”

“No, don’t!” the real Shiho cried.

“Yes, My Queen.” Big Shiho slowly strolled over to Ann. Even raised up by the X-frame, Ann still had to look upwards to stare into the eyes of her executioner.

“Shiho, you don’t have to do this!” Ann said.

“But I do.” Big Shiho frowned. “My job is to bring glory to Shujin first and foremost. And if My Queen says getting rid of you will do that, then that’s what I’ll do.”

“You can’t kill Ann!” Shiho yelled, pounding on her the arm that was holding her again. “She’s our best friend!”

“Yes, she is” Big Shiho said sorrowfully. “Which is why I’ll try to make this quick.” She balled up her free fist and took aim at Ann’s throat.

“Oh, don’t do that” Makoto said, grinning as if she were the devil. “Make it slow. I want to enjoy this.”

“Oh. Yes, My Queen.” Big Shiho wrapped her fingers around Ann’s neck. A single tear streamed down her face. “I’m sorry Ann. I want you to know that this brings me no pleasure.”
Whatever response Ann had prepared, it turned into gagging as Big Shiho slowly began gripping the blonde’s throat. The real Shiho started screaming in incoherent rage, unwilling to be silent as she was forced to watch some monster version of herself murder her best friend right in front of her.

And then, her head started to hurt.

“It's far worse than you thought, isn’t it?”

Shiho didn’t respond to the husky voice in her head. She kept kicking and screaming, clawing at the arm slowly crushing her best friend’s windpipe.

“Whether President or Queen, she’s just another authority figure lording her power over everyone else above her. Just like the gym teacher was.”

Ann’s gagging stopped. She was still struggling, but it was weaker, and her eyes were starting to bug out.

“You were almost a victim too. You thought you had a savior then. But look at your savior now. The only true safety is that you secure for yourself! But you know this, don’t you?”

Shiho kept screaming, but she nodded.

“Then this is our contract: I give you power, and you will take back what she’s claimed for herself. I am thou, thou art I. Agreed?”

Shiho ceased her flailing and screaming. She glared at the hand around Ann’s neck, Ann’s face turning blue.

“Yes…”

Big Shiho let go of both Ann’s neck and the smaller self she was holding captive as blue flames appeared over the real Shiho’s face, burning her arm slightly. Ann immediately inhaled and starting coughing violently. Big Shiho jumped back and rubbed the burnt part of her arm.

Shiho stood up, a mask appearing over the top half of her face. It was red, with golden patterns that resembled wings sticking out from around and underneath the eyes, moving past the border of her head a little. The rest of the mask moved past her forehead, forming in two triangular peaks over where her eyes were.

“No! Not again!” Makoto pointed to Shiho. “KILL SUZUI!”

“What!” Big Shiho looked up at Makoto in confusion. “But I thought you wanted-“

“The others can wait! Kill her first! Before she-“

“It’s time to stage a great escape…” Shiho tore the mask off her face. And for the third time in two days, a pillar of blue fire erupted in Shujin City.

“COME ON OUT, SONYA!”

Chapter End Notes
Huh. No scene breaks this chapter.

Neat.

Next chapter won't be up until at least Sunday. Probably Monday.

Edit: After consulting with a friend I changed the design of Shiho's mask to something less ostentatious. She rightfully pointed out that it's too complex compared to the other characters' masks.
And Then There Were Four

Chapter Summary

Shiho awakens.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The glare from the blue pillar of flame disappearing, Big Shiho was ready to charge forward. Still, her eyes were readjusting to regular light of the stadium, and so she wasn’t quite prepared to block the large spiked ball that smashed into her face, knocking her on her back.

The spiked ball was one of two, each on the end of a long chain. This distinctly non-Chinese variant of the meteor hammer was being held by two pink gloves. Each glove was poking out of tufts of brown fur, which were attached to the wrists of a light brown trench coat, also sporting brown fur around the collar. The tails of the coat dangled over dark brown leggings, which went all the way into white thigh-high boots with pink laces. And wearing all of it was one very angry Shiho Suzui.

More incredible than Shiho’s new outfit was the towering figure standing behind her. Or rather, the towering lack of a figure. With a white overcoat with pink trimmings and red accents and a jeweled corset made out of gold, it certainly seemed to resemble a woman. But instead of legs, there was a massive cloud of billowing black shadow coming out from the bottom of the overcoat, as well as a spire of it where a head would be. The only human features plainly visible were two pink eyes peeking out from behind a white mask with gold wings sticking out from it and a miniature red mask seated right between the eyes. The “woman” had a massive golden gauntlet on her right arm also covered in jewels, and a golden monkey on her left shoulder covered in more jewels and pearls.

Ready to fight back seriously, Big Shiho turned to the bag of volleyballs she’d been given for execution purposes and set one up into the air, once again making a Herculean jump to reach it. The real Shiho was not going to wait for her monstrous counterpart to attack. Wind from nowhere whipping her ponytail back, she pointed at the beastwoman rising in the sky.

“GARU!”

The thing called “Sonya” raised her jeweled golden hand and pointed at the cognitive imposter with one long-nailed finger. A fierce gust of wind erupted from her hand, slamming into Big Shiho before she could even hit the ball, sending her flying into the stands.

“Guards!” Makoto yelled. “Subdue her!”

Makoto’s focus was on Shiho as police started to move into the stadium. While everyone was distracted, Akira slowly and painfully rose to his feet and picked up his knife again. He cut the ropes around Ann’s feet, then struggled to stay standing as he cut her hands free. Akira collapsed as Ann landed on the stage. She dropped to her knees over his battered body and tore off her mask. Ann lay her hands on Akira’s back and they started to glow green.
Energy flowed from Carmen, honing in on Ann’s hands like a lightning rod. It flowed into Akira’s body and suddenly all of his pain vanished. Ann helped Akira to his feet as Carmen disappeared. Full of renewed vigor, he cut Akechi loose. Upon freedom from his suspended state, the first thing Akechi did when he hit the ground was spring up and give Akira a very sudden and very unwelcome hug.

“I knew Igor didn’t choose wrong!” Akechi’s hug lingered. “All you needed was some time to come around!”

“Now is REALLY not the time for this!” Akira managed to wrench his arms free and push Akechi off of him. “We have to get the hell out of here!” Akira turned to Ann. “Let’s grab Shiho and get back to the real world!”

“I think that’s gonna be easier said that done!” Ann pointed at Shiho as five shadows surrounded her. They all wrenched off their masks, four of them turning into little winged devils, the leader turning into a large armored angel with red wings and a sword.

Shiho looked around nervously at the enemies. She had a feeling that tall angel thing was going to be especially hard to beat. She jumped up when she felt a hand on her shoulder, then found a boost of confidence when she saw Ann standing next to her, winking. Akira and Akechi appeared besides Ann, Akechi ripping off his mask.

“KOUGA!”

Robin Hood fired an arrow of light at one of the little imps, disintegrating it. The other three imps started swarming around, clawing at the teens and firing little balls of shadow at them. The four scattered, dodging their attacks. As they broke up, the imps seemed to focus on the girls, with the large angel turning his attention to Akira and Akechi. The two jumped out of the way as it swung its large sword at them.

“Think you got another one of those giant light arrows in you?” Akira asked.

“I do,” Akechi said, pulling out his laser pistol and firing repeatedly at the foe before them, “but it won’t do any good against this kind of enemy. Archangels are immune to bless attacks!”

“So what is it WEAK to?” Akira pulled out his gun and emptied its clip at the Archangel. The effect seemed negligible.

“Curse magic.” Akechi stood calmly as the Archangel’s sword glowed and a circular wall of glowing cards appeared around him, forming a vertical tunnel. The wall tried closing in on him, but he slashed through the side of it with his beam sword, exiting casually. “I used to have access to many of those sorts of skills, but no longer.”

“I think I can do that.” Akira tore off his mask and Arsene appeared.

“And here I was beginning to think I’d been replaced with a horse” Arsene said. Akira rolled his eyes and pointed to the Archangel.

“EIHA!”

Arsene laughed wickedly and snapped his fingers, a black, fire-like shadow sparking and growing in his hand. He lobbed it at the heavenly entity’s face and the Archangel screamed in pain as it made contact, losing hold of its sword and dropping to the ground in a kneeling position.
On the other side of the battle, Ann was firing her machine gun rapidly as the little imps swarmed around her and Shiho. She managed to knick two of them, causing them to plummet to the ground, but the third remained aloft and she was out of bullets.

The little devil dived for Ann’s face, reaching out with gleeful malice on its face. As it did, Shiho’s hand brushed over something hard in her pocket and she pulled it out thanks to pure instinct. It looked like a tube of lipstick, and for a moment Shiho forgot herself and inspected it, wondering where it came from. When she twisted the base, it fired out a bullet, hitting the demon diving for Ann in the side, dropping him to the ground.

Shiho marveled at the lipstick tube for a moment before looking at the scene before her. There were four enemies on the ground, still all alive, but momentarily incapacitated, and the four teenagers had them surrounded. It was at that moment she had an idea.

“Let’s get them while they’re down!”

Nobody needed to be told twice. Shiho started flailing her meteor hammers around wildly, catching one of the downed imps on each and taking them for a ride. Ann wrapped her whip around the third imp’s foot and flung it into the air, where Akira jumped up to intercept it, plunging his knife through its chest and descending in midair with the knife’s edge sticking out the creature’s back. Akechi took the opportunity to walk up to the Archangel and stick his sword into the base of its spine, slowly carving his way up the creature’s back. Right before he reached the skull, Akira came down from the air, the little bit of knife he had left exposed sinking into the back of the holy monster’s head. At the same time, the balls carrying the imps Shiho was in control of smashed into the armored enemy’s sides.

The enemies all exploded into black mush, disappearing into the air. Shiho held up the lipstick gun in front of her, barrel still smoking, and blew on it. She looked over to Ann coolly.

“This is much better than a dream.”

“Glad you’re having fun” Akira said. He pointed up at the blimp-hanging platform, where Makoto’s shadow was scowling at them. “Now we should go.”

“We can’t!” Ann said. “We have to fight her!”

“Not like this” Akechi said. “Akira-Kun’s right. It’s time for us to take our leave!”

More police flooded into the stadium, seemingly a whole army’s worth. Akira dashed back to the tunnel to the locker room, waving for the others to follow.

“Come on! I know the way out of here!”

The masked quartet made their way through the tunnel and into the locker room. They reached the showers, where the grate leading back into the sewer was still open. He hopped into it.

“We can get out of the city through the sewers!”

“Won’t we get lost down there?” Ann was the second to jump down.

“Don’t worry,” Akira said, “I memorized the way I came.”

“Truly?” Akechi hopped through the hole in the showers, laughing. “You must have quite the eye for detail! You’d make a fine detective, Akira-Kun!”
“We can talk about your weird obsession with me later! We’ve got to move!” Akira looked up at Shiho. “Come on, Shiho-San! They’ll be on us any moment!”

Shiho stood at the edge of the hole, letting out a slight whine. She really didn’t want to go into a dirty sewer, but considering they had an army of murderous police on their heels, she didn’t have much of a choice.

To Shiho’s amazement, the sewer had been as clean as the rest of the city. Akira led the group through the sewers, and then Akechi had used his Persona to lift them all out of the tunnels, back onto the street outside. They ran into an alley and returned to the real world, where it seemed only an hour or two had passed, and Shiho’s knees gave out from exhaustion.

“I’m so tired…” Ann and Akira had caught Shiho before she could collapse, and were now lowering her gently to sit on the ground. “I haven’t been this tired since Kamoshida’s practice sessions from Hell.”

“Yeah, it was like that for us too” Ann said. “I’ll go get us some drinks from the vending machine across the street.” Ann turned to Akira and Akechi. “What do you guys want?”

“Well, if you’re offering, I would greatly appreciate a Dr. Salt NEO” Akechi said with a nervous smile.

“Got it. Akira?”

“I’m good” Akira said.

“Come on! You just saved our lives! At least let me treat you to a soda or something.”

“I only saved your lives because I was the one who endangered them in-“

“Whatever! You’re getting water and you’ll like it!” Ann ran out of the alley.

“Wait!” Akira yelled. “You forgot to ask Shiho-San what she wants!”

“It’s fine, Akira.” Shiho smiled at the messy-haired boy. “Ann knows what I like.”

“So I’m just ‘Akira’ now? Not ‘Akira-Kun’?”

“I think after everything we’ve just been through we’re a bit past honorifics, don’t you?”

“An excellent point! We are all a team now, so we should all be friendlier with each other!” Akechi stepped forward and bowed to Shiho. “Allow me to introduce myself, my name is-“

“Goro Akechi, the famous teen detective.” Shiho lowered her head slightly. “My name is Shiho Suzui. Forgive me for not getting up.”

“Of course. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Shiho.”

“The feeling’s mutual. I’m a big fan of your work.”

“You are? Well, that’s always nice to hear!”

“It’s drink time!” Ann ran back into the alley. She handed bottles to Akira and Akechi. “One water, one Dr. Salt…” Ann crouched down and handed Shiho a bottle. “And one Second Maid.” Ann also had a Second Maid, which she cracked open and began drinking.
“Thanks, Ann.” Akira looked down at Shiho. “So, you’ve got a lot of questions, I’m guessing.”

“Well, you told me a fair amount after you decided not to cut my throat, but-“

“Decided not to WHAT!?” Ann screamed right in Akira’s ear.

“I thought she was the fake Shiho that was going to kill you!” Akira said.

“She doesn’t look anything like that muscle monster!”

“I didn’t know that at the time!”

“Perhaps we should continue this conversation somewhere less open” Akechi said. “It would be very unfortunate if any passerby overheard and decided to spy on us.”

“Alright,” Akira said, “where should we go?”

“It’s not rare for students to study together in the diner on Central Street” Shiho said. “Nobody would pay attention to us there.”

“I’m afraid that’s simply inaccurate.” Akechi shook his head. “The fact is, my fame would cause us all to be noticed just about anywhere. We need to find somewhere out of the way that nobody ever visits to function as our secret headquarters.”

Ignoring the “secret headquarters” remark, the first thing that came to Akira’s mind was LeBlanc. A tiny cafe in some back alley would be the perfect meeting place for whatever this group of theirs was. He had no doubt It’d be a good place for a bunch of teenagers to meet after school, especially considering they had the excuse of Akira living there. Unfortunately, while Sojiro was maybe a bit less prickly than Akira had initially thought, he was pretty sure the caffeine-slinging grump would blow a gasket if Akira just brought three friends back with him.

“We could go to my house” Ann said.

“What about your parents?” Akira asked.

“They’re out of the country” Ann said. She seemed a little mopey. “They travel a lot, so I usually just have the whole place to myself, except for a maid that comes in every Sunday.” Ann perked up. “Anyway, nobody will bother us there! We’ll be free to talk about whatever we want. Plus, there’s cake!”

Akira felt a little weird about going over to a girl’s house. Yeah, he and Ann were friends, and it’s not like they were even alone or anything, so it shouldn’t be that weird. Logically, there was no reason to get all flustered about it. But maybe Akira was letting it happen because he wanted to have a normal teenage concern. Just forget about the probation and the magic for a minute and get all freaked out over a totally mundane problem kids his age had. It didn’t last long, though. Because the Takamaki house was unlike anything Akira had ever seen.

Ann lived in Hiroo, and her family’s house was very big. Not a mansion or anything, but certainly bigger than any home Akira had ever seen before. It had two very spacious stories with high ceilings, and there were massive framed pictures hanging on the walls of models in dresses and fashion magazine covers. Everything looked very new, as if it had only been built in the past couple years, with marble countertops in the kitchen and all the furniture looking like fancy designer stuff with bold colors and weird, non-traditional, contemporary shapes.
Ann instructed everybody to sit on a big couch, which was really more like three couches put together forming a U shape. They were all gathered around a glass table with a few small decorative items that Akira wasn’t really sure were supposed to resemble anything in particular. Ann left to grab snacks, and Akira and Akechi just looked around the room in amazement. It seemed that, for the first time, the two of them were finally on the same wavelength. Whatever Akechi had experienced since signing up with Igor, he clearly wasn’t used to such stylish surroundings.

“It’s kind of overwhelming, huh?” Shiho leaned back on the couch, looking at Akira and Akechi with a mix of sympathy and amusement. “I looked just like you guys the first time I came here.”

“Yeah,” Akira said, “I had no idea Ann was loaded.”

“Nor did I” Akechi added. “It’s quite a surprise. I have seen Ann’s modeling in some magazines, but I never imagined she lived in such an environment.”

“You read fashion magazines?” Akira asked.

“I read a little bit of everything” Akechi said proudly. “It is important for an investigator to be well-rounded. You never know what details will come in handy.”

“Details, huh?” Come to think of it, ignoring how all of this was stuff Akira was totally unfamiliar with, there was something else that stood out about Ann’s home. Or rather, didn’t stand out. He turned to Shiho. “Where are all the family photos?”

“There’s never time to take any.” Shiho frowned. “Ann’s parents are fashion designers, so they travel a lot. They’re out of town more often than not.”

“That must be quite troubling for her” Akechi said.

“Not really. She’s gotten pretty used to it. And she misses them a lot, but it’s not like they don’t talk or anything.” Shiho crossed her arms. “Still, you guys shouldn’t bring it up around her.”

“Of course” Akira said. Akechi nodded in silent agreement.

“Who wants strawberry cake!?” Ann came back with a tray with four plates on it, each containing a fork and a large slab of cake with pink frosting. Ann handed each of her friends a plate, and Akira couldn’t help but notice that the one she kept for herself had a slightly bigger slice of cake on it. Given the lunch of flan she’d had earlier and lack of parental supervision, Akira was suddenly both curious and terrified to see what the inside of Ann’s fridge looked like.

“Thank you very much!” Akechi sunk his fork into the cake and shoveled a huge bite into his mouth. He gave a very undignified closed-mouth squeal the second it touched his tongue.

“Is it that good?” Akira tried some of the cake. He liked it, but not that much. Ann and Shiho’s reactions to their first bites were much more measured as well.

“Oh, well, that’s…” Akechi started blushing. “I don’t get to eat sweets very often, so they have a very powerful effect on me.”

“I love sweets too!” Ann exclaimed happily. Akira and Shiho rolled their eyes. “I bet if I had a Palace, it’d be a giant cake or something!”

“‘A Palace’?” Shiho put down her plate.
“Right.” Akira put down his plate. “We promised you answers.”

They group spent a few minutes giving Shiho all the details on Makoto’s Palace and their goal there. Akechi took the lead, with Akira often taking the liberty of highlighting unpleasant or particularly dangerous details Akechi tried to glaze over. Ann tried to highlight the unique things they’d seen so far, including the Ryuji Dog, and Shiho in turn told them about her own experience when the Shadows thought she was on their side. All in all, Shiho seemed to comprehend the situation pretty well. At the end, she did have one final question.

“So just how much will Niijima-Senpai change if you successfully change her heart?”

“She’ll become incredibly remorseful for all her actions” Akechi said. “All of her corrupted behaviors will come to an end.”

“From what I understand, she’ll basically become a completely different person” Akira said. “If we’re lucky she may even be so ashamed of herself that she leaves the school.”

“I hope it doesn’t come to that” Shiho said.

“Huh?” Ann asked through a mouthful of cake.

“Even taking her harsher actions into account, I genuinely believe Niijima-Senpai has been a positive influence on the school.”

“You can’t be serious” Akira said.

“I am. I would like for Niijima-Senpai to stop abusing her power, but I would hate for her to lose it.” Shiho looked at Ann. “You remember what things were like with Kamoshida.”

“Yeah, but this isn’t better!” Ann said.

“I’m not so sure about that.” Shiho shook her head. “There are things she’s done I disagree with, but the simple fact is, Shujin Academy would be a much worse place without Niijima-Senpai. You’re lucky you weren’t here a year ago...”

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It had been two straight weeks of training hell. Usually, as an athlete, Shiho appreciated getting equal treatment when compared to boys. She worked hard at what she did and was proud of her honed skills, and people coddling her or treating her like she was less or her feats didn’t matter as much because she wasn’t born male was the ultimate insult to her. But maybe just this once, she wouldn’t mind being treated with a lighter touch because she was of “the fairer sex”.

Mr. Kamoshida was just as ruthless in girls’ practice as he was with the boys. Every day was being pushed to go harder, faster, stronger, better, but all beyond the point of reason. It wasn’t enough to complete laps or be fast. If you couldn’t beat your previous time, you’d be forced to go again and again, either until you got a second wind and miraculously overcame all your fatigue to rise to the next level or, more likely, collapse from complete and total exhaustion. It was especially hard since Kamoshida often refused to let students rehydrate during practice. And when he decided it was time for target practice, it was guaranteed suffering. Counterintuitive as it seemed, most of Shiho’s training seemed to be about avoiding volleyballs, rather than hitting them back. And sometimes students were expressly forbidden to avoid dodging, to “build up a thicker skin”.

Coming away battered and bruised from volleyball practice had become an everyday occurrence, but it was still better than Kamoshida’s “private lessons”. Shiho had been fortunate enough not to be kept after practice yet, but the students that were would show up to school the next day with
injuries that clearly hadn’t been sustained during volleyball practice. It was mostly the boys who were called to this, summoned by Kamoshida’s little errand boy Yuuki Mishima, but on the rare occasion that a girl would be summoned, she’d show up more than just injured the next day at school, if she showed up at all. Yes, every member of the volleyball team (and the track team, which Kamoshida has also recently taken over) had become much less happy, but the girls who were given special attention just became completely broken people.

Shiho tried not to think about the obvious conclusion, but it was just becoming too much to bear. Especially since it seemed Kamoshida was starting to focus his attention on students who weren’t part of any sports teams at all. In particular, every time Shiho passed Kamoshida while walking with her friend Ann, the man would just leer at her blonde friend the entire time. Ann was very pretty, and drew the attention of just about everybody, but it was Kamoshida whose stares seemed the most intense, the most filled with desire. Today Mr. Kamoshida had actually asked Shiho a few questions about Ann before starting practice, and when Shiho said she was uncomfortable answering, he decided to make things extra hard on her. This was especially bad during target practice, when Kamoshida nailed the same spot on Shiho’s leg multiple times. She was pretty sure it wasn’t fractured, but at this point, she was having a hard time walking. And so when it came time to head home for the evening, Shiho hobbled to the school’s entrance, all the while wondering if volleyball was really worth all of this.

And then Shiho’s body gave out. And all of her pain rose to new heights as she hit the ground hard. She couldn’t stop herself from screaming as she landed on her side. She wasn’t really sure if it was from the pain of the fall or the frustration, but either way, it came out, and it was loud.

“Are you okay!?”

Shiho heard the sound of running feet, which stopped right behind her. She felt her body being pulled up and propped against the wall, and a girl with short brown hair came into view in front of her. The girl had red eyes — something Shiho didn’t even know was possible — and they were full of more concern than she’d seen from most people in her entire life.

“I’m fine” Shiho said. “Just a little sore.”

“You don’t look fine.” The girl’s red eyes seemed to scan Shiho’s entire body, a spark of anger appearing in them. “You look like you were attacked! Who did this to you!?”

“Nobody.” Shiho hated keeping quiet for Kamoshida, but everybody else seemed to be, and she’d be damned if she was the one who was going to throw all their dreams away. If Shiho decided to quit the volleyball team on her own, she could live with that, but she didn’t want to raise trouble for the others who would be strong enough to endure the torture. Still, whoever this nosy girl was, she had to give her something. “I just had an accident during volleyball practice, is all.”

“Volleyball?” The girl stepped back, looking over Shiho again. She was so deep in thought, Shiho felt like any second she’d hear the sounds of a computer’s hard drive spinning coming from the girl’s head. “Ah! You’re that first-year whose skill everybody is talking about, aren’t you? Shiho Suzui, yes?”

“Yeah.” Shiho couldn’t help but smile a bit. That right there was one of the main reasons she hadn’t quit volleyball yet. She was really good at it. Almost everybody around her seemed to genuinely believe she could go pro, and Shiho loved the game so much that she really didn’t want to let one bad coach ruin it for her. “Who are you?“

“Oh! My apologies. I should have introduced myself sooner!” The brown-haired girl bowed to Shiho. “My name is Makoto Niijima.”
“‘Niijima’…” Shiho had definitely heard that name before. Students and teachers alike dropped it often when talking about somebody who was supposed to be the smartest person in the whole school. “You’re the student council vice-president, right?”

“That’s correct.” Makoto held out her hand to Shiho. “Can you stand, Suzui-Chan?”

“Maybe.” Shiho took Makoto’s hand and stood up. Well, truthfully, Makoto did almost all of the lifting, pulling Shiho to her feet. For how petite her body was, the girl was surprisingly strong, and it seemed like having to support all of Shiho’s weight with one arm took her almost no effort. Just trying to move her legs a little was agonizing for Shiho. She tried to stay standing on her own, but was having a lot of difficulty. Without asking permission or awaiting invitation, Makoto took it upon herself to pull Shiho’s arm over her shoulder and hold Shiho close by wrapping her free arm around Shiho’s shoulders, letting the younger girl lean on her for support.

“Allow me to escort you home, Suzui-Chan.”

“That’s very kind of you, Niijima-Senpai, but you don’t have to-“

“Do not refuse me, Suzui-Chan. I could not in good conscience allow somebody in your condition to wander the streets of Tokyo on her own.” The smile Makoto gave Shiho was determined, authoritative, and oddly soothing all at once. “I won’t take ‘no’ for an answer.”

“Alright then.” Shiho allowed herself to lean on Makoto, putting even less effort into supporting her own weight. She felt a little guilty about it, but Makoto seemed untroubled by it, and she just felt like her body needed this right now. “Thank you, Niijima-Senpai.”

The two headed out the front door and towards the subway station.

“What train are we getting on?” Makoto asked.

“No train” Shiho said. “My home’s a few blocks away from the station. I usually walk to school.”

“Good. The shorter the trip is, the better.” Makoto looked down at Shiho’s heavily bruised leg. “You’ll need to get some ice on that leg as soon as possible. Will your parents be home? Because if they won’t, I’d be more than happy to assist you with any first aid you may require.”

“That won’t be necessary. My mother should be waiting for me. But I appreciate your concern, Senpai.”

“I’m a member of the student council. It’s my duty to see to it that all of our students are having the best experience possible at Shujin Academy,” Makoto smiled at Shiho again, but this time Shiho could sense some ulterior motive hidden beneath. “How has your experience at our school been so far, Suzui-Chan?”

“It’s been alright” Shiho said. “The facilities are all fine. The other students are nice, for the most part. The teachers too.”

“What about volleyball?” Makoto asked.

“It is… Very intensive training” Shiho said. “But I can handle it.”

“I’m certain that you can” Makoto said. “But that doesn’t mean you should have to.”

“Senpai?”
“I’m going to get straight to the point, Suzui-Chan.” Makoto’s face became angry. Not at Shiho, just in general. Still, it was scary to be just inches away from. “I have heard some unpleasant rumors about Mr. Kamoshida’s volleyball training, and from the condition you’re in, I believe them to be true. I would like to ask you some questions, and for you to answer them truthfully, if you could.”

“I… Um… That’s…”

“I heard that Mr. Kamoshida likes to assault students with volleyballs during practice. Has he done that to you?”

“Of course not! I mean, that’s not- The thing about training is-“

“Suzui-Chan, I would ask you not to lie to me. This is a matter I take very seriously.” Makoto’s expression softened a bit. “If you are uncomfortable with these questions, you are free to remain silent. I will not hold it against you. Just no lying, ok?”

“Ok.”

“Suzui-Chan, does Mr. Kamoshida overwork the volleyball team during practice to an extent that most would consider inhumane?”

Shiho said nothing. She just looked down at the ground sadly. Makoto studied what she could see of the athlete’s face very intently.

“Suzui-Chan, does Mr. Kamoshida assault students with volleyballs during practice under the pretense of training their reflexes and building physical resistance?”

Shiho said nothing.

“Suzui-Chan, has Mr. Kamoshida assaulted you in particular?”

Shiho said nothing. Her eyes darted quickly to her leg.

“Suzui-Chan, is your leg in the condition it’s in because of Mr. Kamoshida?”

Shiho said nothing.

“I have also heard that Mr. Kamoshida sometimes calls students to his office outside of practice. Is that true, Suzui-Chan?”

“Yes.”

“Have you ever been called to his office, Suzui-Chan?”

“No.”

“I have heard that those who have often show up to school the next day with severe injuries. What do you make of that, Suzui-Chan?”

Shiho said nothing.

“Is Mr. Kamoshida beating students in his office, Suzui-Chan?”

Shiho said nothing.
“There have been rumors of sexual assault happening as well. Several girls have dropped out of our school lately, all former members of the volleyball team. Were they called to Mr. Kamoshida’s office, Suzui-Chan?”

“I…” Shiho’s voice wavered. “I don’t know what goes on in there, ok?”

“Suzui-Chan…” Makoto leaned down and looked Shiho in the eye. Shiho wanted to look away, but felt compelled not to for some reason. “Are you afraid to be called into Mr. Kamoshida’s office?”

Shiho said nothing. Her throat began to tighten.

“I’m afraid I must insist you answer this question, Suzui-Chan. Allow me to repeat myself.”

Makoto spoke in a very low, very calm tone. “Are you afraid to be called into Mr. Kamoshida’s office?”

“Yes.” Shiho’s eyes started to water.

“What do you think will happen in there?”

“Bad things.”

“Such as?”

“I don’t want to say it. I don’t even want to think about it!” Tears were streaming down the sides of Shiho’s face now. “You already know, don’t you!? It’s probably exactly what you’re thinking!”

“Of course. My apologies, Suzui-Chan.” Makoto rubbed Shiho’s shoulder with the same hand that was wrapped around her. It was a very small offering as far as comforts went, but it was all Makoto could give her at the moment. “Why haven’t you come to anyone about this?”

“Because nobody else has! All of the upperclassmen are just dealing with it, so I thought that’s what I’m supposed to do too!” Shiho’s crying continued. “All my life I’ve wanted to be a great volleyball player, so when I got into Shujin Academy, I was really excited because they’re supposed to have this amazing team. And then I got on the team, and I thought it was a dream come true, but it’s been a nightmare, and nobody wants to do anything about it or even talk about it! Every teammate I’ve tried talking to about it just blows me off and says it’s the way things have to be. But I don’t know how much more of this I can take!”

Makoto stopped walking for a moment, which meant that Shiho wasn’t going anywhere. The older girl handed Shiho a tissue.

“I’m sorry you’ve had to put up with this, Suzui-Chan. This isn’t what Shujin Academy is supposed to be.” Makoto resumed walking. “But I’m going to find a way to make things better.”

“You are?” Shiho blew her nose. “How?”

“I don’t know yet, but I’ll think of something.” Makoto gave Shiho a reassuring smile. “I promise.”

Akira reflected on Shiho’s story all the way back to Yongen-Jaya. So far, everything he’d heard about Makoto Nijima had been from Ann, and her stories all focused on Ryuji Sakamoto and how Nijima had twisted him. But in Shiho’s eyes, Makoto was a hero, or had been until recently. A year ago she’d been this caring upperclassman who just wanted to protect people, and now she was running the school like some kind of mob boss or something. Somewhere along the way, Makoto
Niijima became twisted, and Shiho was convinced that she could be returned to the benevolent genius who had saved Shujin Academy from the greatest evil the school had ever known. But between his interactions with both the real and cognitive Makotos, Akira wasn’t so sure.

The sun was still going down when Akira got back to LeBlanc. Sojiro was behind the counter when he came in, but unlike yesterday, he wasn’t pissed. Akira was grateful for it.

“Ah good, you’re here.” A small half-smile formed on Sojiro’s face. “I can actually close up shop on time today.”

“Sorry if I kept you waiting” Akira said. “I was with some friends.”

“You’re actually making friends? With your record out in the open?” Sojiro’s eyes narrowed. “They aren’t other delinquents, are they?”

“No, they’re really nice people” Akira said. “Maybe I could bring them by sometime and you could meet them?”

“So long as they don’t make a huge ruckus, I guess that’s fine” Sojiro said. “Just make sure you stay out of trouble.”

“That’s the plan, Boss.” Akira headed for the stairs to his room.

“Oh!” Sojiro smacked himself on the head. “I almost forgot! Your school called. You’re supposed to go to the principal’s office before class tomorrow.”

“What!?” Akira turned to Sojiro, panic on his face. “Why!?”

“Don’t worry, you’re not in trouble. Believe me, it was the first thing I asked.” Sojiro smirked, but only for a moment. “I don’t know what’s going on exactly, but they said it’s important. So make sure you get to school early.”

“Ok. Thanks for telling me, Boss.”

“Hey, if you miss a meeting like this, it becomes a problem for both of us. Got it?”

“Got it.” Akira walked up the stairs. He had a feeling that whatever this meeting was about, he wasn’t going to like it.

Chapter End Notes

Alright, finally got this done.

It’s going to be a bit until the next chapter, probably. How long, I’m not sure. I’d say a few days to possibly even a week. I just got a Vita, P4 Golden, and P4: Dancing All Night, so I’m gonna be getting into those. Here’s hoping I enjoy them as much as I did P5!
The President's Apprentice

Chapter Summary

Makoto Nijima always get what she wants.

Chapter Notes

Before the chapter, a little treat for you all. I've been collaborating with my friend Hureno on stuff like the design of Shiho's Phantom Thief outfit and her Persona, just trying to figure out how things should look. Hureno happens to be a really good artist, and actually drew Shiho in her thief outfit, so if the description is unclear, follow this link to see what it looks like. You won't regret it:

http://hurenoshmureno.tumblr.com/post/163926136582/some-art-i-did-for-my-friends-p5-au-fic-the

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As Akira walked the final leg of his journey to Shujin Academy that morning, he did not look well. Shambling more than walking, slumped over, and bags under his eyes, he looked like the walking dead. And he felt like it too. Knowing that this meeting was coming made it hard to sleep last night, and between that, waking up early, and his adventure in Makoto’s Palace yesterday, he was just exhausted. The end result was that Akira Kurusu, who was already basically persona non grata at school, looked as unpresentable as people expected him to, and it did not escape the notice of the worst person possible as he trudged up the stairs to the entrance of Shujin Academy.

“Holy hell, Kurusu!”

As far as Shujin’s faculty members went, Mr. Ushimaru was not quite as fat as Principal Kobayakawa (then again, Akira was pretty sure nobody in the nation of Japan save for maybe sumo wrestlers were), but he made up for it in hard-assed obnoxiousness. Ushimaru vaguely reminded Akira of this old news story from the town of Inaba about a high school teacher who was killed as part of a series of serial murders. Apparently the guy’s students were not sad to see him go, because he was a royal asshole. Akira hardly wished a similar fate on Mr. Ushimaru, but he imagined that if something terrible were to befall him, he would not be terribly missed.

“Have you been getting into fights!?” Ushimaru held out his arm, barring Akira’s entry from the school. “Just look at you! You’re all worn out! You look like you're hungover or something! And what are you doing here so early anyway?”

“Uh…” Akira was not lucid enough for this. “I’ve got a… Uh…” Shit. What was the word? That thing you usually have with doctors and stuff?

“You’re acting suspicious… Are you on drugs!? Are you trying to sell drugs to other students before class begins!?”
“Mr. Ushimaru, what on earth are you yelling about?” Ms. Kawakami appeared from inside the school, looking not much better than Akira. Of course, this was her normal state of being, so that wasn’t particularly notable, but Akira still felt like they were kindred spirits in that moment. Kawakami looked past Ushimaru’s shoulder at Akira, and he could swear he saw the tiniest hint of pity in her eyes. “Oh, Kurusu. You look terrible.”

“Yeah…” Being chewed out with preposterous accusations had woken Akira up a little. “I didn’t really get a good night’s sleep.”

“Oh yeah? Up late all night playing games, I bet!” Ushimaru somehow defied all possibility and scowled at Akira ever harder. “You better shape up, or you’ll be getting expelled and sent to jail in no time, you delinquent! Do you understand!?”

“Mr. Ushimaru, please.” Kawakami sighed and shook her head. “Do you really think this is the most effective approach to take first thing in the morning?”

“Please, Ms. Kawakami! He’s obviously up to-”

“He obviously needs a shot of caffeine” Kawakami said, crossing her arms. “I appreciate your concern, Mr. Ushimaru, but Akira Kurusu is in MY homeroom, which makes him MY responsibility. If whatever he does outside of school starts to affect his academic performance, I’ll be the one to address the situation, alright?”

“Of course, Ms. Kawakami. I didn’t mean to step on your toes.” For what Akira believed may have been the only moment in all of history, Mr. Ushimaru showed genuine humility as his sour face loosened up and he lowered his head to the younger female teacher ever-so-slightly. “I’m just concerned that this delinquent-“

“Is supposed to be meeting with the principal right now” Kawakami said. “We should let him get to it.”

“What!?” The moment was over, and Ushimaru turned to Akira angrily. “Why didn’t you say something!? Get going, you punk!”

“Yes sir.” It took some effort, but Akira managed to swallow down all the spite he was feeling at the moment. He walked past Ushimaru into the school. Ushimaru kept looking out the front door like he was the school’s own personal guardian or something. Kawakami watched Akira go, and he looked back at her and mouthed the words “thank you”. She nodded to him, and for the briefest of seconds, he could almost swear that she was actually smiling.

It was nice having somebody on the faculty actually on his side. That talk they’d had on their first day really seemed to resonate with Ms. Kawakami, and she was the only one of his teachers who actually treated him as human. Most of the other teachers just seemed like they were waiting for him to confirm their worst suspicions about him. At best, some of them took some kind of amusement in him when they called on him in class and he answered a question right, like he was a sideshow act or something. Still, he’d rather deal with the biology teacher smirking at him like the bearded lady than Principal Kobayakawa. The fat man had laid out the rules on the very first day Akira saw Shujin Academy: Akira was considered one step above trash, so just one step in the wrong direction and Akira would be thrown out without a second thought. As he approached the secretary outside of the man’s office, Akira got the feeling that Kawakami coming to his rescue was going to be the high point of his morning. In other words, it was all downhill from here.

“Hi, I’m Akira Kurusu” Akira said. “I’m supposed to be meeting with Principal Kobayakawa this morning.”
“Of course.” The secretary got up and opened the door to the principal’s office. “He's been expecting your arrival.”

Akira’s worst fears were confirmed the second he passed through the threshold of that door. Sitting behind his desk was Kobayakawa, sweaty and unpleasant to look at, not quite composed enough to show that there was something he didn’t like about the situation. And it wasn’t hard to guess why. Because standing right behind him was Makoto Niijima, smirking at Akira victoriously.

“Good morning, Kurusu-Kun” Kobayakawa said. His voice was nervous. “I’m pleased to see that you actually arrived.”

“And what’s that?” Akira’s eyes shifted focus to Makoto. He had a pretty good idea of what was about to happen.

“Has my conduct suggested I would do otherwise?” Akira tried focusing on Kobayakawa, but his eyes kept darting back to Makoto. She was perfectly still, her face unchanging. She was the only one in the room not nervous, and it was understandable. When Makoto’s Shadow had told Akira about how the principal obeyed her every whim, he was kind of hoping it was just a case of warped cognition, kind of like how Shiho wasn’t really some kind of amazon or how Sakamoto wasn’t actually a giant dog. But now, seeing how unnerved Kobayakawa was, it was clear where all the power in this room was, and it wasn’t in the office chair behind the desk.

“Well, that’s why you’re here” Kobayakawa responded. “It’s true that you have not done anything overtly disruptive on school grounds so far, but you did show up with injuries on your second day of classes. And at the same time, somehow the other students have learned about your status as a delinquent, which is causing unrest throughout the school.”

“I didn’t tell anybody” Akira said. “It’s only made things more problematic for me.”

“Yes, well, I’m certain that you did not. And I’m afraid we have no way of finding out just who did.” Kobayakawa said that extra-nervously. He was lying. Akira could tell he knew damn well that this was Makoto’s doing. “Still, this doesn’t bode well for your rehabilitation. Things are only going to get harder for you from here on out. Which is why you may be happy to know that I am not unsympathetic to your plight, Kurusu-Kun.”

“What do you mean?”

“You are here for a reason. There is a sickness in you that causes you to lash out, and we at Shujin Academy are meant to cure it. Having the entire student body against you will not result in a healthy environment for your rehabilitation. And so I have come up with a solution.”

“And what’s that?” Akira’s eyes shifted focus to Makoto. He had a pretty good idea of what was about to happen.

“Yes, well, I can see you’re wondering what another student is doing here.” Kobayakawa gestured over his shoulder. “I’d like to introduce you to Makoto Niijima.”

“Niijima-Senpai and I have already met.”

“That’s right.” Makoto’s voice was full of false sweetness and condescension. “It’s a pleasure to see you again, Kurusu-Kun.”

“Excellent!” Kobayakawa tried very hard to act surprised. He wasn’t good at it. “Then I’ll cut to the chase: Niijima-San here is our most accomplished student. She gets the highest marks in all the school, manages certain affairs of the school as the president of the student council, and comes from a prestigious family known for excelling in law enforcement. I believe that she would be a very good influence on you, and so after discussing it with her, Niijima-San has agreed to take you
under her wing for an apprenticeship of sorts.”

“‘Apprenticeship?’” Akira feigned ignorance. Everybody in this room knew exactly what was going on, but Akira felt like if he tried to tear apart the facade, it’d spell big trouble for him. “What does that mean?”

“Put simply, you are to assist Niijima-San here in whatever way she sees fit. She will be your mentor to becoming a better you. This will be a more active method of rehabilitation, one in which we hope a model student’s behavior rubs off on you.”

“My goodness,” Akira said sarcastically, “but surely somebody like Niijima-Senpai is far too busy to waste all of her time on a problem child like myself.”

“Oh, it’s no trouble at all, Kurusu-Kun.” Makoto walked around the desk, her eyes locked on Akira’s the whole time, her red irises taunting him. “One of my many duties as student council president is to look out for my juniors. How could I in good conscience stand aside when I see one of our students in such an awful position?”

“Yes, well, that’s very considerate and all…” Akira turned to the principal. He didn’t know why he was fighting this. He could tell there was no escape. But he could feel Arsene inside of him, telling him to try and finagle a way out. “But isn’t it a bit early to be deciding that my probation isn’t working? I haven’t even been attending this school for a full week yet.”

“Young man, I will state this plainly.” Kobayakawa glared at Akira. “From this point on, you are to do whatever Makoto Niijima asks of you. You can think of her as both your life coach and your probation officer. She will be reporting back to me regularly, and if she is unsatisfied with your attempts at rehabilitation, you WILL be expelled from Shujin Academy. And I’m certain I don’t have to remind you what will become of you should that happen, do I?”

“No, sir.”

“Excellent.” Kobayakawa smiled at the two, turning his head to Makoto. “Niijima-San, I leave your new charge in your capable hands.”

“Thank you, Principal Kobayakawa.” Makoto nodded and walked to the door, signaling for Akira to follow her. “Come, Kurusu-Kun. Let’s leave the principal to his other duties.”

Akira followed silently. He found it hard to speak at the moment. He felt an incredible pressure in his throat, as something had just been wrapped around his neck. Makoto led him outside, into the courtyard.

“I’m so glad that you’ve finally come around on my offer, Kurusu-Kun.”

“It’s not like I had a choice” Akira managed to say.

“I suppose not.” Makoto put some money in a vending machine and pressed a button. “Still, the end result will be the same.”

“And what is your endgame, Niijima-Senpai?”

“There will be time to discuss that later.” Makoto reached into the machine and pulled out a can of coffee, holding it out to Akira. “For now, you look terribly unprepared for class, and that simply won’t do. Drink this.”

“Oh, I, uh…” Akira reached into his pocket and took out his wallet. There was nothing in it. The
only money Akira had on him was a loose 50 yen coin in his pocket. “I’m afraid I can’t pay you back for that.”

“Don’t worry about that, Kurusu-Kun. Just take it.” Makoto shoved the can into Akira’s chest and let go, and he instinctually grabbed it. She gave him what might’ve been the first non-malicious smile he’d seen from her. “You’re mine now, and I look out for my people.”

“I see… Thank you.” Akira stared at the can with suspicion.

“It’s just canned coffee, Kurusu-Kun.” Makoto snickered at him. “Go ahead. Drink it. You need to be awake for your classes.”

Akira silently opened the can and took a sip. It didn’t taste anywhere near as good as the stuff Sojiro served in LeBlanc, but it was helping him shake off the lingering tiredness, at least. Feeling like a man who’d just discovered an oasis in the dessert, he chugged down the tinny-tasting, bitter brew like it was the cure for all his woes.

“Feeling better?” Makoto asked.

“Yes” Akira said. “Thank you again, Niijima-Senpai.”

“You’re welcome, Kurusu-Kun.” Makoto watched as Akira walked over to a nearby recycling bin and dropped the can in, silently approving of his environmentally-conscious choice. “I realize how troubling this morning’s developments must feel to you, but I promise you that I do have your best interests in mind.”

“Really now?” Akira turned from the recycling bin to Makoto. “And just why has the golden girl of Shujin Academy taken such a keen interest in my rehabilitation?”

“In all honesty, I’m not entirely certain myself.” Makoto scanned Akira with that same curious look she had the first time they met in the real world, like she was trying to solve some kind of puzzle. “I suppose I just feel as if there’s something fundamentally wrong with your situation.”

“So what’s it matter to you?”

“Well, that’s-“ Makoto stopped talking to check her phone. “Oh, it’s almost time for classes to begin. We’d best be getting to our homerooms.” Makoto turned away and headed back to the classroom building, waving behind her. “I’ll send for you at the end of the day, Kurusu-Kun. We’ll continue this discussion then.”

“And that’s why I can’t go to the Metaverse today.”

Ann and Shiho stared at Akira dumbfounded as he finished his account of that morning’s events. They were sitting at a small table in the corner of the school cafeteria, far away from everyone else. Of course, this was because nobody wanted to be near Akira, but he was still grateful for the privacy.

“She can’t do that!” Ann yelled.

“I mean, she did, so I’m pretty sure she can” Akira said.

“This is unbelievable” Shiho said. “I knew that Niijima-Senpai did some unsavory things, but I never imagined she’d pressgang somebody into working for her like that.”
“This is why we need to change her heart!” Ann slammed her hands on the table. “She can’t just get away with stuff like this!”

“Well, you’ll have to do it without me” Akira said. “I try to bail on Niijima-Senpai, and I’m off to jail.”

“It just doesn’t make sense” Shiho said. “The Makoto Niijima I used to know would never take advantage of somebody in your position like that. What does she even want with you?”

“I’m trying not to think about it.” In his interactions with both Makoto and her Shadow, it hadn’t escaped Akira’s notice that she’d dropped multiple hints about finding him attractive. And frankly, if the real Makoto had any of her Shadow’s sadistic streak, the fact that he had now been conscripted into serving her took on a new level of horror. “All I know is I don’t buy her spiel about being interested in my rehabilitation.”

“Ake- Uh… Karasu’s not gonna be happy about this” Ann said. “We’re a man down now, and every time we go into that city we find a bunch of terrible new stuff that can kill us.”

“Yeah, we’ll have to figure out another time to go back into that other world.” Shiho scratched his head. “Maybe at nighttime?”

“That’s a terrible idea.” Akira shook his head. “We’d start out tired and then completely wear ourselves out for the next day.”

“So what are we supposed to do?” Ann asked. “We need all four of us if we’re gonna steal that treasure!”

“Maybe we’ll get lucky and Niijima-Senpai won’t want Akira around every day” Shiho said.

“Maybe.” Akira groaned. Between the false arrest, the alternate worlds, the voice in his head, the superpowers, and now being under the thumb of a dictatorial high school student council president of all things, he was really wondering what he’d done to deserve this life.

Akira was aware that there were many interpretations of what Death looked like. Some envisioned a skeleton in a robe with a scythe. Some imagined a kindly goth girl. When a punk with spiky black hair walked into Akira’s classroom at the end of the day, he couldn’t help but feel like he was meeting his own personal ferryman come to take him to underworld.

“Yo.” Ryuji was a lot less scary than the first couple times Akira had met him. This time, he wasn’t angry. Fetching Akira just seemed to be business as usual for him. “Miss Prez wants to talk to you in the student council room.”

“Yeah.” Akira rose from his desk without protest. There’d be no point in it now. It’s not like Sakamoto had any of the answers he was looking for anyway. Ann watched angrily as the two boys departed from the classroom.

Ryuji led Akira up the stairs to the student council room.

“The student council’s in session” he said. “Normally I’m supposed to wait ’til they’re done before seein’ Miss Prez, but today’s a special exception.” Ryuji gave Akira a mischievous grin. “Check this out.”

Ryuji raised his fist and pounded against the door four times in rapid succession. There were a couple shrieks from the other side of the door.
“Come in” said a nonplussed-sounding Makoto.

Ryuji opened the door and gestured for Akira to walk in, following right behind him. The atmosphere in the room was tense. Four student council members Akira didn’t know sat at a table, two guys, two girls. They looked at Akira and Ryuji with a mixture of revulsion and terror. Makoto sat at her own desk separate from the student council table, looking composed and in control. She stood up and addressed the room.

“Everyone, I’d like to introduce a new face to you all.” Makoto walked over to Akira and put her hand on his shoulder. “This is Akira Kurusu, our school’s infamous new transfer student. At Principal Kobayakawa’s request, I have agreed to take him under my wing and show him how to be a proper and productive member of Shujin Academy’s student body. In that spirit, Kurusu-Kun will be functioning as my assistant of sorts, so you should all get used to seeing him around here.” Makoto looked to Akira. “Is there anything you would like to say, Kurusu-Kun?”

“I hope my presence isn’t disruptive” Akira said. The council members’ faces all eased up, but it was clear that he wasn’t welcome.

“Of course not, Kurusu-Kun” Makoto said. “But for the moment, I have an errand for you.” Makoto handed Akira an envelope. There was some weight to it. “This envelope contains a list of drinks and the money to pay for them. Please head to the vending machine outside of the school and bring us back some refreshments. Ryuji-Kun will accompany you.”

“Ok.” Akira took the envelope and was led out of the room by Ryuji. There was an awkward silence as they headed down the stairs and outside. The whole time, Akira thought about the things Ann told him about how Ryuji used to be. Caring, virtuous, ready to take on injustice whenever he saw it, even wanting to do that now. And then Makoto Niijima had “twisted” him somehow. Though the specifics on that were vague. As they reached the vending machine, Akira decided to break the silence.

“So, what’s Niijima-Senpai got on you?”

“Whaddya mean?” Ryuji looked at Akira with confusion.

“I mean this whole mob enforcer thing she’s got you doing.” Akira opened the envelope and looked at the list of sodas. “I’m here on this soda run because I’ll be expelled if I don’t. What’s she threatening you with?”

“Some of us don’t need a reason to be good people” Ryuji said.

“You think you’re a good person?” Akira bought the first drink. “You dragged me up to the roof and punched me so hard I threw up.”

“You’re a delinquent.” Ryuji spoke with a haughty tone, but Akira noticed some sadness in his eyes, like he did have regrets over their first meeting but would never admit it. “I was puttin’ you in your place.”

“You know the legal system already did that, right?” Akira purchased the second drink.

“Sometimes you can’t count on the people in charge to do things the right way. Gotta take things into your own hands.”

“Preaching to the choir there.” Akira bought the third drink. “Still, that doesn’t give you the right to hit me. I didn’t even do anything to provoke you.”
“Will you just drop it already!?” Ryuji slammed his fist against the vending machine.

“Why? Are you going to hit me again if I don’t?” Akira pulled a fourth drink from the vending machine, lining them up on the ground as he inserted the final coins he was given.

“Nah. Miss Prez is givin’ her time to your reform, so I’m gonna try and play nice from now on.”

“Oh.” Akira looked at Ryuji. He heard the clunk as the final bottle dropped to the bottom of the vending machine, but he didn’t reach in to grab it. “That’s… not what I was expecting.”

“I trust Miss Prez with my life. If she thinks you’re worth her time, I ain’t gonna do nothin’ to ya unless she tells me or I see you screwin’ around behind her back.”

“So… you trust me now?”

“So long as you behave yourself, yeah.”

“Great.” Akira held out a bottle to Ryuji. “Carry this back for me.”

“Huh?”

“I have five bottles and two hands.” Akira held up his other hand, which was clinching two sodas by the bottlenecks between his fingers. “The best I can do is two bottles per hand. Help me out here.”

Akira smiled as Ryuji took the bottle from him. As they returned to the school with the drinks, Akira had confirmed a few things about him. Ryuji Sakamoto had a moral code. He genuinely believed that he was doing the right thing, or at least convinced himself that the uglier aspects of what he did were justifiable. He also had undying faith in Makoto Niijima. For whatever reason, the older girl could do no wrong in his eyes, and had him wrapped around her little finger. He worked for her willingly, not by force.

Most of all, Ryuji Sakamoto wasn’t very bright. He bought Akira’s bit about how many bottles he could carry with no question, completely oblivious to the fact that Akira had his school bag on him. If he was forced to interact with this guy a lot, he’d probably be able to outsmart him. Maybe even run away from him and find time to escape into the Metaverse so he could join the team in destroying Makoto’s Palace.

Akira and Ryuji returned to the student council room, and Akira distributed the beverages as Makoto instructed. She dismissed Ryuji and asked Akira to sit in a chair in the corner of the room and wait until the council meeting ended. Akira observed the meeting, seeing what he could gleam from it. On the surface, it was pretty dull. They were just discussing arrangements for the volleyball rally, including what to do for an opening ceremony and decorations. Anything interesting to be found lay in the dynamic between Makoto and the rest of the student council. Someone would lay out a topic, such as what colors a banner should be, and then the council members would start throwing out ideas. If Makoto liked somebody’s idea, it brought a swift end to the topic without any further discussion. If Makoto threw out an idea of her own, there would be silence for a moment. Then she would ask for feedback, and pick out the most nervous person. She would listen to their criticisms or alternative ideas, think for a moment, and then explain why she believed her idea was superior. If things came to a vote, Makoto would cast her vote first, and then everyone else would follow suit, always resulting in a unanimous decision. Makoto had complete control over the student council. There was an artifice of deliberation, but the system in place was clear: Makoto Niijima knew what the best idea was. The only time she valued the opinions of the other council members was if they reached the best idea before she could come up with it herself.
The four student government officials sitting around that table only had power so long as Makoto afforded it to them. Aside from that, they were bodies to handle clerical work and make her job slightly easier. Seeing her in her seat of power, it was easy to see how she got the title of “Queen” of the student body.

After about an hour, Makoto dismissed the rest of the student council. She turned to Akira and silently beckoned for him to come over to her desk. He stood before her, and she looked up at him with great interest.

“So, what did you think of the student council meeting, Kurusu-Kun?”

“It’s more or less what I expected” Akira said. “Am I going to be sitting in on these meetings every day, Niijima-Senpai?”

“Why do you ask?” The smile faded from Makoto’s face. It wasn’t replaced with a frown, it was just neutral. Akira had seen this girl display genuine emotions, but she seemed to have this habit of keeping her cards close to her chest, withholding any real emotion until she felt it was time to reveal it. “Do you feel observing the student council perform their duties is a poor use of your time? Do you have something better to do?”

“Do you want my honest answer?”

“Of course, Kurusu-Kun. I do not make a habit of asking rhetorical questions.”

“Then… yes.” Akira looked down at the floor. “I’m not a member of the student council, so it’s not like I can contribute anything. And that’s time I could spend studying, or doing homework, or socializing or exploring the city.”

“Those last two items are interesting.” Makoto leaned back in her chair, bringing her fingers together. “Yes, I do suppose such moments of levity are also crucial to your rehabilitation. The legal system has judged that you do not need to be incarcerated, so being able to enjoy yourself among others is important.”

“I’m glad you agree.” Akira looked back up at Makoto. “So you won’t be keeping me here every day?”

“Of course not” Makoto said. “There will be days when I have important tasks for you, but it will be nothing like this. Today, I simply wanted you to get an appreciation for what the student council does so you could begin to better understand Shujin Academy.”

“Right. Makes sense.” It didn’t really make sense to Akira. He was pretty sure that Makoto wasn’t interested in rehabilitating him at all. But it was better not to poke the bear.

“You know, I don’t have student council meetings every day.” Makoto leaned forward, a predatory smile appearing on her face. “If you’d like, I’d be happy to show you some of the sights around Tokyo sometime.”

“That’s a kind offer, but I’m not certain I would be comfortable with that, Niijima-Senpai.”

“No?” Makoto fake-pouted. “Why not?”

“Because you’re a psychopathic manipulative she-devil” Akira thought.

“Well, that’s something I’d like to do with friends, and you’re basically my warden” Akira actually said. “I don’t really see us in casual social situations together.”
“Oh, that’s no good.” Makoto stood up and walked around her desk to stand in front of Akira. “I don’t want you to see me as your jailer, Kurusu-Kun. I want you to think of me as your mentor. I didn’t arrange all of this to punish you for your transgressions, you know. I see your potential and want to shape you into a proper member of society.”

“I don’t think that’s-“

“Hush.” Makoto put her finger to Akira’s lips. It was not a welcome sensation for him. “That’s your problem, Kurusu-Kun. You don’t think. You didn’t think about the consequences when you had an emotional outburst and assaulting somebody. You didn’t think about how much you had to gain from accepting my offer freely. And you’re still not thinking about the reality of the position you’re in.”

“And what reality is that?” Akira couldn’t hide his contempt that time.

“At this point, it does not matter what your guardian or probation officer think. I am the one who decides your fate.” Makoto dropped all pretense of politeness, her face coming alive with rage. Seeing the full unchecked fury of Makoto Niijima up this close completely bypassed Akira’s fight or flight instinct and left him paralyzed in fear. When Makoto opened her mouth again, she spoke harshly, and the strength of her tone felt like a weight pushing down on Akira's shoulders. “There will be no rudeness, no second-guessing, no disobedience, and no backtalk. Do I make myself clear?”

“Cr-Crystal” Akira managed to sputter out.

“Good. Which reminds me…” Makoto reached up and swiped Akira’s glasses from his face. “I don’t want you wearing these anymore. They’re a lie, an attempt to make yourself look more benign and less like the delinquent you are. I won’t have it.” Makoto traced her finger around Akira’s face. “Besides, you look so much better without them anyway.”

“You’re telling me how to dress!?“

“Oh, Kurusu-Kun, second-guessing me after everything that I just told you?” Makoto shook her head. “You really are a foolish little thing, aren’t you? It seems excessive to have you expelled for something so minor, but this insubordination cannot go unpunished. Perhaps this will teach you a lesson.” Makoto held the glasses in one hand, the ends pinched between outstretched fingers. She started to squeeze, the plastic bridge between the frames starting to bend.

“Don’t break them!” Akira reached out for his glasses. Makoto took a step back, moving out of Akira’s reach.

“Don’t break them’ what?” Makoto stopped tightening her grip but maintained the pressure she currently had, the plastic on the verge of snapping.

“Don’t break them, please” Akira said angrily.

“Oh, that sounds so insincere” Makoto cooed. “Try again.”

“Please don’t break my glasses” Akira said softly.

“Please don’t break my glasses’ who?”

“Please don’t break my glasses, Niijima-Senpai.”

“Well…” Makoto extended one of the arms of Akira’s glasses and used it to scratch the top of her
head. “That’s better, but I’m not feeling the humility.”

Akira groaned, knowing exactly what Makoto wanted him to do. He bowed down as low as he could, his head almost at an even level with his waist.

“Please don’t break my glasses, Niijima-Senpai.”

“Oh, come now, Kurusu-Kun. I’m sure you can do better than that.”

Akira dropped to his knees, lowering his forehead to the floor.

“Please don’t break my glasses, Niijima-Senpai.” Akira’s cheeks burned bright red as he debased himself like this. He mentally chastised himself for not just letting her keep the dumb fake glasses. He kept his head down, feeling like this wasn’t over just yet.

“Hmm…” Makoto put up the arm of Akira’s glasses up to her mouth, gently biting on the end of it. “You know, seeing you like this really puts our dynamic in perspective. Two-thirds of the school already call me ‘Niijima-Senpai’, but our relationship is special, isn’t it, Akira-Chan?” Makoto let Akira’s name and her new demeaning accessory for it slowly drip off her tongue and down into Akira’s ears like a thick poison. “What do you suppose would be a more suitable manner of address?”

“Please don’t break my glasses, Niijima-Sama.” Those last words fought Akira coming out. He could feel Arsene’s disapproval deep inside of him.

“Oh, very good!” Makoto crouched down and rubbed Akira’s still-lowered head like a dog. “I knew you were smart, Akira-Chan!” Makoto rose up again, grinning at the humiliated boy in front of her. “Now, who holds your life in her hands?”

“You do, Niijima-Sama.”

“That’s correct. So with that in mind, do you promise to obey every command you’re given?”

“Yes, Niijima-Sama.”

“And will you give me any trouble?”

“No, Niijima-Sama.”

“Wonderful!” Makoto dangled the glasses in front of her face. “Now, I believe you wanted these back, right?”

“Yes, Niijima-Sama.” Akira looked up at Makoto, unsettled by the ecstatic look on her face.

Makoto let go of the glasses. They clattered as they hit the floor, but thankfully didn’t break. They were very light, after all. There wasn’t a lot of force to the impact. Akira reached out to grab the faux spectacles, only to be cut off by Makoto’s foot stomping on them. The plastic frames cracked into pieces and the fake lenses shattered. Before Akira could react, Makoto had grabbed her bag and started heading for the door to the hallway.

“Clean that up” she said plainly. She opened the door and looked back to Akira, who was still on his knees, staring at the broken glasses before him with a blank expression on his face. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Akira-Chan.”
Still going through P4G. It's not as engaging to me as P5 was, so I'm kinda going back and forth between gametime and fic-writing. I'm also trying to catch up on some other stuff I've neglected for fic writing over the past couple months, so I'm not sure when the next chapter will be.
The next week was unpleasant for Akira. Every day Makoto Nijima had some new waste of his time ready. The school was gearing up for some big volleyball rally, boys’ team vs. girls’ team, where the winners would hold an exhibition match against a team of teachers. Makoto had Akira posting flyers around the school, checking the sports equipment, and helping decorate the gym. The other students working on these tasks wanted Akira to be there even less than he did, and more than once Akira had nearly broken his neck because the person assigned to spotting him on a ladder was derelict in their duties. Still, none of that was as bad as the moments when Makoto summoned Akira just because she could, having him run some menial chore for her because she liked flaunting the power she had over him. Ann and Shiho repeatedly expressed their disgust at the situation, and one day Ann even convinced Akira to leave the school at the end of the day instead of going up to the student council meeting room, but Ryuji had been waiting by the gate for just that sort of situation. The forced march/drag all the way up to the third floor was very painful for Akira’s arm.

Still, Sakamoto’s shows of force were rare. The thing that upset Akira the most was the touching from Makoto. The girl had absolutely no respect for Akira’s personal space. She was constantly poking him, prodding him, bumping into or brushing against him, grabbing his arm or running her fingers through his hair or touching his face. She always had this hungry look in her eyes in these moments, a not-so-hidden desire clearly fueling these actions. In a lot of ways, Makoto’s touches seemed almost speculative, experimental. Like a very repressed girl stepping into a certain arena for the first time. The only comfort Akira had was that somebody as obsessed with propriety as Makoto Nijima probably wouldn’t try anything considered too deviant on school grounds.

Which made her words one Saturday afternoon particularly distressing.

“Let’s go, Akira-Chan.”

“Go where?” Akira hadn’t even closed the door behind him yet. “The gym?”

“No, the preparations for the volleyball rally are complete.” Makoto rose from her desk. “Let’s go home.”

“Oh. Um… Ok.” Akira turned around and stuck one foot out the door. “See you next week, Nijima-Sama.”

“I’m afraid you misunderstood, Akira-Chan.” Before Akira could get his second foot out the door, Makoto had shot across the room and had her hand on his shoulder. “We’re not parting ways for the day. We’re going to MY home.”

“That’s… I don’t-“ Akira cleared his throat and stepped out of Makoto’s grasp. “How are we going
to accomplish student council business there?”

“We’re taking a break from student council business today.” Makoto once again laid her hand on Akira’s shoulder. “I thought you’d appreciate a private tutoring session in a relaxed environment. I AM interested in ensuring your academic success, after all. Studying in a comfortably-furnished apartment sounds much more pleasant than the library or student council room, doesn’t it?”

“It certainly does, but…” Akira tried to shake loose of Makoto’s hand, but it gripped tighter around his shoulder when he started moving. “I can’t imagine your parents would approve of you bringing a delinquent home.”

“Well,” Makoto said sadly, “I’m afraid you’re a few years too late to scandalize either of them.”

“Oh.” Akira never imagined he would feel sorry for his tormentor, yet here he was. “I didn’t mean to-”

“It’s quite alright, Akira-Chan. You couldn’t have been expected to know.” Makoto returned to her usual domineering demeanor. “My older sister serves as my legal guardian.”

“Oh yeah…” Akira remembered talking about Sae with Ann and Shiho on his first day of school. It hadn’t even been two weeks ago but with the rapid downhill spiral his life had taken it felt like an eternity had passed since then. “She’s a lawyer, right?”

“That’s correct” Makoto said. “She’s a prosecutor for the SIU.”

“That doesn’t sound like the kind of person who’d be cool with you bringing home strange boys.”

“She works late. We’ll be done long before she comes home.”

“Oh, well, I suppose that won’t be a problem then, but are you sure we should-“

“Let’s get a move on, Akira-Chan.” Makoto placed her hands on Akira’s chest. After letting them linger for a moment, she shoved Akira out into the hallway. “We don’t want to miss the train.”

The journey to Makoto’s apartment was uncomfortable. The train was fully packed, and Makoto took full advantage of the opportunity to press herself against Akira’s body. Thankfully, she was more discrete when they got off the train. Makoto was more than capable of sublimating her desires when out in public, though she still stood uncomfortably close to Akira as they walked the rest of the way to her home.

As the pair reached Makoto’s apartment building, Akira found himself praying for a miracle. Frankly, he had no idea what to expect once they crossed the threshold of that building. He didn’t think Makoto would brazenly force him into some kind of explicit act, but Akira knew just how sadistic this girl really was. He feared that if this afternoon went the way she was planning, it’d only serve as a precursor to much more unpleasant situations for him.

“Ah, Makoto-San!”

“Hm?” Makoto and Akira turned around to see Goro Akechi looking at them curiously. “Akechi-Kun? What are you doing here?”

“Well, Sae-San and I are trying to map out the connections between several cases we’re investigating, but all of the cork boards at the SIU are already in use, so we’re using Sae-San’s cork board at home.”
“Sis is home!? Already?” For the first time since meeting her, Akira saw fear in Makoto Nijima’s eyes.

“Yes.” Akechi’s eyes focused on Akira. “Oh my. Is this a friend of yours? I hope I’m not interrupting something.”

“Not at all.” Makoto regained her usual composure. “This is Kurusu-Kun. He’s one of my underclassmen. I’ve been tutoring him, and there have been rumors of girls being harassed in this area lately, so he offered to escort me home.”

“My goodness! Harassment!? I had no idea!” Akechi started scratching his chin. “We’ve heard no reports of such things in this area, then again, I suppose it is the kind of thing that often goes unreported, isn’t it?”

“Yes, well, I’m home safely now, so there’s no need to worry about it!” Makoto turned to Akira and bowed. “Thank you for your concern, Kurusu-Kun, but it would seem the rumors are unfounded after all. You can go home now.”

“Of course.” Akira bowed back, a smug smile on his face. “Have a good evening, Nijima-San.”

Makoto headed into her building. Akechi hung back for a moment, winked at Akira, then followed after her. And for the first time since meeting him, Akira was genuinely glad to know Goro Akechi.

“We must bring about the Nijima girl’s downfall.”

Arsene was speaking to Akira as he made his way down the Yongen-Jaya streets, the dapper demon’s image floating in front of him.

“You say that like it’s easy” Akira replied.

“It is” the Persona said. “Rally your allies, infiltrate her Palace, and give her other self a thrashing she’ll not forget.”

“There’s an entire army, two monsters, Nijima herself, and who knows what else in there. Not to mention spies like that little mouse guy.” Akira stuck his hands in his pockets, his pace slowing down. “Then there’s the matter of Nijima being at the top of that tower, and the only way up seems to be that elevator, which has security watching it. We need a strategy if we’re going to pull this off.”

“So meet with your comrades and form a plan.”

“We need to do more than talk. We need to infiltrate Shujin City. Map things out, do recon, figure out the comings and goings of the cops and when we can sneak past them, key targets we may need to hit, that kind of thing.” Akira let out a long, exasperated groan. “And between everyone else’s obligations and me being at the ‘Queen’s’ beck and call, I can’t imagine when we’d have time for that.”

“The others can manage their extracurricular activities, but Nijima is another problem entirely.” Arsene scratched his face at the place one would expect to find a chin. “There must be a way to escape her constant gaze. You must fabricate a reason as to why you cannot spend time with her.”

“Yeah, but it’d have to be a damn good excuse. Any social engagements I come up with will just be deemed less important than the ‘rehabilitation’ I’m supposed to be getting under Nijima’s
watch.” Akira groaned and leaned against the wall of the building across from LeBlanc. “And even if any club WOULD have accepted me, that witch’s ironclad control of their funding ensures that she won’t let any of them admit me.”

“Perhaps you could seek employment.” The visage of Arsene joined Akira on the wall.

“A part-time job?” Akira scratched his head as he considered the possibility, then sighed. "I don't know if I could really get one."

“You do not have to have one. You just have to claim that you do.”

“Oh no. Whatever I come up with has to be at least a little true. If it's a pure lie, she'll see right through it. And even if I DO land a job, she'll just tell me to quit.”

“So refuse.”

“You know I can't do that! Hell, even if I did, she'd probably just show up to my job and get me fired by telling them about my record.”

“It would behoove you to find fire-proof employment, then.” Arsene tilted his unchanging face to the sky. ‘I believe the restaurant industry is known to hire many individuals with criminal records. Perhaps a job as a chef.”

“I can’t cook!” Akira kicked at the ground. “This would be so much easier if I were still back home. I could just help Dad with his repair work. Then I’d just be all, ‘Sorry, Nijima-Sama, but I made a commitment to my father’. Even she couldn’t claim to override that kind of authority.”

“No, she could not. It is a pity that you have no father here in Tokyo.”

“Yeah…” Akira stared across the alleyway, looking directly into LeBlanc’s window. He saw Sojiro emerging from the kitchen, wiping some sweat from his brow.

Akira and Arsene looked to each other and nodded. Arsene’s image disappeared, and Akira stepped into the cafe.

“Hey Boss, I-“

Akira’s train of thought was immediately derailed by the peculiar woman finishing a cup of coffee at the counter. Akira wasn’t sure whether her style was best categorized as “goth” or “punk”, but it was certainly the last thing he expected to find in this sleepy little back-alley coffeehouse. The woman was maybe a bit taller than Akira and looked to be in her 20s. Her hair had been dyed dark blue, and she had a similarly-colored short dress with an asymmetrical spider-web pattern on it. She had a black studded choker and a necklace resembling some kind of capsule around her neck, a short black leather jacket, black leggings with a number of tears in them, and strappy black pumps.

The woman glanced at Akira from the corner of her eye, but seemed unaffected by his staring. She put down her empty cup and rose from her stool at the counter, giving Sojiro a slight smile. She expressed some kind of thanks or compliment to Sojiro, but Akira didn’t actually register what the words she said were. He was still taking in her peculiar get-up. There were no goths or punks where Akira came from. He had seen such people on TV, but honestly only believed they were stock archetypes in fiction, and did not exist in reality. Clearly city life was going to open his eyes up to many things. Akira barely had the presence of mind to step out of the woman’s path as she left the cafe.

“Don’t stare at my customers like that” Sojiro said. “I don’t need them being creeped out by some
“Sorry, I just…” Akira shook his head, trying to bring himself back down to reality. “Who WAS that?”

“So, that’s the type you’re into, huh?” A small grin appeared on Sojiro’s face. “Well, she’s got legs, that’s for sure. And you are at that age… But still!” Sojiro’s face turned sour again. “No staring at the customers, got it? Especially if you’re thinking about stuff like that!”

“You’ve got it all wrong!” Akira’s cheeks became tinged with the slightest shade of pink. “It’s nothing like that! I just didn’t expect to see anybody dressed like that around here is all.”

“Oh, yeah. That makes sense.” Sojiro’s expression lightened up, although Akira could swear he saw disappointment in his guardian’s eyes for a moment. “Well, actually, now that I think about it, she IS someone you should know. That’s Dr. Takemi. She runs a clinic just down the street from here. Like I said before, I’m not gonna be the one to take care of you if you get sick, so make sure you check out her office sometime.”

“She’s a doctor!?”

“Yup. And a damn good one too.”

“Wow…” Akira started to wonder what a doctor’s appointment with that kind of person was. He was certain it would be anything but orthodox. He kind of wanted to go to the clinic just to find out for himself. It was sure to be interesting. And if he was being fully honest with himself, Sojiro was right about her being attractive. Akira wanted to see if she had some kind of weird gothic doctor’s outfit or something.

“So, what did the principal want?”

“Huh?” Akira pulled himself out of the daydream of terrifying/sexy times in a mad scientist’s lab he had quickly imagined. “Oh, right. I actually wanted to talk to you about that.”

“Why?” Sojiro’s brows knitted together. “I don’t have to come in to the school again, do I?”

“No, it’s nothing like that.” Akira sat down at the counter, dropping his school bag on the empty stool next to him. “The principal expressed some concern about my rehabilitation. He thinks just behaving well isn’t enough. He told me I should show I’m serious about all of this by taking on more responsibilities in my life. And I don’t disagree with him.”

“Really now?” Sojiro raised an eyebrow.

“Yeah.” Akira decided to stick to his course. Sojiro didn’t need to know the full truth about Makoto Nijima being his “mentor”. The whole point of this was to find a way to escape her constant watch. And if Akira could use LeBlanc as an excuse to slip away from Nijima and take down her Palace with the others, then it’s not like this “apprenticeship” situation would be going on long enough for Akira to need to tell Sojiro about it anyway. “Anyway, it’s not really an order so much as a suggestion, but it’s a good suggestion, and I think it’ll look good for the parole board.”

“So what’s this got to do with me?” Sojiro crossed his arms.

“Well, you’ve really done a lot for me by letting me stay here. I know that having me here is a burden on you, and I’ve been wanting to pay you back somehow.” Akira’s voice started to waver, so he paused to clear his throat. “So, I was thinking… maybe I could start helping out around here?”
“Really?” Sojiro looked at Akira suspiciously. “You want to work here? In LeBlanc? Not somewhere more exciting?”

“Well, anywhere more exciting would be somewhere that other kids from my school hang out. And they already hate me at school, so-“

“Yeah, I get it.” Sojiro fiddled with his beard. “You’re looking for somewhere to escape all the abuse.”

“I couldn’t word it better if I tried.” Akira grinned nervously at Sojiro. “It wouldn’t be a full-time thing, if you didn’t want it to be. And maybe in a month or two some of the heat will die down around me and I can take another job. But until then, I’d really like something meaningful to do with my time. And it’s not like I’m expecting you to pay me considering everything you’ve already done for me-“

“Damn right you’re not.” Sojiro started pacing back and forth behind the counter, grumbling inaudibly to himself. At one point, Akira opened his mouth to say something, but Sojiro held out a finger to silence him. Finally, after what felt like an eternity but was likely a minute at most, Sojiro stopped pacing and pinched the bridge of his nose.

There was a deep breath. Then there was a large sigh. And then…

“Fine. You can work here.”

“You mean it!?“ Akira practically jumped out of the bar stool. “Thank you, Boss! I promise not to-“

“Here’s the deal.” Sojiro went from exasperated to stern in an instant. “You’ll be working the night shift.”

“The night shift? That’s unexpected.”

“Yeah, it’s when I could use the help most. That’s not a problem, is it?”

“No, Boss.” Once Akira gave it some thought, this worked out better. The only reason Akira needed to actually work in the shop was in case Makoto started asking him a bunch of questions about coffee to test him. Working nights meant he could spend afternoons in the Metaverse with the others. “Is that when you’re most swamped with people coming home from working overtime or something?”

“No, that’s just when I’m sore from working all day. Having somebody to split the work with would make things a lot easier.”

“Oh, ok.”

“Also, I don’t want this to interfere with your schoolwork. If I get calls because you’re falling asleep in class and your grades are dropping, this arrangement is off. Deal?” Sojiro held out his hand, a grave expression on his face. He wasn’t kidding around. Somehow, Akira would have to balance being a student with working at LeBlanc and Metaverse raids.

“Deal.” Akira shook Sojiro’s hand.

“THE HELL DID YOU JUST SAY!?“
Normally having an angry Ryuji looming over him like an unhinged gorilla would have Akira halfway to shitting his pants by now, but today Akira remained seated with Ann and Shiho and gave the president’s pet thug a bored look.

“I said ‘no’.” Akira took a bite of rice to let his repeated refusal sink in for a moment. “I can’t head up to the student council room after school today. I’ve got other commitments. Do me a favor and tell Niijima-San that, will you?”

“Why you little…” Both Ryuji’s teeth and fists clenched at once.

“You can hit me if you want, Sakamoto, but it’s not going to change my answer.” Akira looked away from Ryuji, showing that he found his rice much more interesting than the potential injury about to take place. “There’s just no getting around it. Contrary to what she believes, Makoto Niijima is not the ultimate authority in my life.”

Ryuji fumed for a moment then stomped off, grumbling something about how this wasn’t over. Akira looked up from his lunch to see Ann and Shiho grinning at him.

“I can’t believe you’re actually sticking it to Niijima!” Ann leaned in maybe a bit too close to Akira. “What changed!?”

“She pushed too far. Motivated me to look for an excuse to get away from her. I found one.”

“What did she do?” Shiho asked.

“She tried to take me to her apartment.”

“That sounds sketchy” Ann said.

“It was. And we almost got there too. Thankfully, I was saved at the last minute by Akechi.”

“Really?” Shiho leaned in and whispered. “Do you think he was following you?”

“No, I’m pretty sure it was a coincidence. But speaking of the guy…” Akira turned to Ann. “Do you have his phone number?”

“Yeah.”

“Great. See if you can get him over here.” Akira tried to give the girls the coolest grin he could. “Today, we’re going into the Palace.”

“You should really have his number on your phone” Ann said.

“I know, but I don’t, so-“

“He really likes you, you know.” Ann gave Akira the kind of guilt-inducing glare usually administered by scolding mothers, instantly crushing all the confidence he’d built up from his confrontation with Ryuji. “He’s gonna be hurt if you never add him to your contacts.”

“I promise I’ll get his number later, but for now can you-“

“What later? I can literally send you his contact info right now!”

“Look, I was just-“ Akira sighed, pulling out his phone. “Fine. Send it.”

At the end of the day, Akira left the classroom with Ann, meeting up with Shiho on the way
downstairs. As they reached the front door, they were cut off by Makoto.

“Akira-Chan, may I have a word with you?”

“Sure.” Akira looked to his companions. “See you two tomorrow.”

Shiho and Ann nodded silently and exited the school. Akira turned back to Makoto.

“Shouldn’t you be in your student council meeting, Niijima-Sama?”

“I could ask you the same.” Makoto gave Akira a Niijima Glare Lite. “What’s this I hear about you having other engagements? I thought you would know better than to double-book our afternoons together.”

“I just can’t help you today. I’ve got to work in the coffee shop.”

“You’ve taken a part-time job?” Makoto’s glare intensified. “This is not conducive to your rehabilitation as I have it planned. I must insist that you quit at once, Akira-Chan.”

“Oh, sorry.” Akira let out an exaggerated hiss, like a deflating balloon. “Nothing doing. See, I was told to work there by my guardian, Sakura-San. You know, my ACTUAL probation officer? And if I don’t do what he tells me, then it’s straight to juvie for me. And I realize that’s awfully similar to the arrangement you and I have, but you know how it is.” Akira held out his left hand, palm turned up. “Staying in school…” Akira held out his right hand in a similar fashion. “Having a roof over my head and food to eat.” Akira slowly lowered his right hand and raised his left hand.

“I see…” Makoto frowned. She seemed to be trying to think of an argument to keep Akira, but was coming up with nothing. Finally, she relented. “Well, I suppose there’s nothing that can be done about it. Is this a permanent arrangement?”

“Looks like it, yeah.”

“Alright then. I’ll just have to find another way to help your rehabilitation. Do you think—”

“I hate to cut you off, Niijima-Sama, but I’ve really got to get going.” Akira looked at the time on his phone. “Daylight’s burning and I’ve got beans to grind.”

“Of course. Goodbye, Akira-Chan.”

“See you around.”

And with a skip in his step, Akira left Shujin Academy — and Makoto Niijima — behind.

Chapter End Notes

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N24fVEJyQKM
Chapter Summary

Akira and friends get goal-oriented.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“Hey, uh… Sakamoto…”

The timid voice caught Makoto’s attention immediately. She was hanging fliers for the school’s blood drive when the name of the school’s rising track star crossed her ears. She looked over to the source and sure enough, there he was: Ryūji Sakamoto, the first year who’d been the talk of the school. According to rumor, the boy had been vexing Mr. Kamoshida ever since he’d taken over the track team. If the things people were saying were true, Kamoshida had been trying to wear down the track team by overexerting them, but Sakamoto refused to break. No matter how hard Kamoshida pushed, what kind of hell he put them through, how much he deprived them of water, Sakamoto just kept going. He seemed to have boundless energy, and Kamoshida’s insults and harsh training regimen had only motivated him to run even faster out of spite. The more Makoto heard about him, the more he seemed like a prime candidate to follow up with on the things Shiho Suzui had told her to bust Kamoshida.

“Yeah, uh…” Ryūji scratched his head, staring at the shorter boy approaching him. “Mijima’, right?”

“Uh, it’s ‘Mishima’, actually.”

And with that, Makoto stared openly at the two, completely unable to hide her intrigue. Yuuki Mishima was another person of interest in her investigation. Apparently he was Kamoshida’s messenger. Anybody who went to see him for “special lessons” was told to report to his office by Mishima. Judging by how meek the boy seemed, Makoto sincerely doubted he acted out of malice. It was more likely he was being threatened into acting as accessory to the gym teacher’s fiendish acts.

“Yeah, whatever.” Ryūji seemed bored. “Whaddya want?”

“Um… Mr. Kamoshida-“

“What about him?” Ryūji glared at Mishima.

“W-well…” Oh yeah. Mishima definitely scared easy. “H-he wants to see y-you in his office.”

“No can do.” Ryūji yawned. “I’m about to head out. Since I don’t got practice today my mom wants me to help her with some stuff.”

“B-But Kamoshida said that he wants you to-“

“Sucks for him. Duty to family comes first, y’know? My mom and I only got each other, so I can’t bail on her no matter what.” Ryūji walked past Mishima and roughly patted him on the shoulder.
“See ya around, dude.”

Mishima reached out to Ryuji as he walked away, but didn’t say anything. Makoto watched as he stood frozen in the middle of the hallway for a moment. Then he started shaking. Makoto couldn’t see his face, but it was obvious from his body language that he was freaking out. Finally, he turned and started walking slowly towards the physical education faculty office, moving at the pace of a man marching to his own execution.

Makoto followed Mishima as quietly as she could. In truth, she wasn’t that stealthy, but he seemed to be too nervous to notice her, pausing before knocking on the door to the office. After a moment, he went inside. Makoto snuck up to the door and pressed her ear against it only to hear a crashing sound.

“What do you mean HE’S NOT COMING!?” Kamoshida’s voice screamed.

“H-He said he had to g-go home to his mother!” Mishima sounded like he was in pain.

“His mother!? What is he, a little kid!?”

“He said she needed him!”

“Fucking- What, is she sick or something?”

“I don’t think so…” Mishima’s voice calmed down. Makoto could barely hear him. “He said that it’s just him and her at home. Nobody else. She must be really overworked or something.”

“Huh…” Kamoshida seemed to calm down as well. “Come to think of it, there’s no mention of a dad in his school file. Always thought that was kind of weird… See what you can find out about this.”

“Huh?”

“What, do you have a concussion or something? Think! Sakamoto’s got no dad, right? There’s gotta be story behind that. Maybe it’s even something that can be used against him. Find out what it is!”

“How am I supposed to do that!?”

“I don’t know! You’re the computer nerd! Google something!”

The sound of footsteps approached the door and Makoto froze for a moment. By the time she realized she should run, it was already too late. It would look suspicious if she was seen bolting from the door as it opened. Thinking quickly, she turned to the wall and started putting up one of the fliers she was carrying. The door opened and Mishima trudged out, followed by Kamoshida a moment later. He looked down at the student council vice-president.

“Niijima-Chan? What are you doing out here?”

“Good afternoon, Mr. Kamoshida.” Makoto finished pinning up the flier and bowed to the gym teacher. “I’m presently going around the school posting fliers for the blood drive this Saturday.” Makoto handed Kamoshida a flier to punctuate her statement. “Would you consider donating?”

“Oh, uh…” Kamoshida looked at the flier for a moment, then back to the girl in front of him, giving her a sheepish smile. “I’m not sure. Between you and me, I have a little thing about needles.”
“I see. That’s a shame.” Makoto took the flier back. “I imagine somebody as healthy as yourself would make an excellent blood donor. Imagine the excitement somebody would get from learning that the blood that saved their life belonged to an Olympian!”

“You make a compelling case, Nijima-Chan.” Kamoshida gave a nervous laugh that was obviously fake and looked up at the ceiling. “I suppose I could give it further consideration…”

While Kamoshida was distracted, Makoto looked past him into his office. One of the shelves was askew, its contents knocked onto the floor.

“Oh my…” Makoto pointed at the mess. “I thought I heard a crashing sound a few moments ago. What happened?”

“Oh, that?” A smug smile formed on Kamoshida’s face. “That was that klutz Mishima.”

‘Mishima’?

“Yeah, you probably wouldn’t know him. He’s a first-year.” Kamoshida shook his head. “I let him onto the volleyball team on a provisional basis, but the poor kid can barely stand on his own two feet. He’s always falling over and injuring himself. I oughta just kick him off the team, but I feel sorry for him. No harm keeping him on board as a bench warmer, right?”

“I suppose not.” Makoto looked down at the fliers in her hand. “Well, I should be getting back to my student council duties.”

“Student council, right.” Kamoshida looked Makoto up and down, his eyes lingering on her legs. “If you don’t mind my saying, it seems like a bit of a waste. You seem to be in pretty good shape, Nijima-Chan.” Kamoshida put his hand on Makoto’s shoulder, causing her to immediately tense up. “You ever consider trying out for the girls’ volleyball team?”

“That’s very flattering…” Makoto stepped back, escaping from Kamoshida’s touch. “It’s true that I keep in shape because I practice martial arts, but I’m afraid I’m much more suited to academic pursuits than physical ones.”

“Shame.” Kamoshida let his eyes linger a moment longer before letting his predatory gaze trail up to Makoto’s eyes. He walked past her and headed for the nearest stairway. “Well, have a good day, Nijima-Chan.”

“And you as well, sir.” Makoto watched Kamoshida as he disappeared from sight. Once he was completely gone, she loosened her stance, feeling a shiver crawl up her spine.

“Akechi was positively elated as Akira walked into the alley. For once, Akira was somewhat equipped to return his enthusiasm.

“Yeah, and it’s a good thing too.” Akira walked past Akechi and patted him on the shoulder. “We’re going to need your expertise if we want to survive this crap, Goro.”

‘Goro’?” Akechi turned to Akira with a confused look on his face.

“Yeah.” Akira pulled out his phone and opened the Metaverse app. “I didn’t get it wrong, did I? Your full name IS ‘Goro Akechi’, isn’t it?”
“Well yes, it is…” Akechi scratched his head. “But most people don’t usually address me by my first name.”

“Are you uncomfortable with it?” Akira asked.

“Oh no, certainly not!” Akechi shook his head very vigorously. “It’s just unexpected, is all.”

“Well, Ann, Shiho and I all call each other by our first names. Why shouldn’t I do the same for you?” Akira looked up from his phone. “We’re a team now, aren’t we? Friends?”

The next thing Akira knew, Akechi was rushing at him, arms spread, a wide smile on his face, and eyes watering. Akira’s reaction time was just good enough to hold his arm out, holding Akechi back by the forehead.

“What are you doing!?”

“You said we were friends!” Akechi’s fingers writhed around uselessly, trying to somehow extend out and grasp Akira. “Nobody’s ever said that to me before!”

“Don’t make it weird, man!”

“This isn’t weird! This is how I express friendship!”

“If nobody’s ever called you a friend how would you know that!?”

“I just feel it in my heart!”

Shiho and Ann started laughing at the display before them, Ann pulling out her phone and switching to camera mode. Akira pressed a button in his Metaverse App, instantly transporting them to the Cognitive World. As the four of them changed into their outfits, Ann’s camera shut off instantly.

“What the heck!?” Ann hit the side of her phone. “I just got this thing! How is it broken already!?”

“Maybe it’s the constant pictures of desserts you’re taking and posting to Pinstagram” Shiho said.

“My followers demand to know where the best treats in Tokyo are!” Ann yelled.

“Ann, you’re a model.” Shiho shook her head. “I can guarantee you that most of your followers aren’t there for your opinions on dessert.”

“Your phone isn’t broken, Ann-San.” Akechi stopped trying to hug Akira and turned to the girls. “Most technology doesn’t work in the Metaverse. Outside of the Metaverse App, our phones are completely useless.”

“Why’s that, Goro?” Shiho asked.

“To be perfectly candid, Shiho-San, I have no idea.” Akechi shrugged. “I have learned many things about the Metaverse, but I am far from an expert on it. Also, as much as it delights me to be called by my first name, I would ask that while we are in this world you call me ‘Karasu’.”

“What’s up with that anyway?” Akira crossed his arms. “It’s not like there’s a point to hiding your identity. The real Makoto Nijima doesn’t know about all this heart-stealing stuff, and it’s not like her Shadow wouldn’t recognize you on sight.”

“It helps me focus on the mission.” Akechi tossed back his cape dramatically. “Goro Akechi is
merely a teenage detective, but he lacks the strength to affect any real change. But as the Phantom Hero Karasu, I have the power to change hearts, fight evil, and save lives!"

“‘Phantom Hero’?” Ann scanned Akechi’s costume with her eyes. “You don’t look like a ghost. Shouldn’t you be ‘Bird Hero’ or something?”

“It reflects the secrecy of my crusade!” Akechi turned his head up, the long nose of his mask pointing up to the red and blue sky. “Nobody knows about Karasu changing hearts, but he still does it in the name of the common good!”

“I see…” Shiho scratched her chin. “And giving yourself a superhero name makes you better at all of this? Is it a matter of cognition?”

“In a sense.” Akechi smiled at Shiho. “I would say the effect is more psychosomatic than a power that actually manifests in the Cognitive World.”

“Ooh!” Ann’s hand shot up. “I want a name too!”

“You do?” Akira and Akechi asked simultaneously with vastly different levels of enthusiasm.

“Yeah! I think we should all get codenames! If we get psyched up for this ‘Phantom Hero’ stuff, it’ll only make us better, right!?”

“That sounds fun!” Shiho clasped her hands together. “It’s like a team-building exercise! Let’s all pick superhero names!”

“Do we have to?” Akira made no effort to hide the annoyance in his tone. “Can’t we just get to changing Niijima’s heart or stealing it or whatever it is we’re doing?”

“Come on, Akira!” Ann put her hands on her hips and glared at her trench coat-clad friend. “Do you have to be such a killjoy all the time!?”

“What are you talking about?” Akira was genuinely taken aback by Ann’s question. “I’m not a killjoy!”

“You’re always brooding and worrying about stuff and acting all serious!” Ann sighed. “I know things are kind of rough for you right now but you need to lighten up. Do you even know how to have fun?”

“I can be fun…” Akira actually started to pout. “I like to play games and tell jokes and stuff.”

“Yeah…” Ann rolled her eyes. “You’re a real joker.”

“That’s perfect!” Akechi shouted.

“What is?”

“That can be Akira-Kun’s codename! ‘Joker’!” Akechi pointed at Akira excitedly while looking at Ann. “It’s the perfect way for a superhero to retain his secret identity! Nobody would ever think that the man called ‘Joker’ would be somebody so serious!”

“You’re right, Karasu!” Shiho giggled. “It’s a great codename for him!”

“What!? No!” Akira stamped his foot. “I’m not going to let you guys give me a codename that makes fun of me!”
“All in favor of calling Akira-Kun ‘Joker’, say ‘aye’!” Akechi shouted. He immediately threw his hand up in the air.

“AYE!” Ann and Shiho threw their hands in the air, shouting in unison.

“NAY!” Akira yelled.

“Sorry Joker,” Akechi said, “the ‘ayes’ have it!”

“Jerks.” Akira turned away from the group, grumbling inaudibly.

“Now me!” Ann started jumping up and down. “What’s my superhero name gonna be!?”

“Hmm…” Akechi looked Ann up and down for a few moments. It was one of the rare moments when Ann didn’t feel creeped out by an intense stare. After his fourth or fifth scan of her, he spoke up. “How about… ‘Madame Claw’? Because of the cat theme.”

“It’s not bad,” Ann said, “but I’m not sure.”

“Ann’s costume doesn’t have claws” Shiho said. She looked at the tail sticking out of Ann’s costume and snapped her fingers. “How about ‘Cat-O-Nine’? Because she’s got a cat tail and uses a whip?”

“That’s not very catchy.” Ann shook her head and turned to Akira. “What do you think, Joker?”

“Huh?” Akira’s attention snapped to Ann. “Think of what?”

“We’re trying to decide on my name! Keep up, Joker!”

“What? I don’t know!” Akira turned away from the others again. “It doesn’t matter! Just pick something! Like, ‘the Panther’ or something.”

“I like it!” Ann gave Akira a thumbs-up. “Good thinking, Joker!”

“Yes, it’s very catchy” Akechi added.

“I agree” Shiho said. “Very sleek and cool-sounding.”

“I guess you CAN be fun sometimes” Ann said.

“So does that mean you’ll call me something else?” Akira asked.

Ann ignored Akira, snarling and curling her fingers like claws. “Look out, evil! The Panther is coming for you!”

“Yeah, but is it coming to stop them or help them?” Shiho raised her eyebrow. “You look more like a villain right now.”

“I can’t help it if villains have more flair” Ann said.

“I’m not so sure about that” Akechi said. “Superheroes are clearly much more stylish than supervillains.”

“I dunno, Karasu…” Ann pointed to the tassels on Akechi’s shoulders. “Your costume’s kind of extra.”
“Firstly, there is nothing wrong with my outfit!” Akechi took out his beam sword and thrust it up into the air. “And even if there were, nothing is more stylish than justice!”

“Justice has nothing to do with style!”

“I respectfully disagree.” Akechi put away his sword and crossed his arms. “I think heroism is the trendiest thing of all.”

“Both of you stop it” Akira said. “Let’s just pick Shiho’s codename so we can get to work.”

“That’s right!” Ann turned to Shiho. “Alright Shiho, I was giving it some thought, and I-“

“‘Russian’” Shiho said. “I want to be called ‘Russian’.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“I think it’s a fine name” Akechi said.

“Huh…” Akira looked at the fur trim on Shiho’s coat. “I don’t really know much about Russia, but I guess it works.”

“Well then, I supposed that settles it!” Akechi posed proudly, hands on his hips and chest puffed out. “Karasu, Joker, Panther, and Russian! We’re the Phantom Heroes!”

“Whatever.” Akira leaned against the alley wall. “So what’s the plan? I mean, I know we’re supposed to beat up Nijima’s Shadow and take the Treasure or whatever, but just how the hell are we supposed to do that?”

“I’d like to know that too” Shiho said. “You’ve all explained everything to me, but I’m not sure I totally get it.”

“It can all be a bit much to take in at first” Akechi said. “I remember when Igor first explained it all to me, no explanation felt satisfactory. I think it will save us a lot of time if I just tell you this is the sort of thing you learn by doing.”

“Alright, so how do we do it?” Ann looked at Akechi with great interest. “What’s step one?”

“Step one is finding the Treasure and securing a route to it. We would likely be too tired to take the Treasure by the time we located it, so it is imperative we establish a way of accessing it quickly and safely.”

“You don’t already know where the treasure is?” Shiho asked.

“It is likely in a highly-secure location. Somewhere Makoto-San would consider very important.”

“The tower” Akira and Ann said in unison.

“Yes, that seems like a likely candidate.”

“Not just likely” Akira said. “Ann- Er- Panther and I have been there. She’s got a big fancy throne room, and she enters it by coming out of the ceiling.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t see anything that looked like a treasure in there” Ann said.
“There’s probably another room you get to through the ceiling.” Akira scratched his chin. “Maybe we need to ride the throne up there like an elevator?”

“But how do we get to the throne room?” Ann started fiddling with her hair. “The tower has all of those police, and they’re not the only danger around here.”

“Yes, there’s that weird muscular version of myself” Shiho said.

“The only way to the throne room I can think of aside from the tower’s elevator is that tunnel the Ryuji dog uses,” Akira said, “and that is not an option.”

Akira, Ann, and Shiho all stood in thought, frustration on their faces. None of them seemed to have a solution for their dilemma.

“Don’t look so glum, everyone!” Akechi gave the group a big smile. “Palace infiltration is never easy! We just have to do the legwork is all! It’s not like you can expect us to find a guide to the city or anything!”

Akira started to chuckle. Ann, Akechi, and Shiho all looked at him in surprise.

“Funny you should say that…”

The rat was stationed in his usual hole in the wall by the sewer’s entrance. He was aware that the Queen’s enemies now knew about him, but since he knew they knew about him, it’s not like that big demon could just reach out and grab him again. This time, the rat would be ready for any clawed hand that came for him, and he could retreat back into his hole where the monster couldn’t reach him.

The rat was not ready for a spiked ball on a chain suddenly swinging down from the open manhole above directly for his perch. He jumped out of his hole just before the ball hit him. And it was a good thing too, because that ball smashed into the wall, creating a much larger opening for his little tunnel. He would not have been able to retreat far enough to avoid being crushed.

The downside to all of this was he was now surrounded by four masked teenagers. The same one with the red gloves as before picked him up by the tail.

“Here he is” Akira said. “This is the same rat that led me to the stadium. I bet he knows a lot more secrets.”

“No I don’t!” The rat started squirming in Akira’s grasp, but it was no use. “Let me go!”

“Holy-“ Shiho leaned in and glared at the rat, scanning its human face. “Mishima!?”

Yuuki Mishima made his way through the halls quickly. With how frantic he was, it was pretty hard not to notice him. But more than his attitude, the flash drive in his hand interested Makoto greatly. After seeing the mousy boy enter Kamoshida’s office, Makoto was about to eavesdrop again, but changed her mind at the last second. She had no fliers to use as cover this time. Instead, Makoto hid by the door to the hallway connecting to the practice building, waiting to see if anything would happen. After about ten minutes, Mishima left the room looking relieved, followed by Kamoshida sporting the most wicked smile Makoto had ever seen in her life. When the two disappeared from view, Makoto entered the office. She walked over to Kamoshida’s computer. The flash drive was still plugged in.
Makoto poured through the drive’s contents as quickly as she could. Contained on that tiny hunk of plastic and metal were extensive documents highlighting one Shizuka Ueno née Sakamoto’s request for divorce from her husband, Saburo Ueno. The request was based on Saburo’s prolonged absenteeism from the family as well as a history of drunkenness and abuse of both the physical and verbal nature towards his wife and their young son Ryuji. As Saburo Ueno had very little in the way of money, Shizuka primarily wanted full custody of Ryuji, as well as to change her son’s last name to her maiden name, Sakamoto. Ultimately, Shizuka won the case, as Saburo could not even be reached to argue against his wife’s demands. But the records of Shizuka’s testimony as well as a psychologist’s interviews with Ryuji painted the clear picture of a childhood full of pain and suffering, the kind of thing that traumatizes people for life.

Somehow, Yuuki Mishima had gotten access to these official documents. And worse than that, he had given them to Kamoshida, who seemed to derive a sadistic thrill from learning the information. Suguru Kamoshida had left his office armed with confidential information about Ryuji Sakamoto, a boy he hated and whose downfall he wanted to orchestrate. And while Makoto was reading all of this information herself, the track team’s practice had already begun.

Makoto ran outside as fast as she could. As she passed windows overlooking the field, she could see some kind of commotion going on, but had no time to stop and observe it. By the time she reached the outside of the school, the track team’s members were all standing around in a circle, unmoving. The few faces Makoto could see displayed complete terror. As Makoto got closer, she could see Kamoshida standing tall. He had a swollen eye and a monstrous grin on his face. And as she arrived at the scene, she saw that he was standing over Ryuji Sakamoto, the boy lying on the ground covered in bruises, screaming in agony as Kamoshida placed his foot on the teenager’s leg and began to apply pressure.

“What is a ‘Mishima’?” Akira asked.

“He’s in our class!” Ann said.

“He is?” Akira held Mishima up to his face and looked at him closely.

“You don’t recognize him?”

“I don’t pay attention to the people in our class much.” Akira tossed the rat in the air and caught it as it came down. “It’s not like they have anything nice to say about me.”

“Well, you should definitely pay attention to this one.” Shiho looked like she was about to bite the creature’s head off. “Because he’s a complete rat in the real world too.”

“I’m sure he can’t be that bad, Russian.” Akechi looked at the rat in amusement. “He seems harmless enough.”

“Back when Kamoshida was around, Mishima was his messenger.” Shiho grit her teeth. “Everybody he assaulted in his office was told to go there by Mishima. He let everyone else get hurt to save himself from Kamoshida’s wrath.”

“And now he sneaks around doing stuff for Makoto Niijima.” Ann pointed at the rat. “He’s a spineless coward who joins up with whoever has the most power and doesn’t care who he has to throw under the bus to save his own hide!”

“That’s not true!” The rat flailed around helplessly. “You don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“I know that when people on the volleyball team talked to you, they’d show up to school injured
the next day.” It took all of Shiho’s self-restraint not to throttle the captured rat on the spot. “If they showed up at all.”

“My, what a loathsome character.” Akechi gave the rat a disturbed look.

“We shouldn’t waste our time talking to him!” Ann pulled out her whip. “Let’s just beat him up and get going!”

“Time out, Panther!” Akira held the rat away from Ann. “We still need to pump this guy for information!” Akira turned to the rat. “So, Mishima, right? We were hoping you could tell us how to get to the top of the Queen’s tower without being noticed. What do you say?”

“Let me go!” The rat managed to get enough of a swing going to snap out at Akira and bite his nose, but Akira moved out of the way at the last second.

“Fine.” Akira turned to Ann. “Panther, let’s do it your way.”

Ann grinned and removed her mask, summoning Carmen. Ann’s hand glowed with a fiery aura and a large fireball appeared in Carmen’s hand. Carmen lowered the flame to right below Mishima.

“Hoo boy, that’s some flame. Makes me wish I weren’t wearing this heavy coat.” Akira let the rat dangle over the fire for a minute, fanning himself with his free hand. “It’s a good thing these sewers are so clean. Maybe I’ll go for a nice refreshing swim after we make some barbecued rat. What do you guys think?”

“Barbecue and a swim? How delightful!” Akechi clasped his hands together. “It’s like a beach party! And I’ve had rat before, but never barbecued!”

“I don’t know if there’s enough meat for all four of us, though” Shiho said.

“You have a point, Russian.” Akira moved the rat away from the fire. “You’re pretty small. Don’t know if your meat could satisfy all of us. But I bet your information could.”

“I’ll never talk!” The rat gave Akira a bizarre look. His eyes were starting to tear up, but there was still determination in them. “So just g-go ahead and cook me already!”

“Huh.” Akira looked to the others. “He was a lot more afraid of being hurt last time I tried this. Led me right to you guys and everything.”

“I f-figured you’d get yourself captured” the rat admitted. “I didn’t think you’d actually rescue your friends!”

“You little shit…” Akira held the rat over the fire again. “This is your last chance, Mishima! Start talking or else!”

“Do it! I’ll never betray the Queen!” Mishima gave Akira a fearful look. “Even if you kill me, nothing you could threaten me with would be half as bad as what she’d do to me if she learned I helped you!”

“I think he means it” Shiho said.

“Should we roast him?” Ann asked.

“You’re asking us?” Akira raised his eyebrow. “You’re the one making the fire.”

“Yeah, I mean, but that was just to scare him!” Ann gave the rat a pitiful look. “If we let him go,
he’ll probably squeal on us again, so we should roast him, right? But at the same time, it’s like, I don’t like Mishima, but I don’t wanna KILL him either!”

“I would remind you that this is not the real Mishima, Panther.” Akechi poked the rat a couple times. “This little fellow is a cognitive being, Makoto-San’s cognition of the genuine article. He does not truly exist.”

“So killing him’s a victimless crime, right?” Akira held the rat closer to the flame. “The real Mishima won’t get hurt by this at all?”

“That’s right, but I do not believe it would be in our best interest to dispose of him at this time.” Akechi held out his hand to Akira, staring at the rat. “May I?”

Akira tossed the rat to the older boy. Akechi removed his mask, summoning Robin Hood, who boosted him back out through the manhole they came into the sewer from. Robin Hood vanished, and Akira, Ann, and Shiho all followed after Akechi. By the time they reached the surface, Akechi was being lifted up by Robin Hood again, and the Mishima-Rat was dangling with one half of a pair of handcuffs closed around his belly. Akechi bent a drainpipe over the alleyway out of shape, causing it to protrude from the wall, and clasped the other half of the cuffs around it. Robin Hood lowered him to the ground and disappeared, and the re-masked Akechi looked up at the rat and grinned.

“What are you doing!?” The dangling rat started to shake in the cuffs. “Let me down now!”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that at this time” Akechi replied. “I would also advise you to stop struggling. I am certain that in time, you would be able to escape the handcuffs, but at the height you’re hanging from, you would likely not survive the fall.”

“Uh… Karasu…” Akira looked up at the dangling rat. “I admire your creativity, but I don’t think anything we can do to this guy is going to make him talk.”

“You’re quite right, Joker.” Akechi grinned at Akira. “At the very least, nothing we can do to him in THIS world will!” Akechi pulled out his phone and activated the Metaverse Nav, transporting the group back to the real world. Not much time had passed since the group had entered the Metaverse, and the sun had only lowered in the sky a little. “Here, however, is a different story.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand, Goro.” Shiho looked up to the spot where the rat had been dangling in the Metaverse, only to see an unbroken pipe and no rat. “Why have you returned us to the real world?”

“Yeah!” Ann stomped her foot. “We didn’t make any progress at all! The only thing we did was pick codenames, and it’s not like we needed to be in that other world for that!”

“Unfortunately, Ann-San, we have already encountered our first major obstacle to progress.” Goro sighed. “We need information from Mishima, but he is not willing to give it to us. But without knowing what he knows, we cannot proceed.”

“Well he’s not talking! Can’t we just ask one of those cops or something!?”

“I don’t think so” Akira said. “I got one of those Shadows to join me, but when he did, he kinda forgot everything about working for the Queen.”

“Yes, Shadows are not complex beings” Akechi said. “The only way we’ll be able to learn anything about Makoto-San’s Palace is from a cognitive being that has a special relationship to her, and Mishima the rat is our best chance of that.”
“Yeah, but we might as well be trying to squeeze blood from a stone as far as that guy’s concerned.”

“I agree. Makoto-San’s cognition of Mishima is somebody who would never dare betray her.” Akechi gave a know-it-all grin. “That’s why we must change the way she sees him.”

“Change Makoto Niijima’s opinion of Yuuki Mishima?” Ann crossed her arms. “How’s that gonna help?”

“A Palace is a world made from someone’s Cognition” Akira said. “Everything in Niijima’s Palace is dictated by how she sees the world. So if the way she sees something changes, I’m guessing it’ll change in there, right?”

“That’s absolutely right, Akira-Kun!” Akechi clapped his hands. “If we make Makoto-San think Mishima might reveal her secrets in the real world, then her cognitive version of him should tell us whatever we want to know!”

“So how do we make him do that?” Ann asked.

“We need Makoto-San to see Mishima talking to one of us. She needs to believe he’s giving away privileged information.”

“I don’t know how easy that’s going to be” Shiho said. “Mishima is pretty scared of Niijima-Senpai as it is. I don’t know if we’ll be able to threaten the information out of him.”

“Nobody said anything about threatening him.” Akira looked at Ann. “There are lots of ways to get a rat to do what you want.”

“You’re right.” Shiho looked at Ann and giggled. “Maybe we just need the right hunk of cheese.”

“What are you two talking about?” Akechi looked back and forth between Akira and Ann. “You do realize that the real Mishima is not a rat, right? I’m not so sure that cheese is-“ Akechi’s eyes landed on Ann’s yellow hair. “Ah, of course!”

“Um…” Ann looked around at the other three. The smiles they were giving her were unsettling. “Why are you guys looking at me like that?”

Chapter End Notes

I’m getting back into the groove of all of this. Hopefully I’ll be able to update this fic more than once a month.
In the past, Makoto Nijima concludes her investigation of Kamoshida.

It had been a few days since what people were calling the “Sakamoto Incident” and Ryuji was still suspended. Thankfully, Makoto’s arrival on the track field that afternoon stopped Kamoshida from breaking Ryuji’s leg, but the boy was still badly beaten and had been the one to throw the first punch at the teacher. Before Ryuji was forced to leave the school’s grounds for a month, Makoto had promised him the same thing she’d promised a similarly-battered Shiho Suzui some time ago: She was going to bring an end to the reign of Suguru Kamoshida.

Makoto figured the best way to do that would be to get Yuuki Mishima on her side. Although she was somewhat disgusted by the boy constantly instructing other students to report to Kamoshida for suffering, she had a hard time blaming him. In all her observation of Yuuki Mishima, the boy always seemed to have a fresh bruise somewhere. Kamoshida abused him even when he did what he was told. She didn’t want to imagine what the punishment for failure would be.

Today, Makoto was trailing Mishima when he did something that broke the usual pattern. As was common, he was approaching a student. The main difference was that this student wasn’t on one of Kamoshida’s athletic teams. Makoto recognized the girl as being from her grade, but couldn’t remember her name. And she really felt like she should’ve been able to, because this girl didn’t exactly blend in with the crowd. She had loud makeup, a single asymmetrical ponytail held up by a pink bow, and her school skirt seemed a bit shorter than the other girls in her class. Makoto had definitely seen the girl around many times, but she couldn’t place a name to the face.

“Excuse me, um, Takao-Senpai?”

The girl was tapping away on her phone at a rapid pace. She barely looked up, one eye glancing over Mishima for a second before returning to her screen.

“Um…” Mishima spoke up. “You ARE Eiko Takao, right?”

“Yeah.” Eiko kept tapping away at her phone. “Uh, do I, like, know you?”

“No. My name is Yuuki Mishima. I have a message for you.”

“So spill it.”

“Mr. Kamoshida would like to see you in his office.”
“Kamoshida?” Eiko actually looked up from her phone. Her expression was nothing short of baffled. “What’s he want with me?”

“I… Um… I don’t know.” Mishima was clearly lying. “He just said he wanted to talk to you.”

“Well, I’m right here.” Eiko returned her attention to her phone. “If he wants to talk to me so bad, you can tell him where I am.”

“He said that he needs to see you in his office right away.”

“Listen, Yucky-“

“It’s ‘Yuuki’.”

“Whatever.” Eiko scoffed. “I don’t have any reason to talk to Kamoshida. It’s not like I’m bombing gym class or anything.” Eiko held out her phone and smiled, taking a selfie. Her face became bored again as she started selecting filters. “Plus, this is totally sketchy. How do I even know you’re telling the truth? What if you’re just like, some slimy little creep trying to get me alone in a room somewhere?”

“That’s not- I don’t-“

“Get lost, Freshie. I’m way out of your league.” Eiko shooed Mishima away with her free hand. He lingered for a moment, then slowly trudged away, defeated. Makoto considered following him, but stopped herself. The worst that would happen was that Kamoshida would take his anger out on Mishima. And that was a terrible thing, but if Makoto showed up at his office to intervene in another one of his violent acts, he would DEFINITELY realize she was investigating him. The more interesting subject seemed to be Eiko Takao. She was a completely new factor in this little drama, somebody who had nothing to do with Kamoshida whatsoever, yet he still wanted to see her. Makoto thought back to how Ryuji Sakamoto had refused Kamoshida’s summons, and how Kamoshida had followed up by having Mishima dig up personal information about Ryuji. Maybe if Makoto got close to Eiko, she could find a way to prevent history from repeating itself. And so, while Mishima was almost certainly going off to his own misfortune, Makoto made the uneasy decision to approach the girl he had just been talking to.

“Excuse me, are you busy?” Makoto asked.

“Depends” Eiko said.

“On what?”

“On who’s asking.” Eiko looked up from her phone for a second, giving Makoto’s face a brief-yet-disdainful scan. “You looking for make-up tips or something?”

“Well, you see-” A lightbulb went off in Makoto’s head. Talking about Kamoshida, who Eiko claimed to have no relationship to, probably wouldn’t get her anywhere. It was probably best to engage the girl with a subject she clearly cared about. “Actually, yes!”

“Oh.” Eiko looked up from her phone in earnest. “Really?”

“Yes. Your look is just so bold, and as you can see, mine is rather plain.” Makoto wasn’t lying. At least, not entirely. It’s true that she wasn’t exactly envious of Eiko Takao’s aesthetic, or even at all fond of it, but there were times that she wondered if she could do something more daring with her appearance. It wasn’t a high priority for her, but it was something she entertained from time to time. Makoto bowed slightly. “Oh! My name is Makoto Niijima. What is yours?”
“I’m Eiko Takao.” Eiko actually put away her phone. “Say, ‘Niijima’, you’re that student council girl, right?”

“That’s right.” Makoto smiled. “I am the vice-president of the student council.”

“Yeah, I thought so.” A smirk appeared on Eiko’s face. “And you also get the best grades in school, right?”

“Well, I don’t know about the WHOLE school…” Makoto blushed a little. She was just being humble. She knew for a fact no other student at Shujin Academy got marks as good as hers. “But I do believe I am the top of our grade, yes.”

“Uh-huh… Uh-huh…” Eiko grinned. “Tell you what, Makoto-Chan. I’ll give you some beauty tips, but you’ve gotta do something for me too.”

“And that is?” Makoto’s heart sunk a bit. She had been approached more than once by her classmates asking her to do their homework for them. They had always offered compensation, but just the idea of helping somebody cheat disgusted Makoto. Still, if it was for the investigation, she may have to lower her standards this one time.

“My grades in history are like, super bad. And my parents said if they don’t get better then I can’t go to Okinawa with my friends over break, which would totally suck ‘cuz I’ve already bought a new bikini” Eiko held out her hand. “So, how about you tutor me in history stuff, and I tutor you in fashion and beauty stuff! Deal?”

It wasn’t quite what Makoto was expecting, but she certainly had no moral objection to it. It was just an exchange of services. People helped each other out all the time. Plus, tutoring Eiko would be a good way to get extra face time with her, AND it would look good for Makoto’s academic prospects down the line. Sae was always telling Makoto to take any opportunity she could to make herself look good. Makoto could see literally no downside to this, so she grabbed Eiko’s hand and shook it.

“Deal.”

Lunchtime came and the classroom came alive. As different desks were pushed together and feet shuffled out of the room, Akira tapped Ann on the shoulder. When she turned around, he pointed at Mishima.

“I really don’t like this plan” Ann said.

“Too bad. The group voted, and we decided you have to do it.”

“That’s not fair! Shouldn’t my opinion count!?”

“It did. The other opinions had a higher count. Just like when you chose my codename.”

“This isn’t the same thing at all! One’s a nickname, the other is… Ew!”

“Look…” Akira pinched the bridge of his nose. “I know it sucks. But you’re the only one who can do this. Goro doesn’t go to our school, Mishima runs scared whenever he sees me coming, and Shiho can’t do it because it’s well known that everyone on Kamoshida’s old teams hates Mishima.”

“But I’m Shiho’s best friend! Doesn’t that mean by the transistor property that I would hate him
“Firstly, it’s ‘transitive property’. And secondly, well...” Akira shrugged. “Honestly, we’re just hoping that Mishima gets so flustered by a pretty girl talking to him he doesn’t think of that.”

“This isn’t a very solid plan, Akira.”

“I know. But it’s the only one we got.” Akira gave Ann a thumbs up. “You can do this. I believe in you. And I’ll be here for moral support the whole time.”

“YO!” Ryuji stormed into the classroom, marching over to Akira.

“Shit” Akira muttered.

“KURUSU!” Ryuji hovered over Akira.

“You don’t have to be so loud, Sakamoto.” Akira rubbed his ears. “I’m right here.”

“Yeah, well, Miss Prez wants to see you!”

“After school?” Akira sighed. “I already told her, I can’t. I have to head to the cafe and-“

“She wants to see you NOW.” Ryuji leaned over Akira menacingly. “It’s not like you got work right this minute, yeah?”

“Yeah.” Akira gulped. “I guess not.”

“Student council room. NOW.”

“Alright, alright.” Akira stood up, raising his hands above my head. “I’m going, just settle down.” As Akira walked out the room, he looked back at Ann and tilted his head towards Mishima, mouthing “NOW”.

Akira started to sweat as he left the room. He realized that just because he had gotten free of Makoto after school didn’t mean he was free of her entirely, but he had hoped only having access to him for short periods of time would be enough of a deterrent to get her to stop bothering him. He had really been counting on being able to oversee this Mishima operation to keep things running smoothly. He remembered when he and Ann were trying to keep the Metaverse secret from Shiho. Ann was a terrible liar. But worrying about bad acting would be a moot point if Ann didn’t even have the confidence to put their plan into action.

As Akira reached the stairs, he heard Ann’s voice yelling “HEY MISHIMAAAAAA” from the classroom. It didn’t do much to alleviate his fears. When he got upstairs, the door to the student council room was already open. Akira walked through to see Makoto sitting at that big desk of hers.

“You wanted to see me, Niijima-Senpai?”

“Now now, Akira-Chan...” Makoto pouted and shook her head. “That’s not the proper address, is it?”

“Right.” Akira grumbled and shut the door behind him. “You wanted to see me, Niijima-Sama?”

“Yes, I wanted to ask about your first day of work.”

“At the coffee shop?”
“Is that so strange?” Makoto gave Akira her usual possessive smile. “Even if we cannot spend as much time together, I am still interested in your rehabilitation, Akira-Chan. If your job is part of that, I would like to know how it’s going.”

“Ok, uh, sure…” Akira had worked with Sojiro last night after the Palace, so it’s not like he didn’t have anything to draw on. “I don’t know if there’s much to tell you though.”

“Well, have you learned to make coffee?” A flicker of amusement appeared in Makoto’s eyes. “I’m sure that would be a marvelous skill for you to exercise during lunch periods.”

“Yes, I can… imagine that.” Akira wasn’t sure if being a Persona user made him psychic, but he had this really distinct feeling that Makoto was imagining him in a butler outfit at the moment. “Well, I haven’t really done any brewing. Right now all the work Sakura-San has me doing is custodial.”

“Oh?” Makoto’s smile vanished. “That’s peculiar… If my recollection is correct, yesterday you told me you had ‘beans to grind’, did you not?”

“Did I?” Akira’s heart started to race.

“Yes. ‘Daylight’s burning and I’ve got beans to grind.’ Those were your exact words.”

“Ah, yes, I DID say that, didn’t I?” Akira laughed nervously and rubbed the back of his neck. “Well, I didn’t actually know what Sakura-San would have me doing. I assumed I was going to be in barista training, but when I got back to LeBlanc that day, he told me I wasn’t ready for that stuff yet.” That was true. Sojiro said Akira would have to earn his trust before he started letting the punk anywhere near the beans. For now, it was all grunt work.

“What kind of custodial work are you doing, exactly?”

“You know, basic stuff. Cleaning dishes, wiping off countertops, mopping the floor, that kind of thing.”

“Very well then.” Makoto laced her fingers together. “There’s a janitorial closet right across the hall. Fetch the necessary equipment and mop the floor of this room, Akira-Chan.”

“Excuse me?”

“I need to know you aren’t lying to me. If you can clean a coffee house, you can certainly clean the student council room, can you not?”

“But it’s lunchtime” Akira said. “I need to eat.”

“You need to work towards your rehabilitation, which sometimes involves sacrifice. I’m sure you’ll survive if you skip one meal.”

“Are you sure there’s enough time to get it done before class?”

“I suppose we’ll find out together, won’t we?” Makoto glared at Akira. “You have two choices, Akira-Chan: Either mop the floor of this room now, or I’ll see to it that you singlehandedly clean the whole school after classes are done, job or no job.”

“Yes, Niijima-Sama.” Akira bowed and stepped out of the student council room, finding the janitor’s closet easily. He grabbed a mop and started to fill a bucket with soapy water. For now, he’d have to indulge Makoto’s power trips. So long as Ann didn’t fuck up her mission, he’d be free
Makoto’s time with Eiko had been a lot more enjoyable than expected. Although their relationship
started out as an exchange of services, the two struck up a genuine friendship when Eiko took note
of Makoto’s old Buchimaru pencil case. Eiko was brash and somewhat spoiled, but underneath the
in-your-face attitude was a very sweet girl. She liked to tease Makoto a lot, but was never mean
about it, and over the course of two weeks they started hanging out more and more, moving beyond
agreed-upon tutoring sessions to shopping trips, meals in Shibuya, and idle hangout sessions.
Makoto, for her part, was thrilled by this. It was true that spending time with Eiko wasn’t really
conducive to the Kamoshida investigation like she had intended, but Makoto didn’t have much in
the way of a social life. Getting to hang out with somebody her own age and do normal girl things
wasn’t something she’d really done since starting high school. It even got to a point where Eiko
invited Makoto to join her and her other friends on their trip to Okinawa after exams were over in
a few weeks. Makoto very much wanted to go, but whether she’d be allowed to was another
question entirely. At this point, Makoto had three main goals:

1. Continue to succeed in her classes.
2. Bring down Kamoshida.
3. Figure out a way to convince Sae to let her take a trip over the summer break.

“Well, lemme know when she says ‘yes’” Eiko said.

“IF she says ‘yes’” Makoto replied. “I’m still trying to build up a strong argument as to how this
trip would be beneficial to my future plans.”

“I’m sure you’ll think of something! You’re like, the smartest girl in the world!” Eiko patted
Makoto on the back. “And then once she says ‘yes’, I’m gonna take you bikini shopping!”

“Oh, there’s no need for that. I already have a swimsuit.”

“Yeah, but I bet it’s all frumpy and stuff, right?”

“It’s not frumpy!” Makoto crossed her arms. “It’s cute!”

“Girl, forget cute!” Eiko gave Makoto a devilish grin. “We’re gonna make you hot! Once you hit
that beach, it’s gonna be you and a different boy every night!”

“Every night!??” Makoto started to blush violently. “I don’t- That’s- They’re all complete strangers
and-“ Makoto went quiet as she got redder and redder. “Can’t I start with just one?”

“Sure you can. And then another. And another. And another.” Eiko moved behind Makoto and
grabbed her shoulders. “You can keep a notebook of them all! We’ll call it ‘Makoto’s Summer of
Love’!”

“I have a student council meeting now” Makoto squeaked. She ran off before Eiko could say
anything else, leaving her friend laughing as she scampered up the stairs. Eiko’s laughter came to
a halt as she heard footsteps behind her.

“Takao-Senpai, a moment?”

Eiko turned around to see Mishima. He was holding an envelope out to her.

“Oh gross.” Eiko scowled at the envelope. “I’m not interested in your confession of love,
Freshie.”
“It’s not a love letter.” Mishima pressed the envelope against Eiko’s hand. “I really th-think you should take a look at it.”

“Whatever.” Eiko took the envelope and tore it open. Some photos started to spill out. “If it’ll get you off my ba-“

Eiko looked down at the photos. They were all of her working her secret job at a hostess club, flirting with older men. Many of them were in compromising positions, featuring the men getting handsy, although none were of a straight-up sexual nature.

“Where did you get these!??” Eiko crumpled up the photos in her fist. “What do you want!?”

“I don’t w-want anything” Mishima said. “B-b-but… But…”

“BUT WHAT!??”

“M-Mr. Kamoshida…” Mishima started shaking. “Mr. Kamoshida said that if you don’t come to see him in his office right away, he would present them to the principal and your parents.”

“Are you threatening me, you little twerp!?”

“N-Not me!” Mishima held up his hands in front of his face. “I-I’m just the messenger!”

Eiko glared at the ball of photos, then at Mishima. Her eyes started to tear up. She took a deep breath, stuffed the pictures in her pocket, and walked towards Kamoshida’s office.

Makoto got out of her meeting an hour later. As she reached the ground floor of the school, she heard something coming up fast from behind her. Before she could turn around to see what it was, something collided into her, knocking her onto her side.

“Ouch!” Makoto rubbed the elbow she landed on as she sat up. “Hasn’t anybody ever told you how dangerous it is to run down the stairs? What’s so urgent that you-”

Makoto’s eyes fell upon the person who had knocked her over, also rising from the ground. It was Eiko, and she was crying. The tears were clearly not from the fall, as Eiko’s makeup seemed to have been running for a while. In addition, her clothes were all ruffled and disheveled and her usual ponytail was let down, her hair in a tangled mess. A crumpled up ball of paper fell out of Eiko’s skirt pocket.

“Eiko!?” Makoto rose to her feet, picking up the ball of a material that, once she touched it, did not feel like paper. “What happened!?”

Eiko looked up at Makoto, her face displaying the kind of misery Makoto didn’t even think Eiko was capable of feeling. She was always so cheerful, so cocky, so confident. In the weeks they’d spent together, Makoto had come to think of Eiko as nearly-invincible, somebody who completely lacked the self-consciousness and anxieties Makoto herself faced. At best, problems annoyed Eiko, but she was otherwise unflappable. To see her friend like this shook Makoto to the core.

Eiko said nothing. She jumped to her feet and ran to the school’s entrance.

“Eiko, wait!” Makoto ran after the girl, still clutching the ball she’d dropped in her hand. Eiko was a lot faster than Makoto gave her credit for, and even as fit as Makoto was, she had a tough time keeping up with her. No matter how many times or how loudly Makoto called out to her, Eiko wouldn’t stop running, and she bolted out the door and down the school’s steps.
“EIKO, LOOK OUT!”

Eiko didn’t listen.

Eiko didn’t look.

Eiko didn’t stop.

And neither did the car.

Not until it was too late.

Makoto had always liked Principal Kobayakawa. He had been very kind to her since she had started at Shujin Academy as a freshman. It was true that was largely in part thanks to who Makoto’s older sister was, given Sae’s history as a model student at the school and her current job in the government. But in a short matter of time, Makoto’s academic achievements and work with the student council garnered her praise from the principal for her own accomplishments. Principal Kobayakawa was stern, but he had always seemed to Makoto like a reasonable man who wanted what was best for the school and its students. There couldn’t be any more Ryujis. There couldn’t be any more Eikos. If anybody could put an end to the madness, it was Principal Kobayakawa.

“Please, have a seat, Niijima-San.” Kobayakawa gestured to the chair in front of his desk.

“Thank you for agreeing to see me on such short notice, Principal Kobayakawa.” Makoto bowed and took her seat. “I understand your schedule is very busy.”

“Of course. If a model student such as yourself says there’s a serious matter to discuss, it’s only right for me to listen.” Kobayakawa gave Makoto his usual friendly smile. “What’s on your mind?”

“It’s… Well…” Makoto paused. She was aware of how serious this subject was. How once she opened this can of worms, she couldn’t close it again. This was the kind of thing that would bring about a permanent change, the kind of legal matter that would likely have Makoto talking to the police at length and bring the school a lot of undesired media attention. But Makoto’s father had always told her that one of evil’s strongest tools was good people fearing trouble, and so she persisted. “It’s regarding Eiko Takao, sir.”

“Ah, yes.” Kobayakawa frowned and shook his head. “Hit by a car right outside the school. It’s quite the tragedy.” Kobayakawa looked Makoto directly in the eyes. “She’s in your grade, yes? How are your classmates taking it?”

“Some are unaffected. Some are shaken. You cannot expect the student body to hold one uniform opinion on the matter.”

“I suppose not.” Kobayakawa gave Makoto a concerned look. “And what of you, Niijima-San? How do you feel about these events?”

“I am not taking it well, sir.” Makoto’s calm facade began to waver. “Eiko is my friend. I am trying to take comfort in the fact that she survived, but she still hasn’t woken up from her coma. And when she does, the spinal damage…” Makoto sniffled and tears started to leak from her eyes. “The doctors say it’s irreparable. She’ll never walk again.”

“I am truly sorry, Niijima-San.” Kobayakawa handed Makoto a tissue. “Tragedy is always a terrible thing, but especially when it befalls someone so young.”
“Thank you, sir.” Makoto blew her nose.

“I suppose I understand why you came to me, but I’m afraid grief counseling isn’t something I’m trained in.” Kobayakawa pulled out a book of contacts and started flipping through it. “If you’d like, I could give you the number of a professional who I believe could-“

“I appreciate the offer, sir, but I am not here to discuss my emotional state.”

“No?” Kobayakawa closed the book.

“I am here to discuss the reason Eiko ran out into the street in the first place.” Makoto wiped the tears from her face and resumed her usual professional demeanor. “It is just the latest symptom of an illness that has been plaguing Shujin Academy for some time now.”

“Oh?” Kobayakawa leaned back in his chair. “And what would that be?”

“Shujin Academy’s physical education teacher and the coach of the track and volleyball teams.” Makoto’s eyes began to glaze over with fury. “Suguru Kamoshida.”

“That’s quite the claim, Niijima-San.” Kobayakawa’s brow furrowed. “Are you suggesting Mr. Kamoshida told Takao-San to run into the street?”

“The situation, I’m afraid, is far worse.” Makoto took a deep breath, calming herself. “I am sure I do not need to tell you that Shujin Academy has had an unusually high number of dropouts this year.”

“Yes, well, it is certainly a bit higher than expected, but not unfathomable.” Kobayakawa sighed. “The world demands more of its young people than ever before, and the comforts of modern technology have made many young people less resilient and unable to keep up with such demands.”

“With all due respect, sir, I don’t think that’s a fair appraisal of my generation or of the students who have dropped out.” Makoto squeezed her hands together, trying to remain calm. “Have you noticed that almost all of Shujin’s dropouts this year have been members of Mr. Kamoshida’s sports teams?”

“Is that so odd?” Kobayakawa raised an eyebrow. “Athletics are intensive and time-consuming. Many people break under the pressure.”

“Then what do you make of the unusually high rate of injuries and bruises among members of the athletic teams?”

“Niijima-San, these questions are getting tiresome.” Kobayakawa’s nostrils flared. “Would you please get to the point already?”

“Very well.” Makoto took another deep breath. “I can say with one hundred percent certainty that Mr. Kamoshida has been physically abusing students and using his position as teacher to keep them quiet.”

“That’s a very serious claim, Niijima-San.” Kobayakawa leaned forward on his desk. “Do you have evidence?”

“The evidence is all around us. Every day, members of Shujin’s athletic clubs show up to school with injuries they could not have possibly sustained as a result of regular sports practices. Many of these students only displayed these injuries after being called to Mr. Kamoshida’s office for private
meetings.”

“Do you have names? Has anybody come forth and told you this?”

“The only student to confirm this to me so far is Shiho Suzui, a first-year on the girls’ volleyball team. She was very tight-lipped about it, and I had to press her for the information, but the things she told me were nothing short of disturbing.” Makoto's posture stiffened. “Still, we need not only look at students who have come forward about Mr. Kamoshida’s abuses to prove that the man is abusive. Take the case of first-year track star Ryuji Sakamoto, who Mr. Kamoshida savagely beat in front of a crowd of witnesses.”

“I will remind you that Ryuji Sakamoto was the one who initiated the fight, Niijima-San. That is why he is still suspended at this time.” Kobayakawa scowled. “Mr. Kamoshida was only acting in self-defense.”

“If that’s the case, then why has Sakamoto-Kun not been outright expelled? Surely assaulting a teacher is a crime worthy of such a punishment, isn’t it? Now that I think about it, wouldn’t assaulting a national icon like a beloved Olympic medalist be enough to get Sakamoto-Kun thrown in juvenile hall?”

“Well…” Kobayakawa started to sweat. “In his case, there were extenuating circumstances-“

“Such as Mr. Kamoshida displaying excessive force, acting with a level of savagery and brutality far greater than would be required for simple self-defense, which would necessitate a full examination of his actions and temperament if you were to build a full case for Sakamoto-Kun’s expulsion or arrest?”

“Niijima-San, I’m going to have to ask you to calm down.”

“I am perfectly calm, Principal Kobayakawa. I am simply stating the facts as I see them.”

“Well, the facts remain that Ryuji Sakamoto attacked Mr. Kamoshida, and Mr. Kamoshida responded as he felt was necessary for his own protection.” Kobayakawa’s tone became impatient. “Furthermore, I fail to see what any of this has to do with Eiko Takao, a girl who was not involved in athletic activities in any capacity at all.”

“Yes, well, I’m afraid that’s where this gets truly disturbing.” Makoto cleared her throat. “Of the ten students who stopped coming to school after being summoned to private meetings with Mr. Kamoshida, eight of them were members of the girls volleyball team. These girls were all popular and considered attractive by the student body. Many of them were the kinds of girls that both teenage boys and older men fantasize about.”

“Where are you going with this?”

“I am saying that Mr. Kamoshida abused his position to sexually assault these girls. I am saying that he did the same thing to Eiko Takao, and that is why she ran into the middle of the street without any concern for her safety, wanting to get as far away from the school as possible after having the worst experience of her life.”

“Niijima-San, this is going too far!” Kobayakawa rose from his chair. “Since entering my office, you have hurled terrible accusations at Mr. Kamoshida based only on your own theories and hearsay! If you do not have any concrete evidence-“

Makoto slammed the photos of Eiko on the principal’s desk. They were still wrinkled, but she had managed to un-ball them.
“What are these?” Kobayakawa sat down and looked at the photos.

“These are photos of Eiko working at a hostess club in Shinjuku where grown men come to spend time with girls dressed in high school uniforms.”

“What does that-“

“Two weeks ago, I witnessed Yuuki Mishima deliver a message to Eiko that Mr. Kamoshida wanted to see her in his office. Eiko refused on the grounds that she had nothing to do with Kamoshida and thought Mishima-Kun was lying to get her alone. On the day of Eiko’s... accident...” Makoto’s voice began to waver. “I witnessed the accident. Right before running into the street, Eiko crashed into me. Those photos fell out of her pocket, her clothes and hair were disheveled, and she was crying. I believe Mr. Kamoshida used those photos as blackmail to get Eiko into his office so he could molest her... or worse.”

“I do not believe you to be a liar, Niijima-San. And given your recollection of events, I certainly can see how you would think that Takao-San was blackmailed...” Kobayakawa put the photos down. “But none of this proves that it was Mr. Kamoshida who did it.”

“It does not, but it does match another event Mr. Kamoshida is irrefutably tied to.” Makoto brought her hands together again. “The Ryuji Sakamoto incident.”

“Sakamoto again!?” Kobayakawa pinched his brow. “I made it perfectly clear that Mr. Kamoshida was only acting in self-defense!”

“And I would agree with you, had I no reason to think that Mr. Kamoshida intentionally provoked Sakamoto-Kun into attacking him.”

“Do you have proof of this?”

“You said you do not think I am a liar, so I hope you will believe what I tell you.” Makoto took another breath to reset herself. Reliving all of these events was infuriating. She never expected Principal Kobayakawa to fight her like this. “Several weeks ago, I witnessed Yuuki Mishima attempt to summon Sakamoto-Kun to Mr. Kamoshida’s office, just as I did with Eiko. Sakamoto-Kun refused on the grounds that he had to help his mother, since they had no other family she could rely on. Shortly afterwards, I heard Mr. Kamoshida telling Mishima-Kun to look more into Sakamoto-Kun’s family situation.”

“Niijima-San, were you spying on Mr. Kamoshida!?”

“Several days later, I saw Mishima-Kun head into Mr. Kamoshida’s office with a flash drive. Mr. Kamoshida left shortly thereafter with a malicious expression on his face. I walked into his office and saw the drive was still plugged into the computer, so I opened the file-“

“You accessed a faculty member’s computer without permission!?”

“The file contained detailed documents about Sakamoto-Kun’s family history, including records pertaining to his parents’ divorce and information about his father’s abusive behaviors. After reading these documents, I immediately headed to the track field, where Mr. Kamoshida was about to break Sakamoto-Kun’s leg. I believe Mr. Kamoshida used this private information to provoke Sakamoto-Kun, ‘airing his dirty laundry’, as it were, to get Sakamoto-Kun to attack him so he could brutalize him in retaliation.”

“Niijima-San, your theory is-“
“Everything I have told you today is the result of a month’s worth of personal investigation, including testimonies from sports club members, gossip among the student body, events I personally bore witness to, and statements I heard Mr. Kamoshida make firsthand.” Makoto stared down the principal, unable to fully hide her anger. “As the principal of Shujin Academy, I believe the best course of action for you to take for the safety of the students at this time would be to suspend Mr. Kamoshida as a teacher and launch a full and proper investigation into his activities. I think if you do so, you will reach the same conclusion that I have: Suguru Kamoshida has abused his position as a faculty member of this school to assault, molest, and possibly even rape-”

“Young lady, that is enough!” Kobayakawa slammed his fist on the desk.

“Sir?”

“I will not hear any more of this! Your accusations are built on a very weak foundation! I do not care what kind of history your family has in law enforcement, it does not make you a detective, and I am not going to drag a good man’s name through the mud on the word of one teenage girl!”

“But it’s not just me! All of the students know that Mr. Kamoshida is-”

“Rumors. Nothing more. Rebellious whispers from bored children who long for scandal due to their own moral deficit.”

“Ignoring what a callous view of the student body that is, I believe the faculty is aware of it too! I’ve noticed that the female teachers always go to great lengths to give Mr. Kamoshida a wide berth when passing him in the hallway in a manner they do not reserve for other male faculty members, and-”

“Niijima-San!” Kobayakawa gave Makoto a strange look. One that was almost guilty. He quickly glazed it over with a sympathetic expression. “I am sorry for the misfortune that has befallen your friend. I understand how hard this is, and how an intelligent girl like yourself who has been raised on strong principles of right and wrong is struggling to make sense of random tragedy. I realize that this is an emotional time for you, and what has befallen Takao-San would be easier to process if you could blame anybody but her for her actions, but-”

“That’s not what this is about!” Makoto jumped out of her chair. “This isn’t just about Eiko! I was already investigating this long before her accident! Why are you doing this!?”

“Doing what, exactly?”

“Why are you protecting him!? Why are you turning a blind eye to this monster’s actions!? Can’t you see that he-”

“Makoto Niijima!” Kobayakawa stood up again, his massive frame looming over Makoto. “Your distress over what has happened to your friend is causing you to behave irrationally. This behavior is unbecoming of both an honor student and a student council vice-president. And given what I’ve seen today, I think it would be best for you to be suspended from your student council responsibilities until such a time that this emotional state has passed and you are ready to handle the pressures that come with your position again.”

“YOU CAN’T DO THAT!” Makoto slammed her hands on the desk, losing all control of her temper. “I’M TRYING TO HELP THIS SCHOOL! WHAT GIVES YOU THE RIGHT TO PUNISH ME FOR DOING THE RIGHT THING WHILE YOU SIT AROUND LIKE THE FAT, LAZY, INCOMPETENT PIECE OF SH-”
“CEASE YOUR PRATTLING, YOU INSUBORDINATE CHILD!” Kobayakawa swung his arm, backhanding Makoto in the face.

Makoto rubbed her cheek, staring silently at Kobayakawa, tears and fury in her eyes.

“I am the principal of this academy and I will not entertain any more of this nonsense! One more outburst from you and I will have you suspended! If you speak of this again, or harass the members of the athletics clubs, or intrude upon Mr. Kamoshida’s privacy in any way, shape, or form, your rear will be out the door no matter who your sister works for! Do I make myself clear!?”

Makoto did not answer. She continued to glare at the principal.

“Answer me, girl!”

“Crystal clear, sir.” Makoto practically spat the words through gritted teeth.

“Good.” Kobayakawa sat back down. “You are suspended from student council activities until further notice. I will have the other members made aware of this immediately. Now get out of my office.”

“Yes sir.”

Makoto stomped out of the principal’s office, slamming the door behind her.

Makoto fumed for the rest of the day, paying very little attention to her classes after lunch. All she could think about was how the principal clearly knew what Kamoshida was doing and didn’t care. At this moment, she had two big questions on her mind. The first was why Kobayakawa was protecting Kamoshida. The answer wasn’t hard to figure out. Suguru Kamoshida was a national celebrity. Having him on the school’s faculty brought a lot of prestige to Shujin Academy. If his abuses of the students could be covered up, there was no reason to get rid of such a major selling point for the school. Preparatory schools like Shujin lived and died on their reputation, and if Kamoshida’s abuse got out, Shujin’s name would be tarnished for years.

Now the second, much harder question: How was Makoto going to stop Kamoshida without the principal’s help? If Kobayakawa was protecting Kamoshida, she had to go over his fat Buddha-like head, but she had no idea how to do that. Any school board or other direct authority would probably dismiss her the same way the principal did. Asking Sae for help crossed Makoto’s mind, but without concrete evidence, even if Sae believed Makoto, there was nothing the prosecutor could do. If only she had thought to take that thumb drive from Kamoshida’s computer, or had recorded him talking to Mishima, or followed Mishima that day Eiko refused him so she could take pictures of the beating he most likely received or-

Mishima…

Even when Eiko and Ryuji refused to budge, it was the information Mishima dug up on them that got Kamoshida what he wanted from the two. And if Mishima could sneak around Shinjuku and access private records without being noticed, chances are he could collect information on just about anybody. All Makoto had to do was get him alone, and she was sure she could make him see things her way.

Since Makoto was suspended from the student council, she lingered in the alley across the street after school. It was the perfect place to keep an eye on everybody leaving Shujin. After a couple hours, the boys’ volleyball team left practice. They were hurt and exhausted, limping along and hanging onto each other for support, but there was still a sense of cheer and camaraderie, all of
them laughing together through the pain. Notably absent from this scene was Makoto’s target. Or at least, that’s how it seemed. After a moment, Makoto spotted Mishima hanging by the door to the school, waiting for the rest of the volleyball team to disappear from view. It seemed that he wasn’t accepted as a member of the group, and after all was said and done, Makoto couldn’t blame them. Seeing Mishima, all Makoto could think about was how he had served Kamoshida. How he played a part in getting every one of those students hurt.

Makoto looked at Mishima’s face and saw Shiho Suzui, leg barely functioning, leaning on Makoto for support and scared of being called to Kamoshida's office.

Makoto looked at Mishima’s face and saw Ryuji Sakamoto, beaten and bruised on the ground with Kamoshida standing on his leg.

Makoto looked at Mishima’s face and saw Eiko, tears in her eyes, her appearance a mess, the picture of human suffering.

Makoto looked at Mishima’s face and saw Eiko being hit by the car.

“HELP!” Makoto ran out of the alley and across the street. The volleyball team was gone and Mishima was walking past Shujin’s gate. “SOMEBODY HELP!” She hunched over in front of Mishima, hands on her knees, panting heavily.

“Niijima-Senpai!?” Mishima stepped back. “What’s wrong!?”

“In the alley… Over there…” Makoto pointed to the alley she just ran out of. “A man… He… He…”

“What’s wrong!? Did he do something to you!?”

“No… Hurt… I think…” Makoto looked up at Mishima, her eyes pleading. “I think he’s dying!”

“What!?” Mishima looked around. He and Makoto were the only ones on the street. “We need to call the police! We need to-“

“Help him! We need to help him now!” Makoto grabbed Mishima’s wrist and started dragging him across the street. “Come on!”

“Niijima-Senpai, wait! What are we supposed to-“ Mishima stopped as they reached the alley. Once the two turned the corner, he saw nothing but a few pieces of trash. “Um… Niijima-Senpai, are you sure you’re not imagining things? I don’t see a dying man here."

Makoto wrapped her hands around Mishima’s neck and squeezed hard. His eyes widened and he grabbed her wrists trying to pull her off of him, but it was useless. Makoto was already stronger than Mishima, and with every bit of breath he lost, he only grew weaker. He looked into Makoto’s eyes, pleading with his expression for mercy, but he found none. All he found was a demon disguised as a teenage girl, a monster with murder in her heart and hatred radiating from every pore of her body. And then the monster spoke.

“I’m looking right at him.”

Chapter End Notes
I actually had this chapter finished last night but didn't wanna do a late post again. I may be able to hammer out another chapter this week, but no promises. I've got other projects I need to focus on.
Regime Change

Chapter Summary

In the past, Makoto confronts Mishima about some secrets.

In the present, Ann does the same thing.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Makoto’s fingers unwrapped from Mishima’s neck. The boy fell to the ground, gasping for air, his entire body shaking. In the few months he’d been Kamoshida’s flunky, he’d experienced pain in a lot of different places, but never anything like this. Mr. Kamoshida was a monster, but not once did Mishima ever fear for his life.

Makoto Niijima was a completely different animal. She didn’t let Mishima rest long. She grabbed one of his shoulders and slammed his back to the alley wall, forcing him into a sitting position looking up at her. Mishima couldn’t move. It wasn’t because of how he was still trying to catch his breath, nor because of the rough treatment he was receiving. Mishima was paralyzed with fear. Makoto stood above him, red eyes bearing down on him, and the way they stuck to him with such hatred felt like a 100-ton weight keeping Mishima pinned to the wall.

“Do I have your attention?” Makoto growled.

“Y-y-y-yes, N-Niijima Senpai” Mishima managed to reply. His voice was raspy from the fresh strangling.

“Good. Because I’m only going to say this once: You’re done working for Kamoshida.”

“Wh-what do you mean?”

“You are not to obey his commands anymore. You are not to send any more students to his office. You are not to collect blackmail material for him or indulge his predatory desires in any way, shape, or form. If he threatens to beat you for refusing him, you take it. If he takes you off the volleyball team, you live with it. If he has you expelled, you’re expelled.”

“Expelled!? But-“ Mishima was cut off by a punch to the face.

“YOU ARE DONE HELPING HIM HURT PEOPLE! DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME!?” Makoto waited for Mishima to look back up at her. “Whatever pain you think he’ll bring you, I promise you that I can deliver far worse.”

“This is nuts!” A bit of blood trickled out of Mishima’s mouth. “You can’t just beat me up! I’ll-“

“What? Tell on me?” Makoto crossed her arms.”Who’s going to believe you? I’m an honor student, the daughter of a police detective, and the younger sister of a respected prosecutor. You’re a slimy little rat who sends his fellow students to their abuser.” Makoto gave an evil smirk. “Even if anybody DID believe you, none of them would care.”
“That’s…” Mishima wanted to argue so badly. But he couldn’t. There was a reason he never hung out with the other guys on the team. Yuuki Mishima had no social life, and it wasn’t just because he was an awkward nerd. People hated him, and with good reason. “What do you want me to do?”

“You seem adept at gathering information.” Makoto took out one of the more tasteful pictures of Eiko and held it out to Mishima. “How do you do it?”

“It’s not that hard. Most people don’t pay much attention to me. Wherever I go, I tend to be overlooked.” Mishima sighed and looked down at the ground. “When nobody cares about your existence, it’s easy to follow them. Find out their secrets.”

“And Ryuji Sakamoto’s records?”

“You can find anything on the Internet if you know how to look.”

“I see…” Makoto knew very little about hacking and cyber crimes, but she’d heard similar statements before, so she was content to leave it at that for now. “And you can dig up dirt on anyone?”

“Pretty much.” Mishima scratched his head. “I mean, within reason. It’s not like I could find out secrets about the Prime Minister or anything.”

“What about people within the school? Is anybody off limits?”

“Not really…” Mishima looked back up at Makoto. “Do you have someone in mind?”

“Yes.” The rage faded from Makoto’s face for a moment. Or at least, she was still angry, but not at Mishima. There was a tinge of sadness to her expression. A part of her was disgusted with herself. She didn’t like that it had come to this. Dad never would’ve approved.

But Dad was dead.

“Principal Kobayakawa.”

“What?” Mishima’s eyes widened. “You can’t be serious!”

“I’m deadly serious.” And just like that, Makoto’s fury was back.

“B-but, that’s nuts! Why would you-“

“Do you want Kamoshida gone?”

“Y-yeah…”

“Well, Principal Kobayakawa doesn’t. Which is why I need leverage against him.”

“You want to blackmail the principal so he’ll fire Kamoshida!?”

“After everything you’ve done, do you really think you have a right to object?”

“I’m not objecting!” Mishima held his hands up in front of his face, fearful of another punch. “But isn’t that really risky!? If he finds out what you’re planning, you’ll be expelled!”

“Don’t worry about me. Worry about yourself.” Makoto crouched down and grabbed Mishima’s left wrist. “Because if I don’t see results soon, there will be consequences.”
“Wh-what kind of consequences?”

“This kind.” Makoto forced Mishima’s hand onto the ground and stomped her heel onto his pinky finger, shattering it.

Mishima started to scream, but Makoto slapped her hand over his mouth, her fingertips painfully digging into the side of his face. Mishima’s tears ran down over her fingers.

“You have nine fingers left. For every day you don’t give me something I can use against Kobayakawa, I will break another.” Makoto removed her hand from Mishima’s face and smirked. “Of course, I’m not an unreasonable person. I realize that every broken finger will make your job harder. So instead of breaking one every day, I’m giving you nine days in total. If you don’t have anything by then, I break all your fingers at once. And then, for every day you don’t give me anything after that, I’ll move on to breaking something else.”

“B-but if I c-can’t use my hands, h-how am I supposed to d-dig up anything!?”

“Yes, it does seem counterintuitive, doesn’t it?” Makoto stood up again, looking down on Mishima with faux-pity. “But just think of it as you getting your just desserts for all the pain you’ve helped bring to your fellow students.”

Mishima looked up at Makoto in terror. Tears were streaming down his face as he held his injured hand. He bit his lip, too afraid of provoking Makoto to say anything else.

“Nine days, Mishima-Kun. That’s how long my patience will last. Do you understand?”

Mishima nodded.

“Good.” Makoto turned and left the alley. “I’ll check in with you tomorrow.”

“This isn’t a very solid plan, Akira.” Ann looked at the messy-haired boy with worry. Having to pretend to like Mishima was a daunting prospect. It certainly wouldn’t do any favors for her reputation, although at this point she didn’t think that could sink much further.

“I know. But it’s the only one we got.” Akira gave Ann a thumbs up. “You can do this. I believe in you. And I’ll be here for moral support the whole time.”

“YO!” Ann looked away from Akira to see Ryuji burst into the classroom. He made a beeline for where they were sitting.

“Shit” Akira muttered.

“KURUSU!”

“You don’t have to be so loud, Sakamoto.” Akira rubbed his ears. “I’m right here.”

“Yeah, well, Miss Prez wants to see you!”

“After school?” Akira sighed. “I already told her, I can’t. I have to head to the cafe and-“

“She wants to see you NOW.” Ryuji leaned over Akira menacingly. “It’s not like you got work right this minute, yeah?”

Ann whined as Akira followed Ryuji out of the room. Just as he passed through the door, he looked back at her and motioned his head towards Mishima. She groaned and took a deep breath.
Yeah, it sucked that her moral support was just dragged away, but that’s why she had to do this. If Ann didn’t get Mishima to open up to her, then the rat in Makoto’s Palace wouldn’t give them any info, and they couldn’t change Makoto’s heart, and she’d have an ironclad grip over the school and Akira for another year. Breathing out, Ann rose from her seat, her resolve steeled. She walked over to Mishima’s desk and tapped on his shoulder, a big grin on her face.

“HEY MISHIMAAAAAAA!” Ann hadn’t meant to yell, but it seemed she was still a little nervous. Mishima, for his part, jumped in his seat before looking back at her.

“Takamaki?!” Mishima gave Ann a confused look. “Do you need something?"

“Need? Uh…” Ann’s grin faded slightly. She had not thought this far ahead. Which was to say, she hadn’t thought things through at all. “Not really. I was just wondering if you wanted to have lunch together?”

“Really? You want to have lunch with me?” Mishima looked around the room to see if anybody was capturing this on their phones. “Is this some kind of prank?”

“What!? No, that’s ridiculous!” Ann looked around the room as well. A couple people took interest in the fact that she was talking to Mishima. She leaned over and gave Mishima a big smile that was meant to be warm, but was actually kind of unnerving. “I just want to talk.”

“About what?”

“That’s a secret.” Ann winked.

“A secret? What kind of secret?” Mishima looked at Ann suspiciously. He wondered what on Earth she could possibly want to talk to him about. Mishima wasn’t used to getting attention from girls. Especially not positive attention. And especially not from someone who could be considered the hottest girl in school. In fact, Mishima was pretty sure Ann Takamaki had never spared two words for him before. Something was definitely up.

“Well, if I told you that, it wouldn’t be a secret anymore, would it?” Ann stuck out her tongue playfully.

“Mmhm.” Mishima rolled his eyes. “I don’t think so.”

“Come on, pleeeeeeease?” Ann pouted and looked at Mishima with big sad doe eyes. “It’s not like you have anything better to do, right?”

“I mean…” Mishima looked into Ann’s eyes and sighed. “Not really.”

“Great!” Ann grabbed Mishima’s wrist and started walking away. “Let’s go somewhere private!”

“What are we going?” Mishima stumbled as he rose from his desk and tried to keep up with Ann.

“Uh…” Again, Ann had not thought this through. Where would she take Mishima? It couldn’t just be anywhere. Ann didn’t fully get this cognition stuff, but she knew that she had to coax a secret out of Mishima and Makoto Nijim had to know about it. But it wouldn’t be great to just do it in a hallway, because there’s no way Mishima would blab while surrounded by people. It had to be somewhere Mishima would believe they were alone, but they weren’t. Ann wracked her brain trying to figure out how to pull this off. She knew Makoto was probably in the student council room right now, on account of how Ryuji had just dragged Akira up there...

Wait. Duh.
“The roof!” Ann pulled Mishima along as she climbed the stairs to the third floor.

“Whoa, hold on!” Mishima tried to pull away, but couldn’t escape Ann’s grip. “Isn’t the roof off limits?”

“That’s right!” Ann grinned as she reached the third floor and saw Ryuji walking away from the student council room. She started speaking very loudly. “That’s why the roof is the perfect place for us to have a secret talk, Mishima! Nobody will listen to us up there!”

As they began their ascent up the final flight of stairs, Ann looked back for a split second. Sure enough, Ryuji was glaring at them, and began moving in their direction. Ann had pulled off half the plan already. She got Mishima alone, and she got somebody she knew who would report back to Makoto to spy on them. Now all she had to do was get Mishima to blab to her. Which was either the easiest part of this or the hardest part. She wasn’t really sure which.

The two stepped out onto the roof, and Ann led Mishima to a spot where they couldn’t see the door from.

“So,” Mishima said, “what do you want to talk abou-“

“One second.” Ann let go of Mishima’s wrist and held her finger up to his face, staring off into space and keeping her ears open. After a few seconds, she did NOT hear the door slowly close behind her. That meant that Ryuji was lingering in the doorway, listening in on them. Ann looked back at Mishima. “Sorry, you were saying?”

“Well, you’ve got me here.” Mishima tugged on his collar. He was sweating. “What did you wanna talk about?”

“Well, that’s, uh…” Once again, Ann was frustrated with her lack of planning. She’d had the better part of a day to think of how to start this conversation, and now she was totally lost. She needed to get Mishima to spill his guts about something, but how would she do that? Threatening him probably wouldn’t work. There was no way Ann could make Mishima as scared as Makoto could. Maybe she could try talking about Kamoshida, but he probably didn’t want to relive all of that. Ann knew that Mishima played spy for Makoto Niijima, but had no idea what kind of dirt he was actually digging up for her. She tried to think of anything big that rocked the school recently, any big reveal that had shook the student body in the last couple wee-

Oh. Again, duh.

Akira.

“I’m gonna ask you a question, and I need you to be a hundred percent honest with me. Can you do that?”

“I mean…” Mishima rubbed the back of his head. “That depends on the question, doesn’t it?”

“Mishima, please.” Ann gave the boy a serious look. “This is really important to me. I need to know the truth, and I think you’re the only one who knows it. It affects someone I care about a lot.”

“Wow, uh…” Mishima’s eyes darted back and forth for a minute, then he sighed. “I mean, I’ll tell you what I can, I guess. Is that ok?”

“That’s-” Mishima gulped. “I can’t tell you that.”

“You did, didn’t you?” Ann’s brow furrowed. “Why did you do it? Did Makoto Nijima tell you to?”

“I can neither confirm nor deny these allegations” Mishima said robotically.

“You promised me you’d be honest!”

“Actually…” Mishima grinned nervously. “I said I’d tell you what I can. And I can’t tell you that.”

“You know that clamming up is the same as admitting it, right?”

“Oh. Huh…” Mishima scratched his chin. “I guess that’s true.”

“So you DID leak his record!” Ann put her hands on her hips. “What’s wrong with you!? Why would you invade someone’s privacy like that!”?

“I-it’s not like I d-dug it up or anything!” Mishima took a step backwards. “I just posted it to the student forum! Nijima-Senpai was the one who gave me his information! I didn’t do any spying this time!”

“So she IS involved!” Of course, this wasn’t actually new information to Ann, but she did a pretty convincing job of making it seem like it was, at least by her acting standards. “And what do you mean by ‘this time’!”?

“Nothing” Mishima squeaked.

“Didn’t you do enough to hurt people back when you were working for Kamoshida?” Ann stared down Mishima with a very real fury. One year ago, one of her greatest fears was that Mishima would approach Shiho telling her that Kamoshida wanted to see her.

“This is different!” Mishima actually raised his voice. “The stuff I do for Nijima-Senpai helps the school!”

“How does leaking Akira’s record help anybody!? He never did anything to hurt anyone!”

“That’s not what the court said.” Mishima raised an eyebrow. “I know you’ve been spending a lot of time with Kurusu. Everyone does. I don’t know if you’ve got a crush on him or something, but he’s a dangerous criminal. You should be more careful, Takamaki.”

“That’s not true!” Ann took a step towards Mishima. “Akira’s not the person everyone thinks he is, but thanks to his record being leaked, he’s lost any chance of having a normal high school life! All you ever do is get people hurt!”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about!” Mishima clenched his fists and stood tall. “Kamoshida would still be around if it wasn’t for me!”

“What are you talking about?”

“You know those rumors about Nijima-Senpai having something on Principal Kobayakawa?”

“Yeah…” Ann’s eyes widened. Yes, she believed the rumors about Makoto blackmailing the principal. Given the kinds of things she got away with, there was really no other explanation for
Shujin’s state of affairs. But nobody ever had any proof. If Mishima could give her a smoking gun, it might help them take Makoto down.

“Well I—

“Yo, what’s goin’ on here?’

Ann groaned as Ryuji stepped out onto the rooftop. For a moment she had forgotten he was listening in on them. Of course he wasn’t going to let Mishima say anything that would seriously compromise Makoto Niijima.

“Sakamoto-San!” Mishima’s legs started shaking. “W-we were just talking and—“

“Yeah, I heard.” Ryuji slowly approached Mishima with a menacing look on his face. “Sounds like you were about to spread some lies about our student council president.”

“I don’t know about that” Ann said. “They didn’t sound like lies to me.”

“Oh, trust me, Takamaki…” Ryuji gave Mishima a death glare. “There ain’t a word of truth to it. Ain’t that right, Mishima?”

“Y-yup!” Mishima started laughing nervously. “It was all a big joke!”

“I thought so.” Ryuji stopped right in front of Mishima, grabbing his collar. “But I gotta say, it’s in pretty bad taste.”

“I-I-I-“

“Spreadin’ lies about folks can be hurtful. Someone oughta teach you a lesson about hurt.”

“Ryuji, no!” Ann grabbed Ryuji’s arm and tried to pull him away from Mishima. “You don’t have to do this!”

“Relax, Takamaki.” Ryuji let go of Mishima and wrenched his arm out of Ann’s grip, taking a few steps back. “I ain’t gonna hit him or nothin’.” Ryuji’s eyes darted back to Mishima. “But we’re gonna have a very serious talk later. Don’t go nowhere after class.”

Ryuji walked away, heading back inside. After he was gone, Ann turned to Mishima, but the timid boy was already slowly trudging towards the door. Ann had a feeling that she had just made things a lot worse for Yuuki Mishima. And while she didn’t like the boy, she couldn’t help but feel bad about it. Getting the weasel hurt was not part of the plan, but it was almost certainly going to be a result of its success. If it even was successful. Ann just hoped this was all worth it.

One week after speaking with Mishima, Makoto stood in Principal Kobayakawa’s office again. He was looking at her expectantly.

“Well, Niijima-San,” Kobayakawa said, “I’m waiting.”

“Oh?” Makoto gave the principal a slight smile. “For what, sir?”

“I agreed to meet with you because you said you wished to apologize for your previous behavior.” Kobayakawa leaned back in his chair. “You may begin whenever you wish. If your apology is sufficient, I may even see fit to let you resume your position in the student council.”

“Ah, that’s right, I did say that.” Makoto’s smile turned into a smirk. “But before you reinstate me
as the student council vice-president, there’s something you should know.”

“And what’s that?”

“I was lying. I am not, in fact, here to apologize.”

“Then why ARE you here, exactly?” Kobayakawa crossed his arms. “I hope it doesn’t involve Mr. Kamoshida.”

“It does.”

“I see.” Kobayakawa sighed. “This is very disappointing, Niijima-San. I truly did not wish to suspend a student of your caliber, but you’ve left me no choice.”

“Well, you’re not wrong.” Makoto retained her smug expression, speaking calmly. “It’s true that you don’t have a choice in what comes next.”

“And what, pray tell, do you mean by that?”

“What I mean is, you’re not going to suspend me.” Makoto approached the desk. “In fact, I think you’ll find you’re not going to take any actions I disapprove of from this point on, Principal Kobayakawa. Or should I say...” Makoto leaned onto the desk with her elbows, lowering herself to Kobayakawa’s eye level. “Koko-Chan?”

“What did you just call me!?” The color drained from Kobayakawa’s face.

“That’s what you like to be called, isn’t it?” Makoto rose from the desk and reached into her bag, pulling out a large envelope. She dropped it on the desk. “When you’re off duty, that is.”

Kobayakawa began to sweat as he reached for the envelope. Opening it, he pulled out several photographs. They were pictures of him dressed in a Kimono, blonde wig, and heavy make-up. The pictures were all in Shinjuku, and featured him entering and leaving seedy bars and less-than-reputable establishments with a gaggle of other crossdressers, laughing happily the whole time. Some of the photos were from different days, featuring different kimonos, showing this wasn’t just a one-time thing. Kobayakawa looked up at Makoto fearfully. The girl was much smaller than him, but in this moment, he felt like he was being stared down by a giantess.

“What do you want?”

“That’s an excellent question, Koko-Chan.” Makoto put her hand on her chin and tilted her head towards the ceiling, though her eyes remained trained on the principal the whole time. “I haven’t fully decided yet. Personally, I don’t take any issue with cross-dressing. In fact, in our male-dominated society, I think it’s admirable for a man to be brave enough to express his feminine side like this. Why, I think such bravery could set a sterling example for countless people! I would love to show these photographs to the Board of Education and the PTA. Maybe even the media. Imagine what a buzz there would be if people learned that the principal of one of the most prestigious schools in Tokyo was a crossdresser!” Makoto looked down at Kobayakawa and put on a faux-shocked face, holding her hands up to the side of her head. “Oh! But so many of those people are stuffy traditionalists, and there’s a possibility that many of them would not approve, including your superiors! Why, if these images were made public, it’s very likely that you would lose the respectable job you’ve worked so hard for, and would be labelled as a disgrace for the rest of your life! You’d probably never work in education again...”

“WHAT DO YOU WANT!?” Kobayakawa started breathing heavily, buckets of sweat running down his face, a vein in his forehead throbbing.
“Now, now, Koko-Chan, there’s no need to raise your voice.” Makoto waggled her finger in Kobayakawa’s face. “I already told you what I want: To show these pictures to everybody. But I suppose there’s something else I want more.”

“Name it.”

“I want Suguru Kamoshida fired and turned in to the police.” Makoto leaned on the desk again. “And while we’re at it, I would like for Ryuji Sakamoto’s suspension to be revoked and for the school to issue a formal apology to him and the rest of the student body. Oh, and of course, I’d like for my suspension from student council activities to be revoked.”

“Is that all?”

“For the moment. Of course, there may be other things I want in the future. And if I don’t get them, I’ll simply have to find personal satisfaction elsewhere.” Makoto’s eyes trailed down to the photos, then back to Kobayakawa. “Do you understand what I mean, Koko-Chan?”

“Yes, Niijima-San.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful. Simply wonderful.” Makoto’s eyes widened and a large smile appeared on her face. “In fact, I just thought of something else right now!”

“What is it?”

“I’d like for you to pay for Eiko Takao’s hospital bills.” Makoto stood up straight again. “I realize that her parents are capable of affording them, but seeing as how she was running to escape a man that you hired when she was hit by that car, I think it’s only fair that you take responsibility for it, don’t you?”

“What!” Kobayakawa rolled back in his chair a little. “The girl is in a coma, in intensive care! How am I possibly supposed to afford that!?”

“I understand you have a sizable bonus coming up.” Makoto glared at the principal. “It seems to me that bonuses should only be rewarded to administrators who do right by their students, don’t you?”

“I… That’s…” Kobayakawa sighed, leaning back in his chair in defeat. “Yes. Of course.”

“Excellent!” Makoto stepped back from the desk. “These are, of course, not the only copies of the photographs. They’ve been uploaded to several cloud-based servers, and should anything happen to me, I’ve made arrangements for them to be sent to a great many individuals.”

Kobayakawa said nothing. He leaned forward on his desk, putting his head in his hands, his face the picture of despair.

“Oh, don’t look so glum, Koko-Chan.” Makoto gave a condescending smile. “Why, I would say it’s a bright, shining new day for Shujin Academy. Wouldn’t you?”

Kobayakawa groaned.

“That’s not an answer, Koko-Chan.”

“Yes, Niijima-San.”

“I knew you’d agree!” Makoto clapped her hands a few times, then started turning towards the
door. “I’ll see you late- Oh yes!” Makoto turned back towards Kobayakawa. “I almost forgot one more thing I want.”

“And that is?” Kobayakawa’s voice was filled with defeat.

“Oh, it’s a small thing.” Makoto pointed to a spot on the floor in front of her. “I’d like you to stand here for me, Koko-Chan.”

“Alright…” Kobayakawa slowly rose from his chair. He gave Makoto a confused look as he walked around his desk and stopped in front of her. “Is this all?”

“Not quite.” Makoto kept smiling as her foot swung forward, her toes driving into the man’s groin. Kobayakawa gasped in pain as he grabbed his crotch and fell to his knees. He looked up at Makoto, and found the smile was gone, a look of rage taking its place.

“That’s for the other day, you bloated asshole.” Makoto spoke harshly, her voice practically growling. “Don’t you ever lay a hand on me again.”

Chapter End Notes

I find it kinda funny that comments on the last couple chapters have been about how it’s "too late to make Makoto sympathetic", because that’s not what I was trying to do at all. I just figured that so long as I was introducing Mishima to the plot, it’d be a good time to show how her transformation happened. This is probably the last of the backstory-heavy chapters for a while.
Two Steps Forward, One Step Back

Chapter Summary

In the Metaverse, the Phantom Heroes learn the path they need to take to reach Makoto's treasure. In the real world, Akira finds a new way to avoid Makoto's attentions.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Alright, team, it’s time for the moment of truth!”

Akechi activated the Meta-Nav. Within a moment, the sky had changed colors, the team were all in their Metaverse outfits, and a rat with a human face hung above their heads, still dangling over the alley.

“It’s you guys!” the rat yelled. “Let me down from here!”

“Gladly.” Akechi pulled out his laser pistol and shot the handcuffs’ chain, melting some of the links and causing the rat to fall. He snatched the rodent out of the air before it could hit the ground, pointing the pistol at its face. “Now, I’ve done as you’ve requested, so now it’s time for you to return the favor. Would you be so kind as to tell us how to reach the throne room in the tower?”

“Everyone kn-knows that” the rat said. “You ride the elevator up to the 100th floor.”

“Not good enough.” Akira pulled out his knife and pinched the rat’s ear, pulling it taut. “I’ve been in the elevator. It’s in the middle of a police station and you have to get permission to ride it that high.”

“N-not true! You can ride to higher floors with a keycard!”

“Oh really?” Akira twirled the knife in his hand, holding it at the rat’s throat. “And just where can we get a keycard?”

The others watched the interrogation nervously. This was make or break time. If their gambit worked, then Ann’s conversation with Mishima had made Makoto distrustful of him and now the rat would talk. If not, they were back to square one.

“I can’t tell you! The Queen will-“

Akira gently pressed the knife’s tip against the rat’s neck.

“COPS HAVE THEM!” The rat’s speech was even more frantic than before. “There are four levels of access! Anybody can ride up to the 25th floor, but you have to be an inspector to get from floors 26-50, a superintendent from 51-99, and only the commissioner can reach the 100th floor without being buzzed up!”

“And that’s the only way up?” Akira asked. “There’s no emergency stairs?”
“There are,” the rat said, “but-“

“Whoa, time out!” Ann yelled. “We are NOT climbing a hundred floors of stairs!”

“I agree” Shiho said. “If we’re going to undergo such an extreme training regimen, we should really work up to it slowly. First, we could start with ten flights of stairs, then fifteen, then twenty, and-“

“Even if we were to climb all of those stairs, I doubt it would be that simple.” Akechi turned to the rat. “Am I correct in guessing that the stairs only go up to the 99th floor?”

“Yes” the rat said. “The 100th floor has its own emergency exit.”

“Karasu, how did you know that?” Akira asked Akechi.

“That’s how these things tend to go.” Akechi shrugged. “I’ve yet to break into a Palace where there wasn’t some kind of barrier to overcome to reach the throne room. In this case, it sounds like we’ll have to take keycards from sequentially higher-ranked police officers if we wish to reach the throne room by our own volition.”

“But isn’t the elevator in the middle of a big police station?” Ann tapped her foot angrily. “We’re never gonna be able to sneak past all those people to ride it!”

“We’ll just have to find a way to sneak into the police station.” Akira looked at the rat. “Can we break into there from the sewers?”

“Y-yes! There’s a garage with a drainage grate in the floor for when they wash the police cars! All you have to do is follow the sewer tunnels and when you get to the middle where they all converge, you’re there!” The rat started squirming. “Is that it!? Can I go now!?”

“Do we need anything else from him?” Akira looked at Akechi. Akechi shook his head.

“So we’re done here?” the rat asked.

“Looks like it” Akira said.

“So I can go now?”

“I didn’t say that.”

Akira pushed his knife forward, slitting the rat’s throat. It immediately vanished in a puff of some kind of shadowy substance.

“WHOA!” Ann stared at Akechi’s empty hand. “What was that about!?”

“If we let him go, he’d let them know that we’re coming.” Akira put away his knife. “This was necessary for our mission. And I’m not going to lie, wasting the guy who leaked my record was kind of cathartic. Plus, it’s not like it was the real Mishima anyway.”

“I can certainly understand everything you’re saying…” Shiho was more than familiar with the feeling of wanting to smack Mishima around a bit. It’s not like she was the only student at Shujin who desired that. “But still, won’t there be repercussions? That’s Nijijima-Senpai’s mental image of Mishima, right? Does killing him mean she’ll forget all about him?”

“Events in the real world can affect cognition, but the reverse is rarely true” Akechi said. “Makoto-San still knows this Mishima fellow, and because of that the rat will eventually be reborn in this
world. You would have to attack the core of a person’s being for our actions in this world to affect them in the real world.”

“So that means if we see the rat again, we’ll have to smash it?” Shiho asked the question with a slight smile on her face.

“Yes, Russian, I suppose we will.”

“Well, no use wasting time” Akira said. “Let’s get moving.”

It seemed that Makoto’s Shadow had caught onto their method of entry, because there were a few Shadows patrolling the sewers. Still, the team was able to deal with them with relative ease, and Akira even managed to recruit a few new Personas: Pixie, Silky, and Pyro Jack. Akechi was a natural as field commander, able to keep track of the weaknesses of the enemies they faced, and with his guidance, Ann and Shiho took to combat pretty quickly, although Shiho’s already-active lifestyle seemed to make her a lot better at it. Eventually they found the entrance to the police station garage the rat had told them about, and climbed through it.

The garage was large, but there weren’t any Shadows present at the moment, so the group split up to look for the door into the main building. After a minute, Akira heard Ann’s voice from the other side of the room.

“Hey guys, come look at this!”

“What is it, Panther?” Akira closed in on Ann at the same time as the others.

“I think it’s a map.” Indeed, Ann had stumbled upon a large map hanging on the wall above a workbench. Or rather, it was a bunch of little maps, each notably distinct from each other. “Wow, all the floors here are really different. Isn’t every floor in a big tower supposed to be the same?”

“Well, Niijima IS crazy” Akira said. He looked at the map closely. “Still, it’s a good thing we found this. It looks like some floors have the elevator exit directly into the bullpen and some give us some opportunity to sneak around. For example…” Akira pointed to the map of the floor they were on. “We can’t use the elevator here on the first floor because everyone would see us, but it looks like we can get to the emergency stairwell from this garage and walk up to the 4th floor, where we can sneak past a few guards and take the elevator all the way up to the 25th floor.” Akira tapped an office marked on the 25th floor. “Five hundred yen says that’s where we’ll get a keycard.”

“Yes, but look at this.” Shiho pointed to the maps of the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th floors. “The stairs aren’t always on the same side. The 3rd floor shows stairs on both sides, but they’re only on the left of the 2nd floor and the right of the 4th floor. It looks like we’ll have to sneak all the way across the 3rd floor to continue onwards.”

“That’s weird.” Akira scratched his head. “Maybe it’s some kind of security measure? Like forcing us to sneak across more floors gives us a greater chance of getting caught?”

“That’s certainly possible” Akechi said. “Though I think it may be just the opposite.”

“What do you mean?” Ann asked.

“Something I’ve noticed is that security in Palaces is never quite as tight as it could be. Any barrier you encounter can be overcome with the aid of something you can find by going down another path. For example, instead of a key to a locked door being in the area beyond the door, it’s usually
in some nearby room immediately accessible to intruders.”

“So what?” Akira looked at the map, then Akechi. “You think Nijima’s leading us into some kind of trap?”

“Not exactly. I don’t think the layout of this tower is intentional at all. But I do find it odd how in an entire city organized enough to have a proper sewer system, sporting events, and a functional police force, the very stronghold that acts as the nerve center for its operations has such a disjointed design philosophy to it.”

“Well, it’s not that weird, is it?” Ann tilted her head towards Akira. “Like Joker said, Makoto Nijima is a crazy person.”

“No, she is not.” It was hard to tell through the mask, but Akechi’s eyes showed his displeasure with Ann. “Makoto-San has lost her way, but not her sanity. And I believe that this tower is designed like this because a part of her wants to find her way again.”

“So her Shadow is helping us?”

“Not consciously.” Akechi looked over to the open drainage grate they’d entered through. “That drainage grate exists so the garage doesn’t get flooded when they wash the police vehicles. But you could achieve the same level of dryness with a bunch of small, spaced-out drains that aren’t large enough for a person to climb through. Similarly, it would be far more secure to have a uniform design for every floor in this tower that had the elevator exit in a spot where anybody riding it would be noticed by the police immediately, but instead there are paths that allow us to sneak around and gain access to higher levels without making our presence known.” Akechi fiddled with the hilt of his sword. “Now, this is just a theory, but I believe that Palaces have these weaknesses that allow for infiltration routes because a part of the person realizes their desires are distorted and is subconsciously providing us with a way to find their Treasure and fix them.”

“So you think there’s still some good in Makoto Nijima” Akira said.

“I have to believe that’s the case.” Akechi gave Akira a somber smile. “It keeps me motivated. Removing a person’s distorted desires stops them from hurting other people, but it often leaves them a broken shell of their former self. I would like to think that when that happens, it gives space for something good in them hidden below the surface to grow, and that they could eventually contribute to society positively.”

“I’d like to think that too.” Shiho beamed at Akechi. “It’d be nice to have the old Nijima-Senpai back.”

“I’ll have to take your word for it.” Akira looked at the map of the current floor and started walking towards the emergency stairs. “Come on, let’s get this over with.”

The trip to the elevator was not uneventful. Although the police tower was not as packed with Shadows as might be expected, there were still a fair number of them wandering about. Akechi made it a point to sneak attack as many of them as possible so the others could get more combat experience and grow stronger, although after their previous fights in the sewer it was clear that everybody was starting to run out of energy. One really bad fight happened just before they reached the inspector’s office when Ann tripped on her own tail, allowing the enemy to get the drop on them. They managed to win the fight, but Ann used up all of her energy healing everyone’s wounds.
“I don’t think I can keep going.” Ann panted heavily as Akira and Shiho held her up from either side, helping her stay on her feet. “My butt got kicked so hard in that last fight it’s probably as red as this dumb cat outfit.”

“It’s your own fault for tripping like that” Shiho said. “You really need to be more conscious of your movements.”

“It’s not easy sneaking around in this thing! I’ve gotta balance on heels and it rides up everywhere and this tail keeps weaving between my legs and stuff!”

“Aren’t these outfits supposed to come from our inner spirit or something? Yours can’t be giving you that much trouble, can it?”

“Let’s trade then! You can take the high heels and the skintight catsuit with the stuck chest zipper and I’ll wear the sensible boots and nice jacket that covers up everything!”

“Oh, I would, but… Ah… How do I put this…” Shiho looked away from Ann. “I don’t think I’d be able to ‘fill out’ the suit, so to speak.”

“Are you calling me fat!?”

“Both of you stop arguing before you get another Shadow’s attention.” Akira did not enjoy having Ann shout directly in his ear. He looked ahead to Akechi, who was staring at a door. “Karasu, can we use the app or something to get out of here? I don’t think we’ll be able to escape the Shadows if we have to go all the way back down the stairs and through the sewers.”

“If we tried to use the app here, we’d appear in whatever part of your school this section of the building corresponds to. I’m not sure where that would be, but we don’t want to take any unnecessary risks” Akechi said. “For example, I don’t think it would be good for your probation if you were suddenly found in the girls’ bathroom.”

“No, it wouldn’t.” Akira didn’t want to begin to imagine what would happen in that eventuality, but he was sure Makoto would have a field day with it.

“Luckily, I think we can avoid that situation.” Akechi opened the door in front of him and held it for the others. “In here.”

The four stepped into what seemed to be a break room. At the very least, there was a table surrounded by chairs. For a second, the police station environment faded out of out existence, replaced by an ordinary high school classroom, but the Palace came back as quickly as it left.

“Here, Panther.” Akechi pulled out a chair. “Take a moment to rest.”

“OH MY GOD YES THANK YOU.” Ann pulled herself away from Akira and Shiho and stumbled over to the chair, dropping into it with all her weight. Akechi sat down next to her.

“Is it ok for us to be resting in here?” Akira leaned against the door to prevent Shadows from opening it. “What if they figure out we’re in here?”

“They won’t” Akechi said. “Did you see how this room’s appearance changed for a moment when we first entered?”

“Yeah…”

“It’s a safe room. The distortion Makoto-San has of Shujin Academy being some sort of utopia
isn’t as strong here, so Shadows can’t enter it. It’s a section of the school that’s still in the Palace, but just barely, so people who can travel between the real world and the Metaverse have access to it, but purely Cognitive beings don’t. And what’s more…”

Akechi pulled out his phone and tapped the screen a few times. There was a flash of light, and the next thing the others knew, they were all back in the alley across the street from the city’s entrance, Ann sitting on the ground.

“Whoa!” Shiho looked around at the walls. “What did you just do!?”

“Anywhere Shadows won’t go in a Palace is designated as a safe spot” Akechi said. “That includes the Palace’s entrance. The Metanav automatically registers these spots as we encounter them and lets us travel instantaneously between them. In addition to allowing for quick escapes when we’re in the condition Panther has found herself in, it means that once we secure a route to Makoto-San’s treasure, we’ll be able to skip over all of the obstacles we’ve encountered and take it instantly!”

“That’s great, but can we go home please?” Ann tugged at her suit. “I’m feeling really bad already and this thing is not helping.”

“Of course!” Akechi activated the Metanav and transported the team back to the real world. “Does that feel better, Ann-San?”

“A little.” Ann slowly stood up. Shiho reached out to help her, but Ann threw out her hand and rose to her feet on her own. “At least these clothes breathe.”

“Well, I’d say we accomplished a lot today” Akira said. “We made it to the Police HQ, found a safe room, and tomorrow we’ll be able to take an inspector’s ID card and continue up the elevator.”

“Oh, tomorrow?” Shiho looked at Akira nervously. “I’m afraid I can’t tomorrow. I still have volleyball practice, after all.”

“Alright then.” Akira nodded. “It’d probably be a bad idea to go into the Palace without the full team, so Wednesday then.”

“I can’t go Wednesday” Ann said. “I have a shoot.”

“Okay, Thursday.”

“Practice again” Shiho said. “Every Tuesday and Thursday.”

“Great…” Akira groaned. “Fri-“

“I’m afraid I have a previous engagement” Akechi said. “I do still work with the police, you know.”

“Busy week, got it.” Akira looked at the others hopefully. “Saturday?”

Everyone nodded. Akira let out a sigh of relief.

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**Tuesday**

Akira tried to ignore the hunger as he pushed a broom around the student council room. Lunch was halfway over and Makoto had him playing janitor the whole time. Unfortunately, he had skipped
breakfast that morning, and all he could think about was the meager bento made from the ingredients Sojiro had given him access to sitting in his bag, losing freshness with every passing minute. Soon enough, his stomach started growing loudly.

“Oh my” Makoto said with false sweetness. “That doesn’t sound good. You should take a break, Akira-Chan.”

“Really?” Akira looked at Makoto suspiciously, the hunger making him forget the ‘proper’ way he was supposed to address her. “Are you telling me to eat?”

“Of course I am!” Makoto pulled out a chair for Akira at the student council table. “Your wellbeing is my top concern, Akira-Chan.”

“Uh… thanks.” Akira felt dirty thanking Makoto for allowing him the privilege of the basic human right to eat, but he had just enough brainpower at the moment to realize that it’d make his life a lot easier if he just went along with her ridiculous expectations, lest she change her mind and not let him have his lunch. He sat down and fished his bento out of his bag, popping it open and immediately digging into the rice.

“Hm…” Makoto stood over Akira and looked at his lunch. “This presentation is a bit too messy to be store-bought… Did you make this yourself, Akira-Chan?”

“Mmhm.” Akira nodded as he wolfed down the umeboshi he’d packed in.

“I see…” Makoto took her own lunch out of her box and opened it, revealing a nearly-identical bento, albeit one with a much neater presentation. “I’m curious to see whose is better. Care to trade salmon?”

“Uh…” Akira stared at Makoto’s lunch. This certainly seemed innocent enough, but he couldn’t help but think there was some weird ulterior motive underneath it all. Still, he didn’t have a good reason to refuse besides a gut feeling. “I guess.”

“Excellent!” Makoto picked up her salmon with her chopsticks and held it in front of Akira’s mouth. “Open wide, Akira-Chan!”

There it was. Makoto Niijima was trying to hand-feed him. And he could tell it was already too late to get out of it. Reluctantly, Akira opened his mouth and let Makoto push the salmon into it. And even more reluctantly, his face twisted up into a big dumb smile.

“MMMMMMM!”

Akira couldn’t deny the facts. That was one of the best pieces of salmon he’d had in a while. Certainly better than anything he could make. Makoto Niijima was a great cook.

“Dish ish-“ Akira stopped, letting himself chew and swallow the fish in his mouth. “That was really good, Niijima-Senp- er- Sama.”

“I’m happy to hear that you approve.” Makoto eyed the salmon in Akira’s bento. “Now it’s my turn to try your cooking.”

“If you want, go ahead.” Akira pushed his bento box towards Makoto. “But I should warn you, it doesn’t compare to yours.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.” Makoto reached into Akira’s bento with her chopsticks and picked up the salmon, quickly sliding it between her lips. She made a show of pulling the chopsticks that had
previously been in Akira’s mouth out of her own mouth, letting them slide along the tip of her tongue as she sampled the fish. Makoto stared off into space pensively as she slowly chewed the salmon, finally swallowing it and returning her attention to Akira. “It’s not bad, Akira-Chan. If I had to rate it on a scale, using my own as a 10, I would give yours at least a 6. Possibly a 7.”

“Uh… thanks?” Akira resumed eating his lunch, just glad that his own chopsticks had never entered Makoto’s mouth. She could have her creepy indirect kiss so long as he didn’t have to be on the receiving end of one.

“If you’d like, perhaps we could meet outside of school sometime and I could give you cooking lessons.” Makoto slowly picked up her umeboshi with her chopsticks, holding it in front of her mouth. “Who knows, maybe once you’re skilled enough, you could thank me by preparing my lunch. Doesn’t that sound fun?”

“Well, I’m afraid I just don’t have time for that kind of thing.” Akira shoveled the last of his rice down his throat. “You know, between my schoolwork and the cafe, I’m just busy all the time.”

“Of course.” Makoto bit into her umeboshi angrily. She informed Akira that since he was finished eating, he could resume cleaning the student council room. Akira was late getting back to class.

Wednesday

“YO, KURUS-“

“Kurusu, are you busy right now?”

Ryuji’s usual lunchtime barge-in was cut off by Ms. Kawakami. She ignored the yelling student who wasn’t in her homeroom and stood over Akira’s desk.

“Do you need something, Ms. Kawakami?”

“I need to discuss your performance in class” Kawakami said. “Would you mind accompanying me to the faculty office?”

“Not at all.” Akira happily followed Kawakami out of the room, glad to get away from a lunchtime of torment from Ryuji and Makoto. It took all of his self-control not to walk with a skip in his step.

None of the other teachers were in the faculty office when the two arrived. Ms. Kawakami stood at her desk and motioned for Akira to sit in her chair.

“Have a seat, Kurusu.”

“Alright…” Akira sat down, looking up at his teacher in confusion. “So, what’s this really about?”

“What do you mean?”

“Am I really doing that bad in Japanese? I thought it was my best subject.”

“Oh do you now?” Kawakami looked at the door nervously. After a moment, she looked back at Akira, speaking in a low voice. “Ok, you’re right. I just thought you could use a break from assisting the student council president.”

“You know about that?”

“It’s the talk of the school. Apparently Makoto Niijima has the ‘dangerous transfer student’ on a
“leash.” Kawakami rolled her eyes. “Or that’s what some of your classmates are saying.”

“It’s a bit more complicated than that.”

“With Makoto Niijima, that’s no surprise.” Kawakami sighed and shook her head. “I was her homeroom teacher last year, you know. She used to be a much more likable person. A little uptight, but there was this sincerity about her. Now she just seems smug all the time, and I don’t know why.”

“Yeah, she’s kind of overwhelming to deal with.”

“I’d tell you to stay away from her, but it doesn’t sound like you have much of a choice.” Kawakami smirked. “She shouldn’t bother you here, though.”

“So… you really just brought me here to help me?”

“Is that so hard to believe?”

“A little.” Akira sat stiffly in his chair. It’s not like he didn’t believe Ms. Kawakami, but life in general just didn’t seem to go that well for him. Lately, nothing good happened without some kind of trade-off. He tried to help a woman and got branded a criminal. He got to go live in the big city like he’d wanted since he was a kid but everyone already knew about his delinquent status. He managed to make friends, and now he was endangering his life with them every single day on these crazy adventures. Ms. Kawakami hadn’t given Akira a reason to distrust her, but he just waiting for the other shoe to drop. “Why do you care what happens to me?”

“What are you talking about?” Kawakami put her hands on her hips. “I’m your teacher! Why wouldn’t I care?”

“The other teachers don’t seem to.”

“That’s not- I mean…” Kawakami sighed again. “Alright, fine. You’re right. This isn’t the kind of thing I would do for any student.” Kawakami pulled the chair out from the desk next to hers and sat down in it. “Do you remember what you said to me your first day here?”

“Uh…” Akira tried to think back to that conversation. A lot had happened that day, after all. “I think I made some joke about cows?”

“Not that part!” Kawakami glared at Akira. “The part about your rehabilitation!”

“Oh yeah…” Akira stared at the ceiling. “What did I say, exactly?”

“You said it wouldn’t help your rehabilitation if people treated you like you were incapable of being rehabilitated.” Kawakami smiled. Not smirked, but actually smiled in earnest. “At the time I thought you might just be telling me what I want to hear, but so far your behavior here seems to indicate that you meant it.”

“So this is you helping with my rehabilitation?”

“I guess.”

“You haven’t decided?”

“Look, it’s hard for me to explain.” Kawakami looked Akira dead in the eyes. “I don’t know the full details of your situation, but I have a feeling that not everything’s as it seems. And I know I’ve
had times like that where I wished I had someone in my corner, so I figure I might as well try to help you if I can.”


“Don’t mention it.”

“So…” Akira looked around the empty faculty room. “What now?”

“Now you pull out your textbook and we get to tutoring.”

“Huh?”

“If I’m gonna keep calling you in here, we gotta make it look convincing, don’t we?” Kawakami looked down her nose at Akira. “Besides, even a good student could always use a bit of tutoring. And it may even change how people see you. Just imagine the upset it’d cause if the delinquent transfer student got the top scores in his class when exams came around!”

Akira imagined it. Somehow, he didn’t see all of the people who’d been whispering behind his back becoming accepting of him in such a situation. But he did see them getting really upset about it, their rumor-spreading mouths hung agape, silenced by how dumbstruck they were. And he couldn’t help but smirk at how satisfying that would be.

“Alright…” Akira reached into his bag and pulled out his textbook. “Let’s get to work.”

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**Friday**

It was a strange feeling, looking forward to lunch. Ms. Kawakami was pretty cool. Beneath the grumpy, frumpy exterior was a smart woman who took nobody’s shit and was astonishingly down to earth. She didn’t have the same bullshit expectations of teens that the rest of the faculty seemed to. Which wasn’t to say that she didn’t encourage Akira to be a model citizen, but she also saw him as a human being, a rare consideration few afforded him these days. Not to mention, he actually did feel like he was getting a better understanding of the course material. It turned out that a little personalized attention went a long way. Sure, Akira would rather be spending time with Ann and Shiho, but all things considered, this wasn’t too bad.

Besides, today he was hanging out with them after school. Since they couldn’t go into the Palace anyway and were both free, Akira decided to finally take up the girls’ offer to show him around Shibuya. A part of him felt kind of bad doing this without Akechi, but he’d find a way to make it up to the uncomfortably-cheery goober another time.

Hangout time with Ann and Shiho was fun enough. True, he didn’t much care for the places Ann chose to go, not really being one for crepes or shopping, but Shiho seemed to be sensitive to this and pointed out some places Akira would like, like the movie theater, the arcade, and Big Bang Burger. It wound up being more of a tour of the area than a proper outing, but being around this many people was still pretty daunting. Being on Central Street wasn’t like commuting to school. On the subway, everyone was packed together, but generally people were going in one of two directions. Here, people were moving every which way, from the dark-skinned foreigner wandering back and forth trying to get peoples’ attention for some business Akira was too young to be a customer of to the scary-looking guy in headphones who pushed past Akira into some back-alley to the portly older man in the black suit and green banner who seemed to be preparing for some kind of presentation outside the train station. By the time the girls were ready to call it quits, Akira was more than ready to return home.
The sun was already down when Akira arrived in Yongen, and he ran as fast as he could from the station to LeBlanc. When he got there, he ran into Sojiro, who was currently taking out the trash.

“There you are!” If looks could kill, Akira was pretty sure Sojiro just would’ve murdered him. He was NOT happy. “I was wondering just when the hell you were gonna get back!”

“Sorry!” Akira hunched over, trying to catch his breath. “I’m not that late, am I? I mean, my shift only started…” Akira pulled out his phone and checked the time. “…half an hour ago.”

“I don’t care about that, dumbass!” Sojiro crossed his arms. “There’s a girl waiting for you inside!”

“A girl?”

“Yeah, from your school! From what she tells me, you made it sound like you’d be working here right after you got out of your classes! She’s been waiting for you all afternoon!”

Akira’s blood ran cold. There were very few possibilities as to the identity of the girl waiting inside the cafe. Really, only one. He just hoped he was wrong.

“Uh, Boss…” Akira gulped. “What does this girl look like?”

“What, you don’t know?” Sojiro’s sneer grew even harsher somehow. “She’s a real refined and proper girl. A bit shorter than you, with brown hair and a red headband.”

“Boss, you’ve gotta get rid of her!” Akira looked around the alley. “Tell her we’re closing and you have no idea where I am! I’ll hide in the bathhouse and-“

“Oh no you don’t!” Sojiro grabbed Akira’s collar. “She’s been in there for hours! I don’t know what a nice girl like that sees in a punk like you, but you are going to march in there, apologize for making her wait, and be a perfect gentleman about it!”

“But Boss, you don’t understand, she-“

“Listen here!” Sojiro let go of Akira. “A real man doesn’t mistreat a woman. Even if this is all some kind of mistake and you’re leading her on without meaning to, you have to be honest about it!”

“I’m trying to tell you, that girl’s a-“

“GET. IN. THERE.” Sojiro stomped over to the front door and held it open, staring down Akira. Akira, for his part, tried to hold his ground, but the harsh eyes of his guardian weighed down heavily on him.

The fact was, Makoto already knew Akira had lied to her about working at LeBlanc right after school. Which meant sooner or later she’d hunt him down and confront him about it anyway. And he might as well get that over now instead of getting attacked by Ryuji on the way home from school one day.

Feeling like he was marching to death row, Akira entered LeBlanc. Makoto sat at the booth in the back of the cafe, finishing up a cup of coffee. She put it down and gave Akira the single-most terrifying glare he’d ever been on the receiving end of in his life, one that made the look Sojiro gave him not a moment ago seem positively friendly by comparison.

“Good evening, Akira-Chan.” Makoto’s voice was just as angry as her eyes, and Akira found himself thinking that the electric chair may be a preferable alternative to this situation. “Late for
Been a hot minute since we been back here, huh?

Apparently I get motivated to write Evil Queen when I run out of antidepressants. Which generally speaking would not bode well for the future of this story, though at the place we've left it at I think the next chapter may come sooner than usual.

Also it feels so weird going back to Akira after two months of Ren.
Akira looked back to the door, hoping Sojiro’s presence would temper Makoto’s wrath slightly. Unfortunately, Sojiro had stepped away, probably to give the two teens some space. He looked back to Makoto nervously, his regular tormentor very displeased. Futile though it would be, Akira decided to try and defuse the situation at least a little.

“Good evening, Nijima-Sa-“

“Hush.” Makoto raised her hand and pressed her finger to his lips. “I’m not going to give you the chance to tell me any more lies, Akira-Chan.”

“Lies?” Akira took a step away, moving past the booth towards the back of the cafe. “I don’t know what-“

“I said ‘hush’.” Makoto rose from the booth. At this point, Akira realized he made a huge mistake moving towards the back of the cafe. There was no escape now. The only exit was right past Makoto, and unless Akira tried jumping over the counter and breaking some brewing equipment — which would get him thrown out on the street — there was no way past her. “It’s time for you to come clean, Akira-Chan.”

Akira’s situation grew even worse as Makoto took a step towards him. He felt like he was being approached by a bear, and naturally moved back to get away from her. Makoto kept walking towards him, and before he knew it, he had started retreating up the stairs.

“I agreed to give you time after school for your job since your probationary status depended on it…” Makoto started up the stairs, poking Akira in the chest so hard he lost balance and fell onto his ass. He quickly scrambled to his feet and continued upwards, Makoto continuing her pursuit. “But that turned out to be a lie! You don’t start working until night! You told a half-truth to get out of your duties at school!”

“Te-technically,” Akira stammered, “it’s still not a good idea for me to do my job and your student council work. After all, I wouldn’t have any time for my homewo-“

“I’m not done yet!” Makoto shoved Akira with both hands as they reached the top of the stairs, knocking him over again. She climbed past the final step and loomed over him menacingly. “You will speak when you are given permission to and not a moment sooner! Do you understand!?“
“Yeah, got it.” Akira sat up, starting to rise from the floor, but Makoto’s foot made contact with his shoulder and pushed him back down on his back.

“Oh no, Akira-Chan.” Makoto shifted her weight to her foot, gradually applying more pressure to Akira’s shoulder, eliciting a hiss of pain from him. “You haven’t earned the right to leave the ground yet. I’ll let you know when you’re allowed up.”

Makoto removed her foot from Akira’s shoulder. He rubbed the sore spot with his hand, but didn’t try to sit up again.

“It’s bad enough that you lied to and abandoned me. No doubt to cavort about town with Takamaki.” Ann’s name left Makoto’s lips with the highest concentration of spite Akira had ever heard in human speech. “But then you also found a way out of our lunchtime rendezvous. But this deception and truancy cannot be allowed to continue. And so, I’ve devised a new plan for your rehabilitation that I believe will—“

Makoto’s eyes wandered around the room. Apparently the sights of LeBlanc’s attic was enough to distract her from her train of thought.

“Will…”

Makoto’s eyes focused on Akira’s unmade bed. She stepped away from the staircase and further into the room.

“What IS this place?”

“Uh…” Akira started to rise from the floor while Makoto was distracted. “This is my room.”

“This is where you live!?” Makoto looked back at Akira in shock, thankfully unperturbed by the fact that he was back on his feet. “In the attic of a coffee shop!?”

“Yeah.” Akira could hear Arsene yelling inside his head to take this chance to flee, but he didn’t feel comfortable with the idea of leaving Makoto Niijima alone in his private living space. “Boss doesn’t trust a convict to live in his house.”

“Oh, Akira-Chan…” Makoto looked around the room again, then pouted at Akira. “I’m so sorry. I had no idea… But I think I understand now.”

“You do?” Akira was thrown off by the complete 180 in Makoto’s tone.

“Yes.” Makoto approached Akira again with a sorrowful look on her face. To her credit, it was almost convincing, but the aura of smugness that radiated from her being betrayed her acting for what it was. “Living in this dreadful environment must be so taxing for you. Why, living conditions like these would disturb anybody. It’s no wonder you’ve been lashing out against my help!”

“It’s really not that ba-“

“It’s alright, Akira-Chan.” Makoto put her hands on Akira’s shoulders. “I realize how hard this must be for you. Sent to a strange city, away from your family and friends, relying on the limited kindness of a man who locks you away in an attic like this…”

“Boss doesn’t lock me u-“

“It’s no wonder you’re galavanting about with the likes of Takamaki.” Makoto rose up on her toes
and started to pull on Akira’s shoulders, bringing his face closer to her. “You must be so starved for affection.”

Makoto pursed her lips together and started to close the distance between them. Every alarm in Akira’s head went off at once, and he acted purely on instinct. Akira thrust his hands forward, pushing Makoto back hard. The older girl yelped as she fell back and hit the floor.

“Oh shit!” It would be untrue to say Akira didn’t take some kind of satisfaction from knocking Makoto Niijima to her ass, but the fact remained that hurting her was not his intention. He bent over and extended his hand to her. “I didn’t mean to do that! Are you ok?”

“I’m fine, Akira-Chan.” Makoto was astonishingly calm as she took Akira’s hand, rubbing her sore rear with her free hand as she got back to her feet. “I’m serious, that was a total accident. I just freaked and-“

“Akira-Chan, please.” Makoto clasped her free hand around Akira’s. “I understand what just happened. You don’t have to explain anything.”

Akira felt like a weight had just been lifted from his chest. And then there was a sharp tug, and the rest of his body felt considerably lighter too. He didn’t immediately process what was happening. One moment, Makoto had turned on her heel. The next, the entire room was upside down, and he felt like he was flying, not unlike he did when executing one of those acrobatic maneuvers in the Metaverse.

And then Akira’s weight came back hard, and he hit the floor full-force, sprawling out on his back. And then, there was even more weight pressing down on his center, and all of the air left his lungs.

It took him a moment to register the full situation, but Makoto was sitting on Akira’s stomach, her legs straddling his sides. She leaned forward, pinning his hands above his head, her face hovering inches above his, giving him her most terrifying glare at point-blank range.

“I’m going to explain this as simply as I can, because despite my best efforts, you still don’t seem to grasp the concept” Makoto growled. “You do not refuse me. EVER.”

“Get off of me!” Akira was having a lot of trouble breathing with the full weight of Makoto pressing down on his midsection, but he still managed to get the words out.

“Stop fighting me, Akira-Chan!” Makoto shook her head. “If you don’t do what I say when I say it, there will be consequences!”

“Fuck you, Niijima.”

“Excuse me!?”

“I said, ‘fuck you’.” Akira smirked at Makoto. “I’m calling your bluff.”

“I am not bluffing.” Makoto stared directly in Akira’s eyes with pure rage. “Think about the position you’re in. If you displease me, I’ll-“

“Have me expelled? Wreck my probation and send me off to juvie?” Akira snickered. “No you won’t.”

“And what makes you say that?”
“Because you want me. You want to keep me around as your little toy to do whatever you want to me. And if I go away, you lose that. And you don’t strike me as the type of person who takes loss well.”

“Very astute, Akira-Chan.” Makoto’s mouth curled up into a smile, but her eyes were still full of fire. “You’re right. I would hate for things to end like this. But I assure you, I can find plenty of ways to make you miserable.”

“With what? Hard labor? Physical abuse?” Akira kept his gaze locked on Makoto’s, showing no fear. It was true that, ordinarily, these things WOULD make him miserable. Being under the total control of this crazy senior of his would be a terrifying prospect if it were indefinite. But it wasn’t indefinite. Because Akira had a way to change Makoto. With his friends and the Metaverse, the days she could torment him were numbered. All Akira had to do was outlast Makoto’s bullshit until the Phantom Heroes could change her heart, and then this would all be a non-issue. “I can take it. There’s nothing you can do to me that would make me be what you want me to be.”

“Who said anything about doing something to you?” Makoto gave Akira a sly look. “There’s other people you care about who I wouldn’t miss if they went away at all.”

“Who, Ann and Shiho?” Akira tried to force out a laugh, but didn’t have enough breath for it with Makoto’s weight pressing down on him. Just speaking was an ordeal. “You wouldn’t dare get rid of Shiho. She’s the school’s star athlete. And even if you had probable cause to get Ann expelled — which you don’t — she’s Shiho’s best friend. And you’re not going to risk demoralizing the star of the volleyball team by doing something to upset her like that.”

“You really are clever, Akira-Chan.” Makoto shook her head. “But not clever enough. I’m referring to the other woman in your life.”

“Uh…” Akira tried to think. There weren’t any other girls he hung out with. So unless Makoto knew about some girl who had a secret crush on him and was threatening to have her expelled, Akira couldn’t conceive who she could possibly be thinking of. “You lost me. Who are you talking about, exactly?”

“Why, who else but the woman who’s been ruining our lunch dates?”

“Ms. Kawakami?” Akira cocked his eyebrow.

“Mmmhm.”

“Bullshit.” Akira gave Makoto an unimpressed look. “Even with your control over the principal, you can’t just fire a good teacher for no good reason.”

“Oh, but I have a good reason, Akira-Chan.” Makoto let go of one of Akira’s hands and pulled out her phone. “A very good reason, even.”

Makoto tapped at her screen a few times before turning it to Akira. What he saw was an image of a maid being held in a passionate kiss outside the door of an older man at night.

“What’s this?” Akira asked.

Makoto swiped her thumb across the screen, showing another photo. The same maid, kissing a different man, but this time you could see her face.

It was Ms. Kawakami.
Makoto swiped to another photo, showing Ms. Kawakami the maid leaving a man’s home, looking very flushed and disheveled.

“It seems your favorite teacher has been moonlighting. And as a sex worker, no less.” Makoto put her phone away and pinned Akira’s free hand to the floor again. “Such inappropriate behavior is easily grounds for firing. Possibly even arrest! Why, who knows what else she’s gotten up to? Maybe she’s even involved her students in these illicit activities!”

“What do you want?” Akira’s rebellious streak finally broke, and the fear had returned to his voice. He tried to keep a strong glare going, but quickly felt himself being overwhelmed by the crazed, victorious eyes of Makoto Niijima.

“You said it earlier, Akira-Chan.” Makoto lowered her head until she was whispering into his ear. “I want you.”

A chill ran up Akira’s spine.

“Here’s what’s going to happen.” Makoto grinned devilishly. “My birthday is one week from tomorrow. There’s no school, as there’s a staff meeting that day, and I want it to be special. So, first thing in the morning, you’re going to come to my home to pick me up for a special date, and we’re going to spend the whole day together.”

“That’s-“

“Hush, Akira-Chan.” Makoto let go of Akira’s hand against to clamp her own over his mouth. She kept it held there, making it even harder for him to breathe. It occurred to him that this girl may just wind up killing him. “I realize this is a monumental event, and so in celebration of us cementing our relationship, I’m going to let you have some space until then.”

Akira started breathing in and out through his nose rapidly. His face was turning red.

“You’ll have the next week to do as you please without interference from me. Think of it as something akin to a bachelor party, one last period of young masculine freedom before you become totally committed to me.” Makoto spoke in a playful tone, as if she wasn’t blackmailing a younger boy into what was essentially a form of slavery. “Of course, if you’d like to take that time to find a job so you could get me a birthday present, I wouldn’t say no. I’m expecting something nice, after all!”

Akira’s vision started to blur from a lack of oxygen.

“Of course, even if you can't afford anything, I'll just consider you my present. And I'll make sure to take my time unwrapping you.” Makoto let go of Akira’s other hand to run her fingers over his chest. “And you better not think of standing me up, or it would spell trouble for Ms. Kawakami. But I know you won’t, because it’s going to be such a wonderful day for the both of us.”

Makoto’s hand left Akira’s face. He opened his mouth wide to take in some air, but was immediately cut off again, this time by Makoto’s lips. Akira lingered at the edge of unconsciousness as Makoto Niijima sat on top of him, forcing him into a very long and unwanted kiss, her tongue poking forward, pushing against his. Akira didn’t have the energy to resist her, and just hoped that she’d come up for air before he passed out.

After far too long, Makoto broke the kiss and got off of Akira. She smiled as he started breathing deeply, finally allowed to have a sufficient amount of air again.

“That was just a taste of what you can expect, Akira-Chan.” Makoto headed for the stairs, leaving
the object of her twisted affections gasping on the floor. “Remember, one week from tomorrow! This is going to be the best birthday ever!”

Although Makoto's weight was off of him now, Akira felt a whole new kind of crushing sensation. Now that he could breathe again, the full reality of Makoto's ultimatum was hitting him. Although the bed was just feet away, he couldn't bring himself to move, paralyzed by the weight of the decision he had to make. Him or Kawakami. If he and his friends couldn't change Makoto's heart in one week, something very bad was going to happen.

Akira slept on the floor that night. It was a restless slumber, his head filled with visions of red eyes and chains.

Chapter End Notes

So yeah, this is a shorter chapter than usual, but I figured it'd be cruel to make folks wait a month or two after that last cliffhanger.
The Phantom Heroes race to secure the route to Makoto's Treasure.

Days Until Makoto’s Birthday: 7

“And that’s why we need to take her down immediately.”

As Akira finished recapping the events of the previous night in the alley, Shiho and Akechi stared at him with their mouths agape. Ann, for her part, was absolutely livid, her entire body shaking like it was about to explode.

“I know I’m asking a lot here.” Akira was pacing back and forth frantically, speaking a mile a minute. “You all have plans and commitments and you’d have to drop them to get through Nijijima’s Palace in a week, and I wouldn’t normally ask you to do that but it’s either me or Kawakami and I don’t want to get her fired and possibly sent to jail but unless we change Nijijima’s heart my only other option is—“

“Akira, you have to calm down!” Shiho stepped forward and grabbed his shoulder, stopping his pacing. “I understand how you feel, but nothing is going to get solved by panicking!”

“How am I not supposed to panic!?” Akira turned to Shiho, his face full of the kind of fear she hadn’t seen since Kamoshida was still at the school. “Don’t you get what’s on the line here!? If we don’t beat Nijijima in time, I’m going to be ra—“

“Akira, please. I understand completely. I’ve been there.” Shiho grabbed his other shoulder and held him still, looking directly into his eyes. In this moment, she was the picture of strength. “Nothing happened then, and nothing’s going to happen now. You have friends who are going to help you through this.”

“That’s right, Akira-Kun!” Akechi thumped his fist against his chest. “You have a team to help you! Together, the Phantom Heroes can do anything!”

“Exactly. We can clear our schedules, no problem.” Shiho smiled, her hands still on Akira. “But this is only going to work if everyone’s giving it their all, so I need you to find your cool and get your head in the game. Ok?”

“Yeah, ok.” Akira shut his eyes and took a deep breath. He held it for a few seconds, and when he exhaled, his eyes opened, much calmer than before, though still showing some worry. “We’ve just got to do it, right?”

“That’s right!” Shiho let go of Akira’s shoulders and gave him a thumbs up. “You ready to go?”

“Yeah.”
Shiho pulled out her phone and activated the Metanav. The world around them went through the sudden metamorphosis they’d all come to know, and all dressed in their outfits, Akira and Shiho exited the alley, making their way towards the manhole. Akechi began to follow them, but as he reached the alley, realized he wasn’t hearing the familiar sound of red heels among the footsteps.

“Panther?” Akechi turned to Ann, who was standing in the same spot she had been for the past few minutes, her whole body stiff, all muscles tensed. She looked into his eyes with a fury he rarely saw outside of Sae dealing with a difficult case. “Is something wrong?”

“Karasu…” Ann’s voice was just as tense as her posture, completely lacking in the usual girlish joie de vivre she tended to express. “If we kill Makoto Nijijima’s Shadow, the real Makoto Nijijima dies too, right?”

“That’s correct.” Akechi raised his eyebrow. “Why?”

“Karasu, I need you to make me a promise.”

“What is it, Panther?”

“If I start to go out of control, I need you to shoot me.”

“What!” Akechi took a step back. “Ann-S— I mean, Panther— I’m not going to kill you!”

“I didn’t say ‘kill’!” Ann loosened up a bit with the outburst. “Just shoot me! Or cut me with your sword or use your Persona or something! Just enough to knock me out! I need you to promise me that you can do that if it comes to it!”

“Why would it come to that in the first place!?”

“Look, I can’t ask Joker or Russian to do it! You’re the only one I can trust with this. Just promise me, ok!”

“Alright, I understand!” Akechi put his hands up. “If your actions become too extreme, I WILL restrain you. But I don’t understand why I would need to.”

“Because right now, I don’t feel like sneaking around.” Ann looked past Akechi to the shining metropolis born from Makoto’s heart. “I want to set this whole place on fire. I wanna take her precious utopia and turn the whole thing to ash. I want her to come out and try to stop me. And I want to burn that bitch to a crisp.”

Days Until Makoto’s Birthday: 6

The climb through the tower was arduous. The team had managed to defeat an inspector and get his pass to go past the 25th floor, but they could only ride as high as the 40th floor before security would have their eyes on the elevator. The superintendent’s office was on the 50th floor, and the Phantom Heroes got up to the 47th before calling it a day. The higher they got in the tower, the more labyrinthine and dangerous the floors got, and considering how tough the inspector they took a badge from had been, they didn’t have another big fight in them. Even Akechi, who was more experienced than the rest, just wanted to go back to his dorm room at school and collapse on his bed.

Unfortunately, he couldn’t. He had a standing dinner appointment with Sae. Which normally he wouldn’t have a problem with. She had actually offered to treat him to sushi for all of his hard work in helping her with her cases. Usually Akechi had to beg and plead for that, but as they got
closer and closer to closing the Kaneshiro case, she’d been in an increasingly good mood. And as
tired as Akechi was, getting to spend some casual, non-work time with Sae was very important for
his long-term plans. What was not part of the plan, however, was…

“Makoto-San!?”

Akechi didn’t harbor the same animosity for Makoto as his teammates, but he had been thinking of
her as an antagonist in his life lately, so he reacted to her presence at the sushi restaurant a bit more
explosively than he should have.

“Hello, Akechi-Kun.” Makoto was as polite and distant as ever. “It’s good to see you again.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I brought her along, of course.” Sae gave Akechi a queer look, as if she couldn’t believe he would
ask such a stupid question. “That’s not a problem, is it?”

“Of course not!” Akechi quickly regained his usual composure. “The more the merrier!”

“Yes, well, let’s not get too merry.” Sae sneered a little as they sat down at their table. “I haven’t
gotten that promotion yet.”

“No, Sae-San, but I’m sure it’s coming any day now.”

“Once we put that fat slug behind bars it will” Sae opened the menu and started reading through it.

“About that…” Makoto looked at Sae uncertainly. “Sis, don’t you think this celebration is a bit
premature?”

“Maybe, but it’s important to enjoy yourself once in a while. Within reason.” Sae shot Akechi a
quick glare before turning back to Makoto. “Besides, I’ll be too busy to spend your birthday with
you, so let’s treat this as an early birthday celebration. YOU can order whatever you’d like,
Makoto.”

“Well, if you insist.” Makoto chuckled, and for a moment, she almost seemed like a normal
teenage girl. “I can’t say no to such a luxurious offer, can I?”

“Makoto-San, it’s your birthday?” Akechi looked at Makoto in feigned surprise. Obviously he
knew when her birthday was thanks to Akira, but he saw this as an opportunity. Akechi never
really had much contact with Palace owners while he was still trying to steal their treasure, so this
would be a good chance to see if the Phantom Heroes’ activities were having any affect on their
target.

“Not until this Saturday” Makoto answered. “I’ll be turning 18.”

“Well, you must certainly be excited! Are you doing anything special?”

“Nothing too exciting” Makoto said coolly. “I’m just going to be spending the day with a friend
from Student Council.”

“Is that so?” Sae asked. “I thought your relationship with your fellow council members was strictly
business.”

“Well, I’ve been trying to be more sociable lately” Makoto said. “Hard work is important, but
success for the sake of success seems like such a narrow-minded way to live. There’s no point to
“I suppose not.” Sae returned her attention to the menu. “Well, since I can’t be there, I certainly hope you have an enjoyable time with your friend.”

“Thank you, Sis,” Makoto’s smile widened, and there was something about it that Akechi found deeply unsettling. “I’m sure that I will.”

Days Until Makoto’s Birthday: 5

Akira was still pretty tired the next day, and had a lot of trouble staying awake in class. A boost from Sojiro’s coffee had gotten him through the early morning, though right before lunchtime he dozed off for a moment and got pegged in the forehead by Ushimarú’s chalk. When lunch finally rolled around, Akira was too tired to eat, letting his eyes shut and laying his head on the desk.

His attempt at a nap was quickly disturbed by a flick against his forehead. Akira shot up in his seat, looking around frantically.

“We’ve been ambushed!” Akira yelled. “Russian, where are they coming from!? We have to-“

Akira’s eyes fell on a familiar yellow shirt with stripes in front of him. His gaze slowly trailed upwards to the half-amused, half-annoyed face of his homeroom teacher looking down at him.

“Sounds like an exciting dream you were having” Kawakami said. “Though I have to wonder what kind of name ‘Russian’ is.”

“Oh, uh…” Akira scratched his head. “I was in World War 2. I was fighting alongside some Russian allies.”

“Russia and Japan weren’t allies in World War 2.” Kawakami smirked. “Your history grades aren’t terrible. You should know that.”

“Dreams aren’t famous for being accurate.”

“Fair enough.” Kawakami crossed her arms. “So, are you ready for our session?”

“Oh, uh… About that…”

“What?”

The truth was, Akira felt very awkward being around Ms. Kawakami right now. Part of that was because he knew about her secret job. All during homeroom and Japanese class, he kept thinking about her in a maid outfit. It wasn’t a sexual fantasy so much as it was a reminder that this woman’s fate was in his hands and she didn’t even know about it. Akira didn’t really think he could hold a conversation with her knowing that A) she was a prostitute and B) she was possibly going to be fired and maybe even arrested for it. And it wasn’t the kind of thing he could just tell her about. First of all was the fact that he didn’t want her to panic. Second of all was the fact that he had no idea how she’d react to him knowing about her other job. Ms. Kawakami seemed cool, but Akira didn’t really know her that well, and it was entirely possible that she’d turn on him if she learned he knew about her secret. He hated that he could think that about one of the only people in the world to show him any kindness in the past month, but the entire delinquent experience had taught Akira that people could be fickle. Childhood friends had abandoned him, total strangers weren’t willing to give him a chance, and even his own parents had suddenly ceased all communication with him. Ms. Kawakami was nice so long as Akira was the suspiciously non-
deliquent but he didn’t want to take the chance that things would change if she had reason to believe he was any kind of threat to her.

In the end, the combination of awkwardness and fear was too potent.

“The thing is,” Akira said, “I don’t really think I need the extra help any more.”

“Really now?” Kawakami leaned forward a bit, her voice lowering. “Are you sure about that? I know you’ve been dealing with some… problems.”

“Those problems have ceased to be an issue” Akira said.

“Really? Just like that?”

“What can I say?” Akira shrugged. “It’s a miracle.”

“Must be.” Kawakami scratched her head. “Well, if you’re sure about this, I’ll let you spend your lunch period however you’d like, Kurusu. Though I would suggest you actually eat. It’ll restore your energy a lot more than a nap will.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Days Until Makoto’s Birthday: 4

The Shadows got stronger and stronger the higher they climbed the tower, and the other Phantom Heroes realized they were relying on Akechi’s strength too much. So instead of going for the superintendent, they decided to spend some time in the lower levels of the tower, fighting Shadows for experience. Akira, Ann, and Shiho pushed themselves practically to the point of failure, and while they were able to safely return to the real world, they wound up the most worn out they’d been since their individual awakenings.

Or, well, Akira and Shiho were. Ann had been running on anger all week, and still had plenty of energy to burn even when they were done with the Palace for the day. It didn’t help that she was still trying to get the hang of her whip. Akira and Akechi just had to stick blades into monsters, and Shiho had to swing a giant ball, but using the whip with precision so just the tip struck enemies was still something she was only able to pull off about half the time. And so, in her basement, Ann angrily bit into the crepe she was holding with one hand, the other hand lashing out at the target she’d set up.

Her aim was true, and the whip tore a hole in one of the many pictures of Makoto Niijima that Ann had printed out.

Days Until Makoto’s Birthday: 3

“Ah, Suzui-Chan!”

A chill ran up Shiho’s spine as she heard Makoto calling her name. Thankfully, she was able to center herself and fake comfort by the time the older girl caught up to her.

“Good afternoon, Niijima-Senpai.” Shiho put on a smile she hoped was convincing. “Is there something I can help you with?”

“I’m not sure if ‘help’ is the right word, but there is something I wanted to discuss with you.”
Makoto gave Shiho a faux look of concern. “I heard that you skipped volleyball practice yesterday. Is something troubling you?”

“Not at all” Shiho lied.

“Really? Because your teammates said you simply failed to show up. You didn’t even let them know you’d be skipping.” Makoto’s eyes narrowed. “That’s unusual behavior for the school’s star athlete.”

“I suppose it would look that way, wouldn’t it?” Shiho’s mind began racing for an excuse. Thankfully, she was a lot better at this kind of thing than Ann. “To tell the truth, I have worried that my academic performance is slipping lately. Volleyball’s no good if I flunk out of school, so I’m taking this week off to focus on my studies. I figured since we don’t have any games this week, it would be fine, but I suppose I should have informed the team first.”

“I see.” Makoto scratched her chin. Shiho couldn’t really tell if she was buying the lie or not. “You know, Suzui-Chan, I have a bit of free time for the next few days myself. If you’d like, I’d be happy to tutor you in whatever subjects you feel you need help with.”

“I appreciate your offer, Niijima-Senpai, but you already do so much for everyone in this school.” Shiho bowed her head slightly. “I’d feel guilty stealing the little free time you have.”

“It’s not stealing if I’m offering it.”

“Still, I don’t think I’ve gotten so bad where I need tutoring yet.” Shiho gave Makoto a determined look. “I’d like to improve my grades through my own hard work.”

“Well, that’s certainly an admirable attitude to have.” Makoto smiled at Shiho. “That said, there’s no shame in asking for help. Keep my offer in mind, Suzui-Chan.”

“I will. Thanks.”

Shiho took off, waving to Makoto as she headed for the school’s exit. Makoto watched her leave suspiciously.

Days Until Makoto’s Birthday: 2

“I’m just uncomfortable with it, ok!? Don’t I have that right!?”

Akira stood in the corner of the Velvet Room, watching what Igor called “Couples Counseling” with great interest. He had slowly grown used to the mysterious therapist’s office, the mysterious therapist, and the mysterious half-pint attendants, but this was a whole new level of bizarre.

Pixie and Succubus sat on the couch. Succubus lounged comfortably in the middle, arms spread out over the back and legs spread out towards one end. Pixie was much more uptight, sitting on an armrest at the other end, legs closed tight, leaning away from the larger Persona.

“Of course you do, Pixie” Igor said. “But haven’t you considered Succubus’s feelings in this at all?”

“Don’t worry about me” Succubus said, running her hands down her sides. “My feelings aren’t hurt. If this little copycat isn’t brave enough to experience all of this, that’s no skin off my wings.”

“I’m not a copycat!” Pixie shouted. “This is just the way I dress! It has nothing to do with you!”
“Of course not, sweetie.” Succubus rolled her eyes. “Do you see what I have to work with, doc?”

“Now just a sec-“

“Hold that thought, Pixie.” Igor looked to the smaller Persona. “I think Succubus may have a point. Don’t you think maybe you’re afraid to get closer because you find her intimidating?”

“Of course she’s intimidating!” Pixie threw her hands out towards Succubus. “Just look at her! She’s so… big! Everything about her dwarfs me! The hair, the wings, that body, who wouldn’t be intimidated!?"

“Pixie, I don’t believe this relationship can progress unless you face this fear head-on.” Igor pointed to each of them with both hands and brought his fingers together. “I want you to take the initiative and give Succubus a hug.”

“What!?”

“Come, dear.” Succubus held out her arms. “Don’t be shy, now.”

“I don’t… I’m not-“

“Pixie, listen to me.” Igor leaned forward and stared her in the eyes. “You can do this.”

“Okay…”

Nervously, Pixie started scooting along the couch, inch by inch, slowly approaching Succubus. She threw her arms open, hesitated for a moment, then threw herself against Succubus, trying to wrap her arms around the Moon Persona’s waist. The two of them started glowing, breaking down into swirls of shadow and light. The swirls intermingled, and took a new form. One Akira recognized from a video game he used to play as a child.

“You can’t be serious” Akira said. “Is that-

“I’m Jack Frost, ho!” The white Persona bounced around a little, just as jolly as the character from the game. “I know I’m just a mask, but take good care of me-hee, ho!”

Jack Frost disappeared in a ball of light, assuming the shape of Joker’s mask, and flew into Akira’s head. He could feel the little frost goblin or whatever it was supposed to be resting in his being among all the other Personas. When it was all done, he turned to Igor.

“I feel like all of this could be taken care of without the theatrics” Akira said.

“You’re not wrong.” Igor said, “but this is much more fun than shuffling cards around.”

**Days Until Makoto’s Birthday: 1**

Akira jumped out of the way of the Commissioner’s spear. When they finally confronted the big boss Shadow of the police department, it had taken the form of a knight in red armor on a black steed. In truth, the team all knew they shouldn’t be fighting this strong of a foe considering how much they’d fought already today, but there was simply no time left. They had to secure the treasure route today.

Akira screamed in frustration as he pulled his gun on the Commissioner and started firing rapidly. He’d already seen that bullets didn’t have much of an effect, but he was too tired to summon any
Personas and his arms were getting sore from all the knife-swinging he’d been doing.

Thankfully, the Commissioner seemed to be on his last legs, and the attack, paltry though it was, finished him off. As he exploded into shadow, he left behind a golden keycard, which Akechi picked up.

“We did it!” Akechi held out the card to the others proudly. “Alright Phantom Heroes, let’s dash to the top floor!”

“Time out!” Shiho shouted. She was panting heavily. “Can’t we take a minute to catch our breath?”

The team made their way back to the nearest safe room. Thankfully, it was on the same floor, so they didn’t have to travel far. Everybody sat down at the table, and Akira began passing out drinks to everyone.

“So,” Akira asked, “we secured the route to the Treasure, right? What’s next?”

“Not just yet” Akechi said. “We still need to reach the top floor and see the room where the Treasure is, but I’m sure we don’t have any more battles ahead of us today.”

“I’m holding you to that” Shiho said. “This is exciting, but it’s also exhausting. And we’ve been going at it every day this week. I can’t believe we haven’t totally worn out our bodies.”

“Yeah, it’s weird” Ann said. “I mean, I’m always kinda sore and stuff when we’re done, but my brain feels more tired than anything whenever we leave a Palace.”

“Well, that’s hardly surprising” Akechi said. “This is a world based on cognition. Your mental health is just as important as your physical health here, if not more so.”

“Let’s get back on track” Akira said. “You still haven’t answered my question. What do we do after securing the route to the Treasure? Nijima’s deadline is tomorrow.”

“Yes, that does present a bit of a problem, truthfully.” Akechi sighed. “When we find the Treasure, it won’t be solid. A Treasure doesn’t fully manifest until the Palace’s owner is aware that their distorted desires may be stolen. Normally, I send them a calling card the day before, which gives them time to start worrying and lets the treasure manifest.”

“We don’t have an extra day” Akira said. “Her birthday is tomorrow.”

“Yes, it is.” Akechi took off his mask and looked at Akira nervously. “Which is why I need to ask you to do something unpleasant, Akira-Kun.”

“What is it?”

“I need you to go on that date with Makoto-San.”

Chapter End Notes

Alright, got something up!

I'm gonna be on vacation so nothing new from me for a little while. I'm gonna try and
get some new fics ready for a few important dates coming up, so I'll be back before May.

But, uh. Not with this. Don't know when I'm gonna update this again. I realize the next chapter takes place on Makoto's birthday and her birthday is in fact coming up and I do have something planned for that, but it's not this. Which some people may think is me missing a big opportunity but do you honestly want a fic about Makoto being evil and the worst on her birthday? I sure don't. So, sorry, but not sorry.
The Queen's Birthday

Chapter Summary

Akira brings Makoto a very special birthday card.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It did not feel good to be Akira Kurusu.

His heart was pounding away like a jackhammer. His knees were shaking like jello in an earthquake. Right now, his friends, the other Phantom Heroes, were in Makoto Nijima’s Palace, standing around in the empty throne room waiting for her Treasure to materialize. In order for that to happen, Akira had to hand Makoto something. A little red envelope in his right pocket containing a calling card that detailed all the ways she was a bad person and how she was going down for it. In the Cognitive World, this would send Queen Makoto’s security into a full-on frenzy. Cops would be swarming the tower, Makoto’s Shadow would likely be guarding the treasure, and she’d probably summon that monster Ryuji dog to her aid, giving Akira’s friends the fight of their lives. In the real world, Makoto Nijima, a psychotic girl who hated being denied and had a very unsettling interest in Akira and apparently an incredible command of martial arts, would be infuriated, and Akira would be all alone with her in her home, where there was no supervision and no witnesses.

Frankly, he wasn’t sure who was going to be in the most danger.

Akira knocked on the door of the Nijima apartment three times. In that moment, it was uncanny just how much the sound of knuckles on wood bore a resemblance to funeral bells. As the door to the apartment opened, it felt like Akira was about to enter his own mausoleum. And then, he saw her…

The angel of death.

Well, “angel” was certainly a stretch. And Akira knew that to any outside observer, there wasn’t anything horrifying about a teenage girl in black pants and a conservative blue jacket. But she might as well have been standing there in a black cloak with a scythe.

“Akira-Chan!” Makoto beamed at the younger boy. “You came!”

“Happy Birthday, Nijima-Sama.”

“Please, come in, Akira-Chan!” Makoto didn’t wait for Akira to accept her invitation, grabbing him by the shoulders and pulling him through the door. “And today’s a special day, so I want to drop all pretense between us. Just call me ‘Makoto’.”

“Are you sure about that?” Akira asked. As the door shut behind him, he felt like his heart had stopped.

“Of course I am!” Makoto pushed Akira further into the apartment, leading him to a kitchen table. “Please, have a seat! How about I make us some tea?”
“Oh, you don’t have to do that.” Akira lingered by the table as Makoto started rifling through cabinets, not wanting to sit down. “I mean, it’s your birthday, you shouldn’t have to make tea, right?”

“But I want to, Akira-Chan! And as you just pointed out, it IS my birthday, so I shall do as I please and begin preparing some tea. So please…” Makoto looked back at Akira, the same almost-sweet smile she’d had on her face since he first showed up, albeit the effect somewhat undercut by the angry look in her eyes. “Sit down. I insist.”

“Yes, Niijima-Sama.” Akira took a seat.

“Uh-uh…” Makoto wagged her finger as she started boiling water. “What did I say about calling me by my name, Akira-Chan?”

“Right. Sorry, Makoto.”

The name felt awkward coming out of Akira’s mouth, like a stone had just made its way up his throat and out through his lips. He sat in nervous silence as Makoto prepared a pot of tea, humming a merry tune all the while. As Makoto went about her work, Akira felt like he was in a fairy tale, about to be gobbled up by a witch. After a couple minutes, Makoto finished making tea, bringing the pot and a couple cups over to the table. She stood right next to Akira and began pouring.

“Here you go, Akira-Chan!” Makoto leaned close to Akira as she started pouring tea, and he could feel her breath on his neck. “Be careful, it’s hot. Before drinking it, you may want to try blowing on it.”

Makoto punctuated her statement by blowing into Akira’s ear. He couldn’t completely stop himself from shuddering, but if Makoto noticed, she didn’t seem to care. Instead, she sat across the table from him and poured herself a cup. Akira watched as Makoto began sipping at the tea, evidently not bothered by the heat.

“Guess I shouldn’t be surprised” Akira thought. “Why would heat bug a dragon lady?”

“Quit wasting time” Arsene said in Akira head. “Instead of thinking up cute quips, you should just give her the card already.”

“Right.” Akira took a quick breath to calm his nerves. “I was so freaked out by being here I totally forgot about that.”

“I’m aware.”

“Aren’t you going to drink your tea, Akira-Chan?” Makoto asked.

“I’m letting it cool down first. In the meanwhile…” Akira pulled the envelope out of his pocket and slid it across the table. “Happy Birthday, Makoto.”

“Oh my goodness!” Makoto picked up the envelope with glee. “You got me a card. I’m excited to see what’s written inside.”

“Oh, I’m sure it’ll have a big impact on you” Akira said.

“I’m sure it will.” Makoto pushed the envelope aside. “I think I’ll open it later, along with the cards from Sis and Dad.”

“Later?” Akira’s nerves started acting up again. “Are you sure about that? I- Wait…” Akira
suddenly found himself completely distracted from the task at hand. “Your dad?”

“Yes.”

“But… I thought…” Akira tugged at his collar, unsure of how to broach this topic. “Aren’t your parents… you know…”

“Dead?” Makoto’s smile died as she looked down at her tea. “Yes. But after Mom died, Dad got to thinking about the future, and how the dangerous nature of his work meant he may not be around for us forever.”

“What kind of work did he do?” Akira asked.

“He was a police detective. He was killed in a hit-and-run several years ago.” Makoto’s smile returned and she looked back up at Akira. “But before he did, he prepared a slew of birthday cards, one for every year until I’m an adult. Each of them has a new message for me, and for one moment of the year, it’s like he’s here again.”

“That’s incredible.”

“He was an incredible man.” Some sadness flashed in Makoto’s eyes for a second, but it quickly disappeared, replaced by genuined joy. “You know, Akira-Chan, in a way I think I’m very lucky. Most people lose a loved one and that’s it forever. But every year, on my birthday, my father comes back to life, if only for a few minutes.”

Akira didn’t know what to say. For the first time ever, he could see Makoto Nijima as something other than a monster. There was no malice about her. No glare in the eyes, no harshness to her speech, no predatory aura making Akira feel uncomfortable. Right now, the facade of Shujin Academy’s queen had fallen away, and in its place was an ordinary girl, human like everyone else, capable of feeling love and loss and everything in between. For this one shining moment, Akira didn’t feel in danger in Makoto’s presence.

But he didn’t need Arsene nagging him to know this wouldn’t last. Akira had to act quickly or events would take a disastrous turn from here on out. In fact, things were probably going to get borderline-disastrous almost immediately. But that was just the price he had to pay.

“Well, I’m certainly honored that you consider my card worthy of being read at the same time as that special message…” Akira started twiddling his thumbs nervously, staring at the red envelope lying on the table. “But the thing is, the contents of that envelope are really more of a pre-date thing. I think you’ll get the most out of it if you open it right now.”

“‘Pre-date’, you say?” And just like that, Makoto Nijima smirked, returning to the terrifying monster Akira had come to know and loathe. She picked up the envelope with great intrigue. “I’m delighted to hear you’re taking the initiative in our relationship, Akira-Chan! If it’s that important to you, of course I’ll read it now!”

Makoto’s finger slipped under the envelope’s seal, tearing it open cleanly.

Ann’s heels clicked as she paced back and forth in the empty throne room of Makoto’s Palace. She, Akechi, and Shiho had been waiting in there for a few minutes now, and all of them were silent, though each for their own reasons. For Ann, it was trying to keep a lid on the constant rage she’d built up over the last week.

“So…” Shiho was up on the raised area of the floor where the throne normally sat, observing the
portrait and statue present. She looked back at Akechi and smirked. “Do you wanna talk about it?”

“There’s no need for that.” Akechi was uncharacteristically curt.

“Come on, it was hilarious!” Shiho started laughing. “You saw the secretary from behind and tried to be all Mr. Smooth. You were all ‘Excuse me, pretty lady’, but then she turned around and you saw the principal’s blubbery face and shrieked like a girl!”

“I was not expecting to see something so grotesque!” Akechi protested. “I never thought with Makoto-San’s penchant for order that something that hideous could be found at the top of this tower!”

“I’ve never seen you draw your sword so quickly” Shiho said. “I mean, it’s probably good that you cut him down so he couldn’t report us, but if you were that quick in all our fights you’d be totally unstoppable!”

“Please, Russian, I’d rather just move past the whole-“

“THIS IS TAKING FOREVER!” Ann shouted. “When’s that stupid Treasure gonna show itself!!”

“Patience, Panther” Akechi said. “The Treasure will reveal itself when Joker gives the target our card.”

“Are you absolutely sure about that?” Ann asked. “The way you described it, it sounds like a calling card makes a Treasure appear through psychology warfare stuff, but what if Niijima wasn’t psyched out!?”

“Just have faith.” Akechi smiled at Ann. “I know the Niijima sisters. The card will have its desired effect. Just give it some time and relax.”

“Don’t tell me to relax!” Ann barked. “There’s way too much at stake here!”

“Panther’s right” Shiho said. “This is a tense situation. Especially since I’m not sure if our plan will work.”

“What do you mean?” Akechi asked.

“So, you think that the Treasure is in this little room you can only get to through the ceiling, right?” Shiho looked up at the ceiling above the throne area. “Panther, this IS where Niijima-Senpai came from the first time you were here, right?”

“Yeah.” Ann walked up the stairs to Shiho and pointed to a particular spot. “A hole opened and she floated down in her throne like it was an elevator or something, then it closed up.”

“So the only way up there is the throne?”

“Maybe” Ann said. “But what if it only works for Niijima? What do we do then?”

Ann and Shiho looked at Akechi, who was walking up the stairs towards them.

“If you’re right, it would mean the Treasure is elsewhere” Akechi said. “Like I said before, I believe Palaces are designed so their owner’s Treasure can be stolen. I’ve been doing this for a few years now, and I’ve never encountered a Palace with a Treasure that’s completely impossible to access.”

“Ok then…” Shiho scratched her head. “We’ve still got some time, right? What if the Treasure’s
not in that room above? Where would it be?"

“Hmm…” Akechi stared at the statue of Justice, then the portrait, then back to the statue again. He took a few steps towards it. “I wonder…”

“What is it?” Ann watched Akechi closely. “Is the statue the Treasure?”

“No. The statue is Sae-San.” Akechi pointed to the portrait. “And that’s Makoto-San and Sae-San’s father, the now-deceased Sadao Niijima.”

“So Niijima-Senpai’s family is her Treasure?” Shiho asked.

“That’s a lovely sentiment, Russian, but it’s not quite what I’m getting at here.” Akechi started fiddling with the scales Justice-Sae was holding, finding they actually could be manipulated despite being made of seemingly-immobile stone. “These two are the most important people in Makoto-San’s life, and so it’s possible that they may be guarding her Treasure.”

“Don’t tell me these two are gonna come to life.” Ann looked at the sword in the statue's hand.

“I doubt it, especially considering one of them is already dead. But maybe if I just…”

Akechi pushed down hard on one of the scale’s pans until a clicking sound was heard. He registered some movement in the corner of his eye and jumped back as the portrait of Makoto’s father revealed itself to be a secret door, swinging open and almost slamming into Akechi’s face.

“There it is!” Akechi pointed to a hole in the wall the portrait had just been covering. Floating inside of it was a ball of shimmering light. “The Treasure!”

“What is it?” Shiho asked.

“We’ll find out as soon as Joker completes his mission” Akechi said. “Both of you prepare yourselves. I’ve never been in a Palace at the moment a Treasure was forced to materialize before. The atmosphere after sending a calling card is quite different from how it is now, and I have no idea what the shift is like.”

As if on cue, a loud, prolonged, rage-filled scream rang out all over the city. The room started shaking violently, and flashes of red light began to explode throughout the air like firecrackers. Akechi, Shiho, and Ann all fell to their knees, eyes shut and hands over their ears as they tried to deal with the sensory overload. After a minute, things seemed to calm down, though there was a slight red fog all about. With all the lights and sounds having died out, the trio began to return to their senses, blinking and repeatedly cupping their ears as the world began to unblur and that lingering ringing sound got quieter and quieter.

“On your knees, hm?”

The three looked up to the source of the voice: Makoto’s Shadow. She sat in her throne, which had apparently descended while the three were recoiling from the sudden shift in the world.

“It’s good that you miscreants have finally learned your proper place.” Makoto rose from her throne and walked over to the statue of Sae, holding out her hand. The statue moved, extending the arm holding the sword, giving it to her younger sister. The Shadow looked back to the three, gold eyes full of hate.

“But I’m afraid it’s far too late for that.”
To Makoto Niijima, the would-be Queen of Shujin Academy...

You have made many suffer through your callous acts of blackmail and abuse. Where once your motivations may have been pure, now they are nothing but corrupt. In your lust for power, you have betrayed your own sense of morality. And more than that, you have betrayed the justice that the Niijima family's name has been synonymous with for generations. Your heart has become blackened and impure, and so we will remove this impurity and save you and others from yourself.

-The Phantom Heroes

The card crumpled in Makoto’s hand as she clenched her fist around it.

“WHAT THE HELL IS THIS?!”

Makoto looked up at Akira with more rage in her eyes than he’d ever seen before. He instinctually jumped out of his chair and started backing away towards the front door.

“Just what kind of game do you think you’re playing!?”

“It’s not a game” Akira said. He stopped backing away and summoned his courage, standing tall. What was done was done. There was no backing out now, no capitulating, no easing the dragon’s wrath. It was do or die time, and being scared wasn’t going to accomplish anything. “It’s exactly as the card says. You’re a psychotic monster, and something is being done about it.”

“Are YOU trying to threaten ME, Akira-Chan!?”

“It’s not a threat.” Akira shook his head. “It’s a statement of intent. And our plan is already in action.”

“OUR plan’? So you have an accomplice for whatever this is?” Makoto stood up, regaining some of her composure. “Let me guess, this is the doing of that airhead Takamaki. This tacky little mascot seems like her doing.”

Makoto uncrumpled the card and pointed to a logo of a grinning face with sparkling teeth, a top hat, and a cape trailing behind it. In actuality, this logo — as well as the rest of the card — was entirely of Akechi’s making.

“It doesn’t matter who’s involved” Akira said. “You’re going down, Niijima. You’re not going to terrorize the students of Shujin Academy anymore.”

“Oh, Akira-Chan…” Makoto approached Akira, her voice practically cooing. “This is so sad to see. She’s gotten her claws into you, hasn’t she?” Makoto raised her hand towards Akira’s face. “There’s still time to fix this. I still have to punish you, but it will be much lighter if you promise to behave and stop letting yourself be led around by that little whore.”

“STOP THAT!” Akira smacked Makoto’s hand away. “Stop talking down to me, stop touching me, and stop insulting my friend!” Akira couldn’t possibly muster up the sheer, concentrated hatred in his glare that Makoto could, but he gave it his best shot. “This is over. All of it. You’re done.”

“I see.” Makoto walked away, disappearing into another room. A moment later, she came back with her bag, and walked around Akira towards the door.

“What are you doing?” Akira asked.
“I’ll think of a way to deal with Takamaki later” Makoto said as she put on her shoes. “For now, though, it’s time for me to go to school.”

“What for? There’s no classes, today, just the faculty meet-“ Akira’s eyes widened. “NO!”

“Yes.” Makoto looked over her shoulder and smirked at Akira. “I think it’s the perfect place for me to show those photos of Ms. Kawakami’s night job, don’t you?”

“Ms. Kawakami’s done nothing wrong!” Akira stormed over to Makoto. “If you think I’m going to let you-“

Akira was cut off by a kick to the face. Makoto’s foot connected with his jaw, causing him to lose all sense of balance. He went down hard, and couldn’t hear the sound of the door slamming over his body hitting the floor. It took about thirty seconds for Akira to regain clarity, and his newly-sore condition made rising to his feet harder. But he persisted, and finally, Akira gave chase to Makoto Niijima.

Makoto had a 45-second lead, and Akira actually couldn’t find her on the streets at all, but he knew where she was going. By the time Akira got to the train platform, people were already boarding a train headed for Aoyama-Itchome, and he couldn’t see Makoto anywhere. Akira was just barely able to board, making it to the back car of the train at the last second. He was on edge for the whole ride, trying to remain as close to the door as possible. When the train arrived, Akira pushed through the crowd as quickly as he could, seeing Makoto already running out of the station. He chased her for about a block, but no matter how hard he ran, he couldn’t catch up to her. When Makoto ran past the turn Akira usually made to cut through the alley, he realized she didn’t know about the shortcut to the school. This would be his only chance to catch up.

Akira waited in the alleyway, taking a moment to catch his breath. It wasn’t too long before Makoto came running by, and he reached out and pulled her into the alley. Akira’s victory was short-lived. Before he knew it, there was some twirling and grabbing and pulling and a familiar weightless sensation, and he was on the ground again.

“It seems I didn’t kick you hard enough the first time, Akira-Chan.”

Makoto’s foot dug into Akira’s kidney before he could respond. He didn’t even get to scream before she kicked him again. And again. And again.

“It seems… I’ll need to… be more thorough… in incapacitating you… Akira-Chan.” Makoto spoke between kicks, each landing on a different spot on Akira’s body. “Not that you can… actually stop me… but this will help you… learn your place.”

Akira curled up into a ball as Makoto continued kicking him, reaching into his pocket. He found his phone and started tapping all over the screen.

Makoto finally stopped kicking Akira when she felt a sudden dizzy sensation. She stumbled back and leaned against a wall, trying to reorient herself. When Makoto’s head cleared, she found her shoulder pinned to the wall by a red-gloved hand. She looked up to see that the hand belonged to Akira, although he was dressed in bizarre clothing she had never seen before.

“Akira-Chan!? What are you w-“

“Shut the fuck up” Akira said.

Makoto was about to protest, but suddenly felt that she wasn’t really in a place to argue.
After all, there was a knife pressed to her neck.

Chapter End Notes

God I could not stop writing "Ren" during this I had to correct my like a bazillion times I thought I was past this problem.
Truth be told, Akechi didn’t fully understand the intricacies of Metaverse weaponry. He knew that they functioned on very loose rules. Basically, if there was some kind of perception that an item could hurt somebody, it would likely work against Shadows. The one time Akechi had asked, Igor had mentioned that some people had used paper fans and even a folding chair as effective weaponry in the past. Whatever gift horse made Akechi’s toy beam sword into a real laser blade wasn’t one he was going to peek into the mouth of, although he did have to wonder why it seemed to have varying levels of effectiveness. Sometimes it worked exactly like you’d expect a laser to, able to burn through solid materials and melt all obstacles in its path. Other times, it might as well have been just a regular blade, unable to penetrate an effective enough barrier.

As Akechi clashed swords with Makoto’s Shadow, he really wished it were the former right now. If he could cut through her weapon, this would be a lot easier, and he could help his two companions fighting the giant monster at the bottom of the stairs.

“Panther, get down!”

Ann dropped to the ground as Shiho swung her meteor hammer, smashing the iron ball into the jaw of the giant Ryuji-Dog trying to bite her friend in half. As the beast recoiled in pain, Ann took the chance to summon Carmen and blast it with a few fireballs.

“Why is he always coming after me!?” Ann yelled.

“It seems pretty obvious to me” Shiho said. “He’s a giant dog, and you’re dressed like a cat.”

“Oh come on, it’s can’t be that, can it?” Ann tilted her head up towards the ceiling and scratched her chin. “Then again, the real Ryuji doesn’t like cats either…”

“PANTHER!”

Shiho tackled Ann, just barely pushing her out of the way of a giant paw that was about to crush her.

“Don’t get distracted right now.” Shiho rolled off Ann and summoned Sonya, kicking up a wind that pushed Ryuji back a bit. “This monster’s gonna take any chance it can to tear you apart.”

“I noticed!” Ann got up and pulled out her tommy gun, opening fire on Ryuji and piggybacking on Sonya’s wind to speed up her bullets for more damage. “You gotta trade outfits with me!”

“Uh…” Shiho lost control of the wind and pulled out her lipstick gun, aiming at Ryuji’s eye. “No.”

“Come on!” Ann slung her whip at Ryuji’s paw as it came for her, managing to repel the monster’s
assault for another moment. “Just gimme a break here! You’re more athletic than me, you’ll have an easier time dodging him!”

“Even if we could trade outfits in this world, which I don’t think we can…” Shiho swung both ends of her weapon at Ryuji at once, but he dodged it by rearing back on his hind legs. “It’s not like we have time to do it right now. Plus it wouldn’t fit. There’s no way we’re the same size.”

“What are you imply- AAAH!”

Ann was cut off as Ryuji’s front legs came back down on the ground, creating a huge shockwave that sent both her and Shiho flying. The dog-thing gave no quarter, charging after them, barking madly. The girls both tore off their masks as they rose from the ground, their Personas appearing behind them.

“AGI!”

“GARU!”

A ball of flame and a spiral of cutting wind shot at the creature at the same time, colliding right before its human face. The two spells combined, the fire burning through the concentrated air, creating a huge explosion that sent Ryuji reeling back.

Meanwhile, by the throne, Akechi continued his duel with Makoto. He internally cursed the strength Shadows had, which allowed his foe to wield a two-handed longsword with one hand like it was a rapier or cutlass. This freed up her other hand to hold onto the materialized treasure: a simple black briefcase. Akechi figured he’d have to fight Makoto’s Shadow — he had never successfully stolen a Treasure without battling the Palace’s owner, after all — but part of him still hoped he could just snatch the Treasure and run.

Akechi ducked under a wide swing of Makoto’s sword, a few hairs from the top of his head getting chopped off in the process.

“You shouldn’t let your eyes wander in a battle.” Makoto grinned, coming for Akechi with a downward swing. “Getting this briefcase will do you no good if you lose your head in the process, Akechi-Kun.”

“What!” Akechi raised his sword above his head, pushing against the back of the blade with his free hand as Makoto’s sword came down on it. Blocking proved to be a mistake, as now Akechi had both of his hands occupied and was being pushed down to his knees by the Shadow’s superior strength. “How do you know who I- I mean…” Akechi cleared his throat and deepened his voice. “You are mistaken, villain! I am the Phantom Hero Karasu! I-“

“Oh come off it, Akechi-Kun.” Makoto kicked out with her foot, catching Akechi in the gut. He tumbled as his back hit the ground, just barely dodging Makoto’s sword, although his stomach was now in considerable pain. “I recognize you. And Takamaki and Suzui-Chan. You can’t fool me with your tacky disguises.”

“Tacky’!?” Akechi jumped to his feet, incensed. “This is the outfit of a brave hero of justice!”

“It’s the outfit of a clown” Makoto said. “And unfortunately for you, there’s no place in my court for a jester.”

In theory, Makoto should’ve been able to escape Akira’s hold. He was bigger than her, and he had her hands pinned behind her back, and the knife being held against her throat was a concern, but
it’s not like she hadn’t been trained to escape situations like this. A few deft turns, combined with maybe a headbutt or foot stomping, and she’d be able to escape. She was well-practiced in escaping large aggressors, after all.

But theory kind of went out the window when your aggressor’s strength was beyond the limitations of normal humans. Not that Makoto fully comprehended this in the moment. All she knew was, in addition to the world and Akira’s clothes completely changing, Akira suddenly showed much greater strength and reflexes, able to dodge and counter every movement she made to escape him effortlessly. If she tried to pull her arms one way, he’d pull the other way. She tried to stomp on his foot, he’d slide it out of the way. She tried to bash his nose with the back of her skull, and he’d casually tilt his head back. It was like he was wrangling a helpless child instead of a young woman with a mastery of the martial arts, and it was a very frustrating position for Makoto to find herself in.

“Alright, that’s enough of that.” Akira rolled his eyes and sighed. “Let’s go, Your Majesty.”

Akira started walking forward, pushing against Makoto’s back, and as in his suddenly-strengthened state her weight was no longer an obstacle to his movement, her options were to either step in time with him or let her feet be dragged against the ground. Makoto elected to take the action that preserved at least a little of her dignity and started walking.

“Where are you taking me!?” Makoto looked ahead at the peculiar city she was being marched into. “What is this place!? Where did the school go!? And what are you wearing!?”

“SHUT. UP.” Akira applied just a little more pressure to the knife against her neck. Not enough to actually cut into Makoto, but enough to put some proper fear into her. “Keep walking.”

The two silently passed through the gateway to the city, and a Shadow cop manifested out of the ground. Makoto screamed as it materialized in front of her.

“HALT!” the Shadow yelled. “Identify yours- YOUR MAJESTY!?”

“Get out of the way” Akira said.

“What’s going on here!?” The Shadow glared at Akira. “What are you doing to the queen!?”

“I told you to get out of the way.” Akira’s voiced lowered. “I won’t ask again.”

“Oh no you don’t!” The Shadow grabbed its radio. “This is gate! We have a top-priority emergency! One of those rabble-rousers who’s been wreaking havoc in the city has captured the queen, and is holding her at knifepoint! Requesting back-up immediately!”

In an instant, two dozen Shadows appeared before Akira, all very angry and ready for war.

“Back off” Akira said. “I’ve killed dozens of you over the past week, and I’m not afraid to kill her and bring this whole world crashing down around us.”

The Shadows remained in formation, unmoving. They couldn’t decide whether to press forward or retreat.

“I mean it!” Akira tightened his grip on Makoto’s wrists, squeezing almost hard enough to crush them, making her squeal in pain. “I’ll do it! I’ll kill her if all of you don’t get out of my sight RIGHT NOW!”

“JUST DO WHAT HE SAYS!” Makoto yelled. She had no idea what was going on, or how the
power dynamic between her Akira had changed so dramatically so quickly, but it was all enough to
terrify her out of her wits. Makoto couldn’t remember the last time she felt this vulnerable. It took
everything she had not to burst into tears.

Makoto’s plea seemed to resonate with the Shadows, and the wall of enemies parted, creating a
narrow path for Akira to walk through.

“That’s it.” Akira stepped forward, looking around at the crowd of Shadows as he started making
his way to the tower. “Nobody try anything funny. The first one of you to make a move gets to
spend his last moments knowing he’s responsible for the death of his queen, his comrades, and the
city he had sworn to protect.”

The Shadows took Akira’s warning to heart. They didn’t bother him during the long, slow march to
the great tower in the center of the city. There was no ambush waiting at the police station, no
stealth rescue attempted as they walked through the lobby to the elevator. Finally, Akira and
Makoto got on the elevator, and as Akechi had been carrying the stolen keycard, he had to use the
touchpad and press the camera button to get access.

“Top floor.” Akira grabbed Makoto’s hair and wrenched her gaze up towards the camera. “Now.”

The elevator started moving immediately. The ascent was a slow one, taking a couple seconds per
floor. Makoto decided to take the opportunity to get some questions answered.

“Akira-Chan, just what is going on here!? What is this place!?”

“First off…” Akira kept the same menacing tone he’d had since they entered this world. “It’s not
‘Akira-Chan’. It’s ‘Joker’. I don’t want to hear my name cross your lips anymore. And to answer
your question, this is the world inside your heart.” Akira grunted. “On second thought, only my
friends get to call me ‘Joker’. Just use ‘Kurusu’.”

“My heart?” Makoto started trying to process that, unsure if Akira was speaking in some kind of
riddle. Honestly, she wasn’t entirely sure this wasn’t all the result of being drugged somehow. But
Makoto’s thoughts felt pretty clear, all things considered, and she couldn’t remember Akira
actually having any opportunity to slip her something.

“Yes, well, I realize that when it comes to you ‘heart’ may not be the most accurate term.” Akira
spoke with a level of spite Makoto didn’t realize he was capable of. “This world has been born
from your distorted desires.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Alright, how do I put this simply…” Akira hummed for a moment before continuing. “This world
is kind of like a manifestation of your subconscious. There’s this part of yourself in your brain
called a ‘Shadow’-“

“Like in Jungian psychology?”

“I don’t know anything about that. But your Shadow is kind of the manifestation of all the
repressed parts of you, the real you that you don’t show the world.”

“Yes, that’s what I was referring to” Makoto said. “What you just described is one of the core
ideas of Jungian psychology.”

“Great, then I can keep going.” Akira cleared his throat. “This is a world created by your Shadow.
You’ve become so high on the idea of yourself as the queen of Shujin Academy that your
“Shadow’s created a world inside of yourself where Shujin is a literal utopia of which you are the queen.”

“That’s ridiculous” Makoto said. “I’ve heard the whispers of that ‘Queen of Shujin’ nickname other students have given me, but I’ve never used it to describe myself.”

“Maybe not consciously. But your subconscious has embraced it. I’ve been dealing with the Shadow you in this world since coming to Shujin. She’s a callous tyrant who delights in hurting others to get what she wants and makes no bones about how much she loves flaunting her power.”

“Is that really what you think of me?” Makoto sighed.

“I don’t think it, I’ve seen it.”

“That’s not who I am, Kurusu-Kun.” Makoto, despite her current situation, somehow found it appropriate to turn her nose upwards. “Everything I do is simply to make sure that Shujin Academy is the best academic environment possible for its students so it can serve its role as the foundation they build the rest of their lives on.”

“Uh-huh…” Akira rolled his eyes. “And how does having Ryuji Sakamoto bully others achieve that?”

“Sometimes troublemakers require a staunch reminder of what is and isn’t appropriate conduct.” Makoto spoke with a haughty tone. “It’s not as if Ryuji-Kun is seriously hurting anybody, he’s just a bit forceful when needed.”

“Yeah, I bet that’s what you and your friends like to think.” Akira gave the fakest gasp Makoto had ever heard. “But wait, you don’t have any friends, do you? The only people you spend a significant time with are the Student Council, and they’re too terrified to do anything but agree with you.”

“They simply agree with my vision for the school” Makoto said. “There’s nothing wrong with that, is there?”

“I suppose not. But there is something wrong with blackmailing the principal.”

“Principal Kobayakawa is a corrupt ingrate who cares more about his own societal status than the wellbeing of the students whose growth he’s supposed to be fostering.” Makoto was suddenly speaking with a lot of vitriol. For a second, Akira thought he might’ve touched a nerve, but it seemed more like she just genuinely hated the principal. “If I weren’t holding his leash he would’ve retained a violent molester on staff.”

“You’re talking about that Kamoshida guy?”

“That man’s volleyball fame gave him an undeserved position of power in the school which he used to abuse the students as he pleased.”

“You realize you just described yourself, right?”

“Excuse me!?” Makoto looked over her shoulder to glare at Akira. This time he HAD touched a nerve. “I’m nothing like that monster!”

“Oh really?” Akira glared back, emboldened by his power in the Metaverse. The physical advantage he had over Makoto finally gave him equal footing in this contest of wills they’d had going on for weeks. “So you don’t see anything wrong with threatening Ms. Kawakami’s job?”
“That woman is doing disgraceful things at night that are completely unbecoming of an educator.” Makoto practically spat on Akira’s face. “I was offering her leniency with our deal.”

“It’s not a deal, it’s an ultimatum!” Akira’s voice rose, and in the confines of the small elevator car, it left an impact. “You were just running to school to get her fired because I refused to be in a relationship with you! If I let you have your way, you would’ve wound up raping me!”

“How dare you!?” Makoto’s reaction was a lot bigger than Akira was expecting, actually managing to wrench herself out of Akira’s grip. She turned to face him, jabbing his chest with her finger. “I WOULD NEVER DO SOMETHING SO VILE, SO REPREHENSIBLE, SO-“

“Oh come off it, Niijima!” Akira smacked Makoto’s hand away. “You haven’t been subtle at all! The constant comments on my appearance, the shared meals, the looks and touching, not to mention how you LITERALLY FORCED YOURSELF ON ME in my own home!”

Makoto took a step back, the fire leaving her eyes. It seemed like Akira had finally gotten a leg up on her, and he decided to press his advantage.

“You’ve been manipulating things since I set foot in this school to try and make me into your ‘boyfriend’! I was only in your apartment today because of your sick and twisted threats, and I think we both know where things would’ve gone if I didn’t have that calling card with me. Do you think it’s ok because I’m male? I want you to think of all the things you’ve said and done to me since we met. Then imagine that a man was doing all of it to a woman, and tell me how ok it was.”

Makoto remained silent. Akira observed her closely, trying to figure out what was going on in her head. There was no anger in her face, no righteous indignation, no attempt to talk back or justify her actions again. But she didn’t seem sad either. Or happy. She didn’t seem… anything. The blank expression on Makoto’s face was completely indecipherable. She just stood there, not moving, not speaking, not reacting. If it weren’t for the slight motions of her breathing, she could’ve been mistaken for a mannequin.

The elevator stopped, opening to the reception area on the top floor. Akira put away his knife and pulled out his gun, pointing it at Makoto.

“Walk.”

Makoto stepped out of the elevator. Akira followed her, gun pressed to the back of her head.

“Maybe you still think everything you’ve done is right. Maybe there’s nothing I can say that will make you see yourself for what you really are.”

Akira pointed to the door to the throne room.

“But if you go through there, I don’t have to say anything. Move it.”

Makoto pushed through the large doors, and although she didn’t display it externally, she was, in fact, having an emotional response.

Sheer disbelief.

Makoto struggled to process everything before her. There was a giant dog with Ryuji’s face doing battle with Ann Takamaki and Shiho Suzui. Takamaki was swinging a whip around while Suzui had some giant woman behind her kicking up a gust of green wind. Meanwhile, atop a staircase, she saw herself, dressed in fine clothes and sporting a tiara, locked in a sword fight with Goro Akechi, who was wearing the most garish thing she’d ever seen in her life.
It just couldn’t be real. It was all too absurd.

The Ryuji dog collapsed, and after the room shook from its weight hitting the floor, the monster slowly dematerialized, vanishing into thin air. Ann and Shiho fell to their knees, both completely exhausted. Meanwhile, Makoto’s Shadow kicked Akechi down the stairs, making him lose his sword in the process. Akechi groaned in pain when he hit the bottom, and the Shadow slowly descended the stairs, sword at the ready. He managed to successfully roll onto his back before the Shadow loomed above him, her foot pinning his shoulder to the ground. She looked at Ann and Shiho.

“Impressive.” Makoto heard her own voice come out of the bizarre doppelgänger, albeit a bit distorted. “But it seems that fight took a bit too much out of you. Why, even without Ryuji-Kun, I could easily slay all three of you right-“ The yellow eyes of Makoto’s copy looked away from the three intruders in front of her and towards the door, where she finally took notice of Akira and the real Makoto. “Oh my. This is an interesting development.”

Ann, Shiho, and Akechi all looked to the door. Ann seemed to get her energy back first.

“What the hell!?” Ann shouted. “What’s SHE doing here!?”

“She didn’t react well to the calling card” Akira said. “It was this or watch Kawakami lose her job.”

“A bold strategy, Akira-Chan” Shadow Makoto said. She reached the bottom of the stairs and stuck out her sword, the tip of the blade right against Akechi’s chest, holding the briefcase above her head with her other hand. “Let me guess, you’re going to threaten to kill my weaker self unless I surrendered this, right? It’s certainly not a bad idea. After all, if she goes, I go. But tell me, do you think you can kill me before I kill Akechi-Kun here?”

“Kill?” Makoto whispered as her blank expression finally broke. She was finally starting to process all of this, but she didn’t know what to make of it. For as bizarre as this scenario was, the strangest thing about it was how alien it didn’t feel. The sights and events playing out before her were nothing short of fantastical, but it all seemed perfectly normal, like when you’re in a dream and don’t know it, and the myriad plot twists and inconsistencies feel totally natural.

But at the same time, Makoto knew this wasn’t a dream. She’d had the odd lucid dream before, and none of it felt as real as this. The ‘plot’, so to speak, made sense, at least linearly. There had been a chain of events from Akira showing up at her door to giving her the card to the run to school to arriving in this city, all of which followed the rules of cause and effect.

“You know,” Makoto’s Shadow said, “I’m starting to think you’re more trouble than you’re worth, Akira-Chan. I’ve offered you a nice little spot in my utopia, a perfect place where you could escape criminality. I offered it to you in two worlds, even! And instead you reject my offer of a home and embrace criminality instead.”

“You didn’t offer me a home, you offered me a prison. And I don’t know if you noticed, but my whole thing in life right now is staying out of prison.” Akira put his finger on the trigger. “Now hand over the Treasure.”

“Joker, what are you doing!?” Akechi yelled.

“This city’s going down one way or another” Akira said. “I’d rather do it without getting Makoto Niijima’s blood on my hands, but after all the grief she’s given me, I don’t think I’d mind too much.”
“Hm…” Shadow Makoto’s eyes narrowed. “I’m not so sure about that, Akira-Chan.”

“Don’t test me, Nijijima.”

“Don’t waste my time, Akira-Chan.” Shadow Makoto pushed her sword forward, just enough for the tip to break Akechi’s skin. “Were you to kill her or I to hand over the Treasure, I would die either way, but I can at least take one of you with me. So I’m calling your bluff.” Shadow Makoto grinned. “I’ll give you until the count of three. Either you kill me and all your problems are solved, or I reveal you for the coward you are and kill Akechi-Kun to punish you for inconveniencing me.”

“No!” Shiho pointed her lipstick gun at Makoto’s Shadow. “Step away from him now!”

“Now, now, Suzui-Chan…” Shadow Makoto shook her head. “This is between me and Akira-Chan. If you or Takamaki interfere, I’ll run Akechi-Kun through before the count is over. Speaking of which…” Yellow eyes returned their focus to Akira. “One…”

Akira’s mind started racing. Makoto’s Shadow had called his bluff. He couldn’t actually straight-up murder somebody, not even Makoto Nijijima. That was the whole point of stealing her Treasure. But he couldn’t just stand by and let Akechi get killed either.

“Two…”

Akira pushed the real Makoto out of the way and pointed his gun at her Shadow. It was a long shot, but maybe he could shoot the sword out of her hand. He aimed his pistol the best he could.

“Three!”

The sword thrust forward as the gun fired. The bullet missed, and Akechi was impaled through the chest, howling in pain as the sword came out through his back and stuck into the floor.

“SHIT!” Akira ran towards Akechi as Ann and Shiho summoned their Personas. The real Makoto tried to take in the whole scene, but all she could focus on was the young man bleeding out on the floor.

Goro Akechi, her sister’s protege. A friendly, intelligent, good-natured boy detective. Perhaps a bit cloying, maybe a little arrogant sometimes, and Makoto wouldn’t consider him a friend, but she had never wished him any ill either.

There had been times when she was angry enough to hurt people. Took a certain pride in it, even. But those had always been for good, hadn’t they? Everyone Makoto ever hurt was a monster or troublemaker hurting others. But Akechi was none of these things. Ridiculous outfit aside, whatever he was doing in this city that was supposedly born from her, Makoto had trouble believing he was acting out of ill will. And now he was dying. Bleeding like a stuck pig by her own hand… sort of. It was too much to take in. Makoto knew it was real. She could feel it in her bones. But she didn’t want it to be.

“This isn’t real!” Makoto yelled. “None of this is real! This city isn’t real! This room isn’t real!” Makoto pointed at her Shadow, the yellow-eyed duplicate pulling the sword out of Akechi’s chest, gleefully watching his blood drip from the blade. “And that’s not me!”

Makoto’s Shadow stared at the real Makoto and started laughing wickedly. A dark aura surrounded her, and she began to float into the air.

And then, among all this other insanity, Makoto watched as her doppelgänger’s shape began to change.
Chapter End Notes

Somehow I feel I got this out both quicker and slower than I thought I would.

And no Akechi falling down the stairs is not a reference to another fic I wrote recently, so don't read into that.
Dethroned

Chapter Summary

The Phantom Heroes have their final battle with Makoto Niijima.

Chapter Notes

Got a couple important announcements in the end notes, so make sure to check those out when you're done reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The pool of blood reversed its flow, retreating into the wounds from whence it came before they sealed shut. Akechi shot up and took a deep breath, his clothes damaged and a little roughed up but largely unharmed thanks to the double-Dia spells simultaneously performed by Carmen and Sonya.

“That was a close one!” Akechi yelled. He turned towards his saviors, Ann and Shiho, a big smile on his face but some fear still lingering in his eyes. “I saw a light! It was so welcoming… I still feel a slight urge to move towards it.”

“Well we’re gonna need you to stay here.” Ann grabbed Akechi’s shoulder and pulled him to his feet, pointing behind him. “Because I think it’s gonna take all of us to deal with that.”

Akechi looked past Ann’s finger to see Makoto’s Shadow floating above the stairway, an evil aura swirling around her as she suddenly grew in size. He, Ann, and Shiho all backed away from the base of the stairway, their decided-upon safe distance happening to put them in line with Akira. It was hard to see what was happening to the Shadow. The shift happened radically, her body rapidly contorting into something no longer human.

The Phantom Heroes shielded their eyes as this new giant figure came crashing down to the ground, the displaced air creating an explosive gust of wind that nearly knocked them off their feet. When it felt safe to look, they saw they were at eye level with what appeared to be a giant tire with spikes protruding from it. The tire was flanked by two giant mechanical arms, both emerging from beneath a billowing white cloth. Muffled engine noises came from beneath the cloth, and the affect of the tire and arms almost looked like a person sprawled out on the ground.

But the real person was above it all. Looking up, the cloth appeared to actually be some kind of dress, which came up to the shoulders of a grey-skinned human form emerging from the top of the mechanical being like the upper half of a centaur. A giant Makoto Niijima loomed above them, her yellow eyes obscured by a solid slab of metal. She seemed to be imitating the statue of Justice, her left hand holding a sword, her right hand holding aloft a massive scale balancing blue balls of energy.

“I am a Shadow,” the grotesque thing said, “the true self!”

“What the hell is that!” Akira yelled.
“Makoto-San’s Shadow self has revealed her true form” Akechi said. “I was hoping we would be able to avoid this.”

“You knew this was gonna happen!?” Ann asked.

“Well, it was certainly a possibility.” Akechi backed away from the giant while summoning Robin Hood. “If you can’t steal a Treasure without attracting the Palace owner’s attention, they’ll transform into a monster and you have to fight them for it.”

“So how often does that happen?”

“In my experience?” Akechi looked away from Ann shamefully. “Every time.”

“And you didn’t think to warn us that this would happen!?” Shiho asked.

“I thought we’d be able to avoid it this time!”

“Based on what logic!?” Akira yelled.

“Well, I-“

Akechi got cut off as one of the giant mechanical hands balled up into a fist and swung in a wide haymaker at the entire group. Akira, Ann, and Shiho all jumped back in time, but Akechi was a second too late and got grazed, which given the fist’s size knocked him on his ass, making Robin Hood disappear.

“You know what, we can discuss this later.” Akira pulled Akechi to his feet again. “We’re not going to beat whatever this is if we’re not at the top of our game.”

Akira pointed his pistol at Shadow Makoto and unloaded the entire clip. There were two grunts in response. A booming, echoey one from the mechanical woman in front of them, and a normal cry of pain from the real Makoto behind them.

“Hmmm…” Shiho looked back at the real Makoto, who was grabbing her head with both hands. “Think that means fighting her is working?”

“Maybe.” Ann did a back handspring as the upper body of the Shadow swung its sword down at her. When she returned to her feet, she glared back at the real Makoto. “More importantly, do you think smacking around a real person would change their cognition to make their Shadow weaker?”

“We’re not doing that” Akira said.

“Are you sure about that!?” Ann whipped out at the Shadow, but the tip of her whip was grabbed by one of its giant mechanical hands. “It’d be a lot easier than this!”

“This isn’t up for debate, Panther!” Akechi yelled.

“Are you REALLY, REALLY sure!?” Ann grunted as she tried to pull her whip free. “Because I really think we could all save ourselves some time if-“

“Enough!” Shiho swung her meteor hammer into the wrist of the giant hand. It let go of the whip and Ann fell backwards. “We’re here to save Niijima-Senpai from herself, not beat her up for your satisfaction!” Shiho helped Ann up to her feet and pointed to the monster in front of them. “If you wanna take out your anger on something, try the giant thing trying to kill us!”

“FINE THEN!” Ann tore off her mask and Carmen appeared. “I’M GONNA MELT THIS
Carmen shot a fireball at Shadow Makoto, who blocked it with one of her giant hands. An unsettling grin formed on her face.

“Oh, how interesting…” Shadow Makoto started swinging the scales in her right hand back and forth, the blue energy balls glowing brighter. “I wonder whose power burns hotter, Takamaki-San?”

One of the energy balls launched from the scales, soaring high into the air before coming down towards Ann. Ann stepped back, but the ball exploded when it hit the ground, and the blast knocked her back. Ann got up just in time to see the second ball coming down towards her. She gritted her teeth and had Carmen launch an Agi spell directly at the incoming projectile, and the two collided in the air, going off in a brilliant explosion of red and blue. As the energy in the air dissipated, Ann let out a scream of rage, and Carmen started unleashing rapid-fire Agi spells, one fireball after another. Between the repeated booming and flashes of light caused by the chain of explosions, it was hard to tell how much it was affecting Shadow Makoto, and Ann’s continued screaming didn’t help. When her assault finally ending, Ann fell to her knees, panting heavily.

“Take that… you biiiii~” Ann fell forward, planting her hands on the ground as Carmen disappeared.

“You alright, Panther?” Akira asked.

“I think so.” Ann looked up at the massive cloud of smoke where Makoto’s Shadow had once been visible. “Did I get her?”

“I doubt it” Akechi said as he kept his guard up. “I imagine our foe is hardier than that.”

“Speaking from experience again?” Shiho asked.

“Not exactly.” Akechi kept his eyes trained on the smoke cloud, watching for any sign of movement through the grey haze. “But I watch a lot of battle anime. And if there’s one thing I’ve learned…”

A strange mechanical sound came out through the smoke, like two things disconnecting from each other.

“It’s to never let your guard down until the smoke clears.”

A loud crashing sound followed, and two points of impact displaced some of the smoke, revealing the form of Shadow Makoto. Before the group could respond, there was the loud roar of an engine and a screeching sound, and a massive wheel swung out, crashing into all four of them and sending them flying.

None of the Phantom Heroes landed gracefully, but Akira, Akechi, and Shiho managed to rise to their feet quickly. Ann was having some trouble getting up, still worn out from the massive fiery assault she had unleashed moments ago. The others weren’t quick to help her up either, taken aback by the full revelation of the Shadow’s true form.

Shadow Makoto brushed the last bit of burning cloth that had once been her dress off her shoulder. She looked a little damaged, but the absence of the billowing dress revealed what the team had suspected since the fight’s beginning to be true: The entire lower half of the Shadow was a giant motorcycle. It was silver and blue, shaped like a modern Kawasaki motorcycle, but armored like a tank. The back wheel was spiked like the front, and the giant arms had been detached from the
sides, the vehicle left standing through the sheer force of the Shadow’s will.

“I’m done entertaining you peasants!” Shadow Makoto reared back, raising her front wheel into the air, the spikes spinning around rapidly. “I’m going to turn you all into roadkill!”

The Shadow brought down her front wheel and took off in an instant, moving much faster than anything as large as her could be expected to move. Thinking quickly, Shiho summoned Sonya and kicked up a Magaru towards herself and her teammates, the wind blowing everybody out of the way quicker than their legs would allow.

“Very clever, Suzui-San.” Shadow Makoto leaned to her left, pressing the tip of her sword against the ground. “But there’s no trick a bug like you can come up with that I can’t overcome.”

As the Phantom Heroes got up, Shadow Makoto charged again, dragging her sword against the ground. Massive sparks shot up as the blade cut across the throne room floor, and while Shiho was able to blow everybody out of the way in time again, a bunch of the sparks got caught in the wind, burning the team.

“Son of a bitch!” Akira bit into a Devil Fruit, healing the burn damage. “She’s so fast! Can we even hit her at that speed!?”

“We better determine that quickly!” Akechi pointed at the charging Shadow. “Here she comes again!”

“We have to break this pattern!” Shiho yelled. “Everybody split up!”

The group all ran in different directions as Shiho kicked up another Magaru, this one accelerating everybody to the corners of the room. Akechi was the first to get up, positioned behind Shadow Makoto. He ripped off his mask and had Robin Hood fire a light arrow with Kouga, hitting his target square in the back. Shadow Makoto growled as she turned around and tried to mow down Akechi, dropping a blue ball of energy from her scales on him as he dodged, scoring a direct hit.

“Karasu!” Akira called out to Akechi. “Are you ok!?”

Akechi groaned, giving a thumbs up. Makoto’s Shadow loomed over him, positioning her sword to stab into his chest again.

“Leave him alone!”

Ann opened fire with her machine gun. Shadow Makoto turned around, wincing from being on the receiving end of the spray of bullets, and began to charge at Ann. Akira took in the situation, noticing how the charge would have the Shadow pass directly between him and Shiho as she made her way towards her aggressor.

“Russian!” Akira yelled. “Throw your meteor hammer at me!”

“What for!?” Shiho asked.

“No time! Just do it!”

Shiho complied, sending the business end of her weapon flying at Akira. The timing was just right for the chain to thread between the spokes of Shadow Makoto’s front wheel, and Akira caught the end of the hammer, pulling the chain tight. When Shiho felt the tug, she realized what Akira was doing and pulled from her end. The two managed to slow down Makoto’s Shadow, but another rev of her engine caused Akira to fall and lose his grip, and the chain slipped out of her spokes as she
continued charging at Ann.

“Shit!” Akira got up as fast as he could. “I thought that would work!”

Ann’s gun ran out of bullets as Shadow Makoto reached her, ready to bring down her sword again. And once again, the attack was interrupted by gunfire, this time courtesy of Akechi’s laser pistol. The blast hit the Shadow’s left hand, making her drop the sword, and she turned around and threw another ball of blue energy at Akechi.

Akechi dodged and continued firing his pistol, the blasts hitting the motorcycle’s body. Shadow Makoto readied another charge, but before she could, Ann picked up the sword she dropped and stuck it between the spokes of her back wheel. As the Shadow lunged forward, the sword proved sturdier than Akira’s hold, and the Shadow spun out of control, landing on her side.

“She’s dazed!” Ann yelled. “Let’s finish this!”

Ann leapt forward first, landing right in front of the Shadow, whipping her face over and over to pile on the hurt. Akechi and Akira each took a wheel, sinking their blades into the rubber of the motorcycle tires to render them nonfunctional. Shiho aimed for the scales, smashing into each plate with one end of her meteor hammers, sending the energy balls shooting up into the air before they came back down on the Shadow’s body.

The Shadow howled in pain at being in the receiving end of this assault, and off near the entrance of the room, the real Makoto did the same, hands grabbing at her head and rolling around on the ground as all of her senses went out of whack, the mental anguish of being witness to her own cognitive beatdown too much to bear. As the Shadow began to return to her previous human size and shape, Akechi ran over to the real Makoto to check on her.

“Makoto-San, are you alright!?” Akechi knelt down and helped Makoto sit up.

“Akechi-Kun…” Makoto’s voice was weak, tears of pain leaking from her eyes. She looked at the incapacitated Shadow lying on the floor. “This pain… this is all real, isn’t it?”

“Not for much longer.” Ann stepped forward and summoned Carmen again, the Persona holding a ball of flame in her hand. “It’s time to end this.”

“Panther, stop!” Akira yelled.

“You can’t!” Shiho added.

“Why not!?” Ann grimaced at the fallen queen before her. “Why shouldn’t I put this monster out of everyone’s misery right now!?”

“Because I’m not a monster” Makoto’s Shadow answered.

“The hell you’re not!” The flame in Carmen’s hand grew. “What do you call everything you’ve done to the school over the past year!?”

“Necessary!” Shadow Makoto rose to her knees, banging her fist on the floor. “Do you have any idea how things were before I took control of the school!? The abuse of power!? The physical danger the students were in!? The apathetic attitudes of the faculty!?”

“I fail to see how that’s changed” Akira said. “You throw around your weight all the time.”

“You’ve turned Ryuji into an attack dog” Ann said.
“And as far as I can tell, the faculty give you a wide berth” Shiho added.

“That’s all different!” Shadow Makoto said.

“Different how?” Ann asked.

“Because…” The real Makoto got up and slowly approached her Shadow. “We’re—I’m— trying to help the school.” Makoto looked at her Shadow desperately. “Aren’t I?”

“Of course!” Shadow Makoto glared at Ann. “Other people have no idea what we’ve been through! The kind of nightmares that happen when the wrong person’s in charge! If it weren’t for me, Kamoshida would’ve broken Ryuki’s leg!”

“If I had acted sooner, maybe Kamoshida never would’ve gotten his hands on Eiko.”

“And then she wouldn’t have been hit by that car!” Shadow Makoto’s rage turned to sadness. “When I saw her accident, I remembered how truly terrible the world can be. I didn’t even consider the possibility that she could survive. In that moment, all I could think about—”

“Was Dad” Makoto said.

“Makoto-San…” Akechi put his hand on Makoto’s shoulder. “I know what it’s like to lose a loved one. How it sours your view of the world. But is this what your father would want?”

“I… I thought I was enforcing justice, like he did.” Makoto looked past her Shadow, up the stairs to where the portrait of her father hung behind the throne.

“We are!” The Shadow cried out. “Crime and disorder are rough and uncaring! Justice has to be the same to counter it!”

“No.” Makoto looked back down at her Shadow. “That’s not what Dad believed. Justice is as strong as it needs to be. Not every infraction deserves the highest-severity punishment in response.”

“So now you’re going to mollycoddle criminals? Treat them with kindness?” Shadow Makoto sneered. “You know they deserve the worst we can give them.”

“I think I’d have to take it on a case-by-case basis” Makoto said. “All of that rage and hurt is part of me. And maybe sometimes it’s the right response, but not all the time.”

“So now you’re rejecting me? Rejecting everything we’ve built?”

“No.” Makoto shook her head. “Not everything. Getting rid of Kamoshida was the right thing to do, even if we went about it the wrong way.” Makoto looked back at Akira. “But Akira-Cha—I mean—Kurusu-Kun was right. We’ve been on the wrong track ever since. There needs to be a better way of doing things.” Makoto turned back to her Shadow. “I think we can find that better way together. One that honors everything Dad stood for while staying true to who we are.”

Makoto extended her hand to her Shadow. “What do you say?”

“That sounds nice.”

The Shadow reached out to her doppelgänger, but when their hands touched, she started glowing. Once again, Shadow Makoto transformed, but this time, instead of taking the form of a giant monstrosity, she turned into a large motorcycle with a face on it. Makoto glowed with the same energy and the motorcycle disappeared, then she collapsed.
“Makoto-San!” Akechi caught Makoto before she hit the floor. “What’s wrong!?”

“I don’t know” Makoto said. “I’m just very tired all of a sudden.”

Before Akechi could respond, Makoto had passed out.

“Am I imagining things,” Shiho asked, “or was that a Persona?”

“I think you’re right” Akira said. “I don’t know if her having one of those is a good thing or not.”

“I’m gonna say ‘not’” Ann said. Carmen still loomed over her, flame in hand. “I should probably blast her, just to be safe.”

“Cut it out, Ann!” Shiho smacked Ann in the back of the head, and Carmen promptly vanished. “She’s obviously not a threat anymore!”

“Seriously,” Akira said, “wasn’t beating a giant monster version of her enough for you?”

“How are you so calm about this!?” Ann pointed at Akira. “You’re the one she threatened the most! You should be even angrier than I am!”

“I kidnapped her, held a knife to her throat, and told her everything I hate about her” Akira said. “I think I got my rage out.”

“Whatever.” Ann started walking towards the stairs. “Let’s just grab her Treasure and get outta here already.”

“I don’t think that will be necessary” Akechi said. “I believe we just witnessed a new kind of change of heart.”

“So what now?” Shiho asked.

“Now…” Akechi picked up Makoto in a bridal carry. “We should leave. Before things get ugly.”

“Ugly how?”

As if to answer Shiho’s question, the floor started to shake.

“Ugly as in the city collapsing and us dying with it if we don’t escape in time” Akechi said.

“Seriously!?” Ann yelled. “Did you know this was going to happen too!?”

“Of course.” Akechi ran for the door out of the throne room. “It happens every time!”

“For fuck’s sake!” Akira ran after Akechi. “If we get out of this alive, we’re having a serious talk about you withholding information from us!”

Chapter End Notes

So, two things:

1. I went back and forth on this a lot, but ultimately, I’ve decided that once I finish Evil Queen, I will not write any sequels chronicling the continued adventures of
Phantom Heroes. I like what I've done with this story, and I appreciate all the positive reception it's gotten, but it's very draining to write and if I committed to trying and write an entire AU as long as the plot of the game, it'd take me years, and I just don't want to deal with that. Still, I did put a lot of thought into this, and had a few plans for sequels, so I've decided to release a document of all my ideas for what I might've written alongside the final chapter. So the next time I update this story will be the last.

2. At the end of last year, I committed to being in a P5 fan zine. It's called the Crimson Compendium, it drops online in two weeks, and it contains over 260 pages of fanfiction and fanart from about 20 different creators all for the price of 10 dollars, every penny of which is going to charity. If you'd like to learn more about it, you can follow this link:

https://crimsoncomp.tumblr.com/post/175246115039/give-your-heart-the-crimson-compendium
The New Kingdom

Chapter Summary

Makoto Nijima has her change of heart.

Chapter Notes

I got this out uncharacteristically fast, didn't I? I posted the previous chapter yesterday, so it's entirely possible you missed something!

It was a mad dash to escape the collapsing city. More than once the Phantom Heroes were almost crushed by falling rubble, especially Akechi who was slowed down by carrying Makoto the whole time. The ground itself began to fall out from underneath them as they reached the alley, and Ann hammered the escape button on the Metaverse App as quickly as she could the second Akechi caught up with the rest of them. Once they were back in the real world, Makoto woke up, and to avoid any kind of awkward conversation, Akechi volunteered to escort her home. Akira decided to go home to Leblanc, and somehow, Ann and Shiho wound up joining him.

“I’m back” Akira said as he walked through the front door of the cafe. There were no customers in the shop.

“Where have you been?” Sojiro asked.

“Bad date” Akira said.

“Ohh.” Sojiro chuckled. “I’ve been there. You wanna talk about it?”

“Not really.” Akira looked back towards the door. “By the way, I ran into some friends on the way home and they decided to follow me here. Is it cool if they come in?”

“You wily punk.” Sojiro crossed his arms and scowled. “Are you using my sympathy for your bad date to try and get me to go easy on you and your pals?”

“I mean, I wasn’t thinking of it like that, but now that you lay it all out…” Akira flashed a wide grin. “Pretty please?”

“Fine.” Sojiro rolled his eyes. “Just keep it down. Just because there’s no customers doesn’t mean I wanna put up with a bunch of teenage rowdiness.”

“He says it’s cool!” Akira shouted to the door.

Ann and Shiho stepped into Leblanc, and Sojiro’s attitude changed instantly, grumpiness making way for surprise.

“Hi there!” Ann had a skip in her step and waved at Sojiro. “I’m Ann!”
“And I’m Shiho.” Shiho bowed to Sojiro. “It’s nice to meet you, Sakura-San.”

“These are your friends?” Sojiro whispered to Akira. “The bad date wasn’t with one of them, was it?”

“Of course not” Akira whispered back.

“Good.” Sojiro cleared his throat and smiled at the girls. “Welcome to Leblanc, ladies. How’d you like a coffee on the house?”

“That sounds great!” Ann said.

“‘On the house’? As in free?” Shiho cocked her head to the side. “What for?”

“For keeping this guy here out of trouble.” Sojiro tilted his head towards Akira. “You ARE keeping him out of trouble, right?”

“Uh…” Ann and Shiho shared a look before replying in unison. “Sure!”

If Sojiro thought anything of their awkward response, he didn’t show it, readying three cups of coffee as the trio sat down in a booth. Sojiro brought the cups over and was about to ask a bunch of questions when his cell phone went off. His brow furrowed and he groaned as he put his phone back in his pocket.

“I gotta go take care of something at home real quick” he said. “Mind watching the place for a few minutes? There’s a whole pot of coffee brewed already so you don’t have to worry about preparing anything.”

“Will do, Boss” Akira said.

Sojiro nodded and ran out the door.

“You work here?” Ann asked.

“Usually I’m just cleaning stuff” Akira said. “This is the first time Boss has asked me to actually serve drinks. Though I doubt anything’ll come out of it.” Akira took a sip of his coffee. “This place is usually dead. Honestly, I don’t know how it stays open.”

Everyone sat in silence for a minute, just enjoying the masterfully-prepared coffee and quiet atmosphere after a hectic day. Finally, Shiho broke the silence.

“So…” Shiho put her cup down. “Do you think it worked?”

“It seemed to” Akira said. “I mean, Niijima started acting pretty differently after we won that fight.”

“I’m not so sure” Ann said. “She’s always been good at manipulating people. That whole thing could’ve been an act.”

“Maybe” Shiho said. “But I’d like to think that exchange she had with her Shadow was genuine.”

“I guess we’ll just have to wait and see” Akira said. “If she really did change, all our problems are pretty much over. And if she didn’t…”

A silence fell over the room again. Akira’s voice got low as he continued.
“Well, it was nice knowing both of you.”

“And you’re sure you’re ok? Your senses are all functioning normally?”

Akechi fussed over Makoto as she sunk into the back of her couch, closing her eyes.


“And I’ll give you those answers in due time” Akechi said. “But this has been a very trying day for me as well, and I’d very much like to go home and rest.”

“I understand. Thank you for helping me home, Akechi-Kun.”

“Until another time, Makoto-San.”

Makoto’s thoughts started racing as Akechi headed for the door. In a very short time she’d undergone a radical shift in how she saw the world, and now that she was back in the comfort of her own home she was beginning to process it all. Makoto knew she had done some pretty terrible things. She had students beaten, she terrorized the school clubs, she blackmailed the principal (and that in itself opened a whole can of worms, including the question of what he’d do to her if she stopped and if she deserved whatever punishment Kobayakawa saw fit to give her), and most egregiously, she had sexually assaulted Akira Kurusu. And the only reason she felt any remorse about it now was because Akira, Akechi, Shiho, and Ann had gone into her head and manually changed her way of thinking. Could a forced change of heart really count for anything? What did it say about Makoto that she had to have her mind invaded to become a better person, and was it really fair to call herself ‘better’ when you took that fact into consideration?

“Akechi-Kun…” Makoto turned to Akechi as he had one foot out the door. “Could you answer just one question for me, please?”

“Alright.” Akechi sighed. He really didn’t want to talk about the Metaverse after nearly dying multiple times today, but he supposed it would be cruel to leave Makoto completely hanging. “What do you want to know?”

“Where do I go from here?” Makoto’s voice quivered. “How can I reconcile my resolve to do better with all the things I’ve done wrong?”

“Oh. That’s…” Akechi wracked his brain trying to think of an answer. Of course Makoto would have to ask the hardest question possible. Now he wished it was about the Metaverse, at least he could answer that easily. “That’s something you’re going to have to figure out for yourself.”

“I see.” Makoto closed her eyes again. “That’s not very helpful.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” Akechi began to close the door behind him, then a sudden impulse fired off in his brain. He poked his head back into the apartment. “By the way, happy birthday, Makoto-San.”

“Thank you.”

Makoto’s thoughts started racing in a new direction as she heard the door close behind her. From the moment Akira had taken her into that world Makoto had completely forgotten it was her birthday. That kind of thing just didn’t seem as important in the face of everything else. But the reminder of her birthday brought one other thing to mind. Something that might just give Makoto some clarity and a sense of direction.
Makoto went into Sae’s room and dug up an old shoebox in the corner of her sister’s closet. Where it once had a number of envelopes inside, now there were only three left. Makoto picked out the one with the number 18 written on the front and took it into her own bedroom, opening the envelope carefully. Inside was a card featuring, of all things, her old favorite mascot character from when she was a little girl, the panda-dog called Buchimaru-Kun. Makoto opened the card and found her father’s handwriting.

*Makoto,*

*By the time you read this card, you’ll have started your final year of high school. Maybe some would say Buchimaru-Kun is a little immature for an 18-year-old, but I’d like to think there’s still an innocent part of you in love with everything cute and silly. It’s hard to imagine your little girl becoming a young lady, but I’m sure you’re excelling at it.*

*The truth is, I don’t really know what to write here. I figure by this point you have a pretty good idea of what you want to do with your life and have already started picking out your top colleges. You’ve always been smart as a tack, and I doubt that’s changed, so I’m sure you’ll get into whatever school you think is best.*

*Maybe you still want to be a police officer. I hope so. I know it’s unusual for a parent to want their child to go into a dangerous career, but I know you’ve got what it takes. You’ve always had the best moral compass of anyone I know, and you’re tough to boot. I’m certain that if you trust your own personal judgment, you’ll continue the family tradition of upholding justice and bring honor to the Niijima name.*

*And if you’ve decided you don’t want to be a cop, that’s fine too. I just know that whatever path you choose in life is one I can be proud of. Whether you decide to go into business or throw a fist of justice or maybe even become a housewife, you’ll be splendid at it. Everywhere you go, you’ve always been a shining example of the best of humanity. Maybe you think I’m laying all this praise on a little thick, but as you go into the adult world, you’re going to deal with a lot of changes and face new hardships, and through it all I want you to remember one thing:* 

*You are Makoto Niijima. And that is the most wonderful thing in the world to be.*

*Love you forever,*

*Dad*

A tear landed next to the signature at the bottom of the card. Then another landed on top of the signature. Then on the word ‘wonderful’. And then they just started coming down rapidly, one after the other, and Makoto had to move the card out of the way so it wouldn’t get ruined by moisture.

And she bawled. It was a loud, ugly sound. One that carried so much shame and regret as it filled the air. And there was no comfort to be offered, and the person making the sound didn’t think she deserved any. All alone in her room on her 18th birthday, Makoto Niijima cried harder than she had in years.

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Monday came and nothing happened. Ms. Kawakami still had her job, the police didn’t come to
arrest Akira, Ann and Shiho weren’t expelled, and everybody went about their day normally. The only standout was Ryuji Sakamoto, who for once didn’t seem to be antagonizing anybody. Word around the school was that Makoto Nijima had taken an unprecedented sick day, and as such her attack dog wasn’t getting sicced on anybody.

It was the next day that Akira saw the dreaded sight of Ryuji approaching him. But there was something off about him. He carried himself with an alien uncertainty. His face was contorted into a bizarre expression, like every muscle was straining not to form his usual sour look. There was no air of menace as Ryuji stood over Akira’s desk. And his voice was nowhere near as harsh as Akira was used to.

“Miss Prez wants to see you in the Student Council Room” Ryuji mumbled. “Uh… if you’ve got time right now. Please.”

Truthfully, Akira didn’t want to go. But the whole situation was so odd that he had to see what was going on for himself. If Makoto wanted to make his life hell, she would’ve done it already, which meant that the change of heart probably worked. And it wasn’t that Akira felt like he owed her anything, certainly not after all the crap she put him through, but he figured if she wanted to talk to him after everything, maybe it just might be important after all.

Akira made his way upstairs and knocked on the door to the student council room.

“Come in.”

As Akira stepped in, the first thing he noticed was Makoto’s new look. She’d lost the regular Shujin blazer, instead wearing a vest that still complied with the school dress code. The red headband was absent from her head, and in its place was a row of braided hair that upon closer inspection turned out to be a headband.

“That’s kind of hypocritical, isn’t it?” Akira asked.

“Excuse me?”

“That braid.” Akira pointed to Makoto’s headband. “Didn’t you give me this big lecture about false appearances and tricking people the first time we met?”

“Yes, I did. Which is actually one of the things I wanted to talk to you about.” Makoto reached into her bag and pulled out a small case, handing it to Akira. “Here.”

Akira took the case and opened it with no small amount of caution. To his surprise, inside was a black pair of glasses, just like the ones Makoto had smashed a few weeks ago. Although in retrospect he couldn’t imagine anything else that would fit in a case this size, so it shouldn’t have been surprising.

“I still don’t fully understand why you would choose to wear fake glasses, but it wasn’t my right to tell you that you couldn’t wear them.” Makoto looked down at the floor shamefully. “Really, none of the things I’ve done to you over the past several weeks were my right.”

“I see.” Akira donned the fake glasses and instantly felt a little more secure. He knew it was ridiculous. He’d been going around school without glasses for a while now so it’s not like the student body didn’t already know he didn’t actually need them. But somehow just having control of that tiny aspect of his life returned to him made him feel a whole lot better. “So this is an apology?”

“No.” Makoto’s face twisted up in displeasure, and it was clear to see that she was internally
admonishing herself for how curt her answer came off. “What I mean to say is, this is me trying to make things right, although I know there’s no way I fully can after the way I’ve treated you these past few weeks. I’m not going to give you an apology, not because I don’t think you deserve one, but because I don’t think any apology I could give would be sufficient.”

“You’re right.”

“At this point, I think the only thing I can do is promise to leave you alone forever.”

“Sounds good to me.” Akira tapped his foot impatiently. “So we’re done here?”

“Yes, Kurusu-Kun.”

“Great. Bye forever.”

Akira turned to leave the room. Makoto turned away from him towards the large, fancy desk she’d been using for the past year and started thinking out loud.

“I’m going to sell this desk.”

Akira just wanted to keep on walking. There was no need to entertain Makoto Nijiiima any further. He had his glasses back, he had his life back, he had her promise to leave him alone, as far as he was concerned they had no further business.

And yet, in spite of that, he found himself responding.

“What?”

“It’s not proper for the student council president to have a lavish personal desk like this” Makoto said. “I could easily sell it for at least a hundred thousand yen and redistribute that money to make up for some of the budget cuts I made to the school’s clubs.”

“Sounds like a plan” Akira said.

“And then when that’s done, I intend to step down from my position of student council president.”

“You probably should.”

“And then I’m going to go to Principal Kobayakawa and give him those photos I’ve been blackmailing him with.”

Again, Akira wanted to walk away. A voice inside of him was screaming at him to do just that. Arsene’s voice, in fact. But something about hearing those words unsettled Akira just enough for him to say something he thought he never would.

“Don’t do that.”

“What?”

“I don’t know all the details, but I know that Kamoshida guy was a sack of crap. Just as bad as you’ve been, if not worse. And I know Kobayakawa didn’t do anything to stop him until you blackmailed him.” Akira turned back to Makoto and looked her straight in the eyes. “Maybe you’re ready to accept the possibility of him expelling you if you let him off the hook, and hell, maybe you do deserve expulsion, but I think letting the guy who was happy to let students be abused have his power back can only be a bad thing. What if he wants to feel like a big man again and starts pulling a bunch of bullshit that makes life for the students a living hell?”
“So you think I should keep blackmailing him?”

“Maybe not that. Maybe just let him think that the possibility of you ruining his life is still on the table. You don’t actually have to force him to do anything or make a bunch of threats, just let him keep believing that if he doesn’t toe the line you’ll ruin him. Maybe even actually do it when you graduate so the school doesn’t fall back into danger once you’re out of the picture.”

That should have been enough. Arsene was telling Akira to stop talking and just leave. But Akira kept going.

“And hell, maybe don’t quit student council either.”

“I don’t understand.” Makoto balked at Akira. “Didn’t you just agree that I should?”

“I did, but then I thought of something else.” Akira sighed. “You’re not dumb. And while maybe you got it twisted, I believe that you once had the school’s best interests at heart. Maybe you should try pursuing all that without the corruption. Help tutor kids whose grades are slipping instead of having Sakamoto beat the fear of failure into them. Make it easier for the students to talk to the teachers. Encourage clubs to perform at their best instead of restricting them with an iron fist. Don’t just drop everything and let yourself wallow in misery. Do what you told your Shadow you were gonna do and try a better way. Try to make good for all the shit you’ve done and be the student council president that Shujin Academy deserves.”

“You really think I can?”

“I dunno. Maybe. That’s up to you.” Akira turned around and headed out the door. “Just make sure you do it as far away from me as possible.”

“Of course.” Makoto gave Akira a melancholy smile. “Goodbye, Kurusu-Kun.”

“Goodbye, Niijima-Senpai.”

And with that, Akira Kurusu closed the door to the student council room, and with it, the most frustrating chapter of his life.
Afterword: What Would Have Been

Chapter Summary

A look at what was considered and discarded.

Chapter Notes

I posted the final two chapters within the last 24 hours of posting this, so if you haven't read 'em yet, make sure to do that!

I went back on forth on this a lot, but ultimately, I’ve decided not to write a follow-up to Evil Queen.

I have a love/hate relationship with this fic. It is fun to do. But it is SO MUCH WORK. I really don’t know how people like Dowdz and FlOrangey and Circuit do these reimaginings of the whole game’s story and can stick through with multiple arcs and consistently deliver such engaging content and keep a goddamn schedule of all things. It is mind-boggling.

That said, I didn’t want to leave folks fully in the lurch. I did have a lot of fun thinking up what future arcs would’ve been, so here’s a rundown of my now-abandoned plans. But first, I wanted to show some of Hureno's unfinished art. Here's the original sketch of Shadow Makoto and a mostly-finished depiction of Shiho's Persona Sonya.
I don't really remember why Sonya is a smokey form. I think it might have something to do with a myth about her grave, but it might also just be artistic license. I do know that the real Sonya Golden-Hand (hence the big ol’ Infinity Gauntlet-esque golden hand) had a trained monkey that would swallow and later poop out stolen jewels, hence that little freaky guy on her shoulder who looks like he came straight out of the Cave of Wonders. The 007 on her chest is a reference to Shiho’s love of spy movies and the general Spy aesthetic of her PT outfit.

Now for the actual plans:

**Arc 2: Mitsuo Togo**

The second arc would’ve had Hifumi take Yusuke’s place on the team, with her mother being the Palace Owner. Hifumi’s Persona would’ve been Madame Ching, with her weapon being a spear or naginata. Hureno and I discussed some design options and while originally I was thinking of
calling Hifumi something like “Shogun” or “Geisha” and having her wear an outfit to match Yusuke’s ninja-esque garb, towards the end we were leaning towards “Wolf” and looking at a Princess Mononoke-inspired appearance.
Mitsuo Togo’s Palace would’ve been a TV Station, with Cognitive Hifumis happy to basically be sold as media, little subservient dolls making their mom money and looking generally glamorous. I also considered the idea that she was responsible for her husband’s chronic illness to really sell the evil that would result in an entire Palace. I also would’ve planted the seeds of an Akira/Hifumi romance, though I don’t know if I would’ve committed to it. I at one time considered an Akira/Ann/Shiho love triangle, but just didn’t want to deal with it.

Yusuke would’ve appeared in the story too. He would be free of Madarame thanks to Akechi having helped him in the past, and would’ve been the one that turned Akechi onto the idea that Hifumi may be going under some kind of abuse, having recognized past behaviors of his in her.

Mementos would also be introduced, though not as you know it. Instead of an underground train system, the idea is Mementos would’ve blown up with the fall of Yaldabaoth, and now would be a bunch of islands of concrete and broken pieces of railway floating in the sky. The Phantom Heroes would be able to fly from island to island in a vehicle given by Igor to Akechi, a blimp/hot air balloon/airship thing that looks like a cat called “The Morgana”.

In addition to all this, I also wanted to flesh out Akechi’s backstory more exploring why somebody who’s been infiltrating Palaces for three years isn’t much stronger than his juniors. The reason for
Arc 3: The SIU Director

This would’ve been the return of Makoto and Ryuji into the story. Makoto would be delivering lunch to Sae at work and then overhear the SIU Director planning to dispose of Sae because she’s getting too close to a case against Kaneshiro which would also implicate the Director. I never actually decided what the Director’s Palace would be.

The idea would be that Makoto has the Metaverse App thanks to Akira bringing her there at the end of Evil Queen, and reconciling with her Shadow has given her a Persona but she’s never actually used it. At first she’d bring Ryuji in and awaken him to a Persona since he’s the only real friend she has (I also probably would’ve been teasing a romance between them, or at least a one-sided crush from Ryuji’s end), but they wouldn’t be enough and she’d reluctantly approach Akira for help. It would be very awkward for everyone involved but naturally Akechi isn’t going to let Sae die, so the Phantom Heroes are on the case.

At the end, Makoto and Ryuji would not permanently join the Phantom Heroes. With their work saving Sae done, they’d retire from being Persona users.

Arc 4: Mishima

This is by far the least concrete of my ideas.

I would’ve already introduced Futaba and Wakaba as Sojiro’s housemates earlier, probably during the Togo arc. I think Wakaba would’ve become a Confidant of Akira’s thanks to her Metaverse research, though what form this takes beyond her getting Sojiro to ease up on him I never fully considered.

I thought of the idea of Mishima as somebody who was already online friends with Futaba and who starts the Phan-Site like in the original story (that’s as far as I got in “but how does Futaba actually get involved”). I had some ideas of him getting high on his influence like he starts to during his Confidant arc in the game, but I never really fleshed it out, and could never conceive of a high-stakes reason for the deadline. I think maybe his Palace would’ve been a Tron-esque digital world with his Shadow as the MCP or something.

Arc 5: ???

I never really figured out what would replace the Okumura arc. I also never really decided how to fully fit Haru into this, but I did consider the idea that she made a request to the Heroes, they defeated Kunikazu in Mementos, and she became a friend of theirs but not a member.

I think maybe I briefly entertained the idea of the Cleaner (that yakuza muscle) as the Palace ruler? Like maybe with Kunikazu’s change of heart he was gonna come for him and Haru needed help to
save her father? I don’t know. I might be making that up on the spot honestly. Seems like too much of a retread of the SIU Director arc.

Arc 6: Mitsuru Kirijo

This one’s probably my favorite.

I think I would’ve hinted earlier on that the Shadow Operatives had begun to investigate the Phantom Heroes because Mitsuo Togo’s TV Station Palace was somehow broadcasting to the Midnight Channel. In this story, Mitsuru’s power would be completely unchecked (honestly kind of like I write it in my main fic verse, but there I present the idea as heroic and good whereas here I would not) and the idea of this rogue group of Persona users going around changing hearts would really set her off. I never fully decided what her threat/deadline was beyond maybe trying to conscript to Phantom Heroes into the Shadow Ops on threat of kidnapping or possibly death.

The real interesting part would’ve been in the new member that joins the team: Shinjiro Aragaki. I would’ve had Shinjiro having survived P3 with his Persona-pill illness having disappeared with the end of the Dark Hour (this universe would be a FeMC run), but with the death of Minako he just decides he doesn’t wanna stick around Port Island so he asks the doctors to forge his death certificate and runs away. He would wind up in Tokyo where he changes his name and becomes the personal chef of the Okumura family, being very protective of Haru. How he learns of Mitsuru’s corruption was something I never decided, nor what his thief outfit would be, though I figured I may go for something Greek-related to keep with P3’s themes. I might have also made Mitsuru’s Palace Greek-themed, maybe like a modern Sparta, but I never gave that much consideration either.

I do like the idea of Shinjiro the Okumura chef though. May still write that story on its own one day, sans Evil Queen context. Hell, I was actually planning on writing it, pretending it was its own separate AU, and later surprising people by folding it into the Evil Queen sequels, but obviously that’s not happening now. If I ever do actually write it, though, it will be canon in the Evil Queen universe, but that won’t matter much because it’ll be a prequel that takes place when Haru is a child and it’s not like I’m writing any of these stories that would follow up on it.

Arc 7: Shido

The only returning arc from the game proper. I really did not give a lot of thought to this. I considered the idea that Akechi learns Shido’s his father and re-awakens to Loki and then his friends could talk him down and now he’d be able to control that Persona since he has a support system. I also entertained the idea of changing Shido’s Palace from a ship to a creepy daycare center where the rest of Japan were children that needed to be taken care of, though this is just because I briefly thought that’s what Shido’s Palace would be the first time I played the game before the ship reveal.

There would’ve been no final Yaldabaoth Palace, obviously. I did very briefly consider the idea that there would be a new Black Mask that would turn out to be Yusuke, but this was less of a serious story thread I wanted to pursue and more of a passing fancy I had to make things different for the sake of being different. In retrospect I think it could make a good parallel to Akechi’s original arc from the game, but I never really planned for it. I think it just would’ve all ended with Shido and then Akira — having finally gotten his name cleared and the absolution he’s desired all along — would’ve gone home, leaving the others to continue their work without him. I really
wanted Akira to stay reluctant the whole time and take an out when he finally got one, though I can’t imagine people would’ve been satisfied with that characterization/ending, so it’s probably for the best I didn’t write it.

And really, that’s how I feel about the sequels in general. I’m not big on planning stories. Usually my plans go that I have a handful of ideas in my head and just run with it and see what happens. I think just Evil Queen proves that. Hell, I “planned” for Ryuji to play a bigger role in the climax of Evil Queen and totally forgot by the time I got to writing that part of the story. The longer I allowed this to go on, the worse it would’ve gotten, so I’m fine ending it here.

I’d like to thank everyone who did read and enjoy the story and extend my apologies to those who hoped it would continue. I never predicted when I started this that it’d take nearly a year to finish, and so I hope you understand that sequels are a commitment I’m just not willing to make.

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